

Promoting Human Rights and Participation at Local Level Through Open Government: A Case Study in Georgia



Congress of Local and Regional Authorities
of the Council of Europe

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Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the
Council of Europe
F-67075 Strasbourg Cedex
France
E-mail: congress.adm@coe.int

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

CSO	Civil Society Organisation
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
GIZ	German Agency for International Co-operation
LA	Local Authority
NDI	National Democratic Institute
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OGP	Open Government Partnership
SIDA	The Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The participatory research study conducted to evaluate the integration of human rights considerations, citizen participation, and inclusivity within the governance processes of six local authorities in Georgia has yielded valuable insights. The six local authorities taking part in the study include Tbilisi, Rustavi, Kutaisi, Khoni, Ozurgeti, and Akhaltsikhe, all active participants in the Open Government Partnership Local Programme (OGP Local). Aligned with national priorities and OGP commitments, the project aimed to foster a more inclusive and participatory governance environment at the local level, contributing significantly to advancing human rights protection and promoting inclusivity. Through a participatory approach inspired by the Delphi method, the project engaged both local authorities and civil society organisations, reflecting a commitment to comprehensive stakeholder involvement.

The study was conducted amidst the severe political crisis in Georgia. The adoption of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence has since further exacerbated the tension and eroded the potential for co-operation between public institutions and civil society organisations. The findings of this study reflect the experience and achievements of the period when the political tension was less intense and the co-operation between civil society organisations and public institutions was not impacted by the crisis. Under current circumstances, any prospect of collaboration or affecting positive change becomes increasingly difficult to attain.

The study revealed notable progress in the last five years (2019-2024) in citizen participation and inclusivity across municipalities such as Rustavi, Kutaisi, Khoni, Akhaltsikhe, Tbilisi, and Ozurgeti. Proactive efforts by local governments, collaboration with organisations, and innovative initiatives such as participatory budgeting and citizens' assemblies have been instrumental in fostering active civil participation. Ongoing challenges such as citizen passivity and the lack of general statistical data on vulnerable groups, as well as data on their engagement levels were identified, underscoring the need for continuous improvement and participation practices targeted at vulnerable groups. In addition, the study revealed that participatory methods were used sporadically and were not well institutionalised, highlighting the need for more structured and consistent engagement mechanisms and practices that ensure their sustainability. Despite these challenges, municipalities remain committed to enhancing participatory democracy and promoting inclusivity, drawing inspiration from best practices and the Local framework.

The research concludes with several recommendations aimed at fostering more effective and inclusive civic engagement. It calls for improving participatory mechanisms to engage vulnerable groups, ensuring their voices are heard in the decision-making processes and their needs are properly addressed. The study recommends enhancing the integration of a human rights-based approach in local governance to ensure that local policies and decisions effectively promote and protect human rights.

Overall, the project represents a significant step towards fostering a more participatory and inclusive democratic environment at the local level in Georgia. By producing actionable recommendations and facilitating cross-country dialogue, the project aims to inform future initiatives and promote sustainable, inclusive governance practices, thus contributing to the broader objectives of strengthening democratic institutions, protecting human rights, and enhancing citizen participation in Georgia.

1. INTRODUCTION

The present participatory research study has been designed to evaluate the integration of human rights considerations, citizen participation, and inclusivity within the governance processes of six municipalities in Georgia. These municipalities are active members of the OGP Local Programme under the Open Government Partnership – a unique partnership of government representatives and civil society advocates that promotes transparent, participatory, inclusive and accountable governance. OGP Local Programme helps to build partnerships between local governments and civil society organisations to make their governments more open, accountable and responsive to citizens.¹

The ultimate goal of the study is to foster a more inclusive and participatory governance environment at the local level. This initiative culminated in an online peer exchange event during OGP week,² where cross-country dialogue and knowledge-sharing took place. This study will contribute with recommendations toward significantly advancing human rights protection and promoting inclusivity in Georgian local governance.

Aligned with national priorities, the project supports the strengthening of democratic institutions, protection of human rights, and the effective decentralisation of governance. These objectives are integral to Georgia's commitments within the OGP framework, which emphasise participatory governance approaches.³ Additionally, the project dovetails with the Council of Europe's Action Plan for Georgia (2024-2027), which focuses on reinforcing democratic institutions, enhancing citizen participation and promoting human rights.⁴

The research methodology employed in this project is rooted in a participatory approach, engaging both local authorities and civil society organisations. This approach is intended to foster a deeper understanding and cultivate positive attitudes towards the integration of human rights and inclusivity in participatory governance processes.

This study was conducted amidst the severe political crisis in Georgia. In April 2024, the government introduced the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, which attracted widespread and forceful criticism both inside Georgia and internationally. The Law has the objective effect of risking the stigmatising, silencing and eventually elimination of associations and media which receive a certain part of their funds from abroad.⁵ The discussions in Parliament and the adoption of the Law have been accompanied by mass protests and demonstrations. The Venice Commission strongly recommended repealing the Law in its current form.⁶ More than 250 organisations signed the statement to suspend co-operation formats with the government until the law was dropped.⁷

Recognising the complex relationship between local authorities and civil society organisations, particularly given the current political climate in Georgia, the data collection phases for these

1 Additional information about OGP Local Programme is available in English at opengovpartnership.org/ogp-local/about-ogp-local/

2 May 27-31, 2024

3 Open Government Georgia Action Plan for 2024-2025, available in English at ogpgeorgia.gov.ge/upload/pages/24/OGP%20Georgia%202024-25%20Action%20Plan_ENG.pdf

4 Council of Europe Action Plan for Georgia 2024-2027, available in English at rm.coe.int/council-of-europe-action-plan-for-georgia-2024-2027/1680ae25db

5 Venice Commission, CDL-PI(2024)013, Urgent Opinion on the Law of Transparency of Foreign Influence, § 98.

6 Venice Commission, CDL-PI(2024)013, Urgent Opinion on the Law of Transparency of Foreign Influence, § 100.

7 The Non-Governmental and Media Organisations Suspend Co-operation Formats with the Government until the Law is Dropped, 25.04.2024, available in English at csf.ge/en/the-non-governmental-and-media-organizations-suspend-cooperation-formats-with-the-government-until-the-russian-law-is-dropped/

groups were conducted separately. This separation was crucial to ensure unbiased and genuine responses, thereby enhancing the integrity of the research findings. Through thoughtful stakeholder engagement, the study aimed to produce practical recommendations that will inform future initiatives and promote sustainable, inclusive governance practices in Georgia. This study represents a significant step towards fostering a more participatory and inclusive democratic environment at the local level in the country.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

Participatory research approach

The methodology incorporated a participatory research approach, involving both municipalities and civil society organisations. This approach was designed to foster understanding and build positive attitudes towards integrating human rights considerations and inclusivity into participatory processes. Participants were actively involved in the collection of research evidence and collective sense-making of the data, positioning them as collaborative partners with significant insights and agency, thereby deepening the common understanding of the research findings.

Research design

The design of the study builds off of the Delphi method, an iterative research technique where participants are engaged through successive rounds of surveys or questionnaires. This method allows participants to reflect on the findings and revise their responses, ensuring ongoing engagement and involvement in the research development. The process supports asynchronous dialogue among all research partners, presenting synthesised results from each round.

Given the project's time constraints, the research consisted of two main rounds of data collection and reflection, followed by the formulation and discussion of recommendations during the OGP week.

Detailed steps of the research design

1. Initial Data Collection:⁸

a. Civil Society: Researchers conducted two online workshops with the civil society representatives, one in the municipalities that were part of the Council of Europe project 2021-2023 "Strengthening Participatory Democracy and Human Rights at Local Level in Georgia" and one in those that were not engaged,⁹ using a semi-structured interview guide focused on the topics of human rights, participatory democracy, and inclusion.

b. Local Authorities: Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with representatives from each of the six local authorities.

2. First Analysis and Synthesis: Researchers analysed and synthesised the results obtained from all participants in the initial round.

3. Second Round of Data Collection: Researchers presented the initial analysis to both stakeholder groups in separate focus group workshops, allowing them to refine their responses and provide feedback on the research gaps.

4. Integration and Final Analysis: Researchers combined and analysed the feedback from the group discussions, aligning it with the initial findings to ensure coherence and depth in the research outcomes.

5. Recommendations: Researchers developed actionable recommendations based on the comprehensive analysis of the gathered data.

6. Presentation and Feedback: The final research results and recommendations were presented during the OGP week, facilitating a feedback session with all stakeholders involved.

⁸ Note on Stakeholder Engagement: Due to the current challenging relationship between the governmental local authorities and civil society organisations, influenced by national political dynamics, the data collection phases for the two groups were conducted separately to ensure unbiased and genuine responses.

⁹ Strengthening participatory democracy and human rights at local level in Georgia, 2021-2023, available in English at coe.int/en/web/tbilisi/strengthening-participatory-democracy-and-human-rights-at-local-level-in-georgia

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1 Rustavi Municipality

General overview

Rustavi, a self-governing city in the Kvemo Kartli region of Georgia, serves as an important industrial hub and administrative centre. Rustavi municipality has a population of approximately 127,200 residents. The population distribution is fairly balanced, with women making up 52% and men 48%. Rustavi has several advisory councils aimed at facilitating citizen engagement and addressing specific issues: The Citizen Advisory Council; Youth Advisory Council; Council working on issues of persons with disabilities; Council working on gender issues.

Rustavi joined the OGP Local Programme as part of the 2022 cohort and is currently implementing two key commitments from its 2022-2025 local action plan:¹⁰ strengthening the participatory mechanism of the Council of Civil Advisors and introducing a participatory mechanism for developing the biking network. The municipality has a history of promoting open governance, having developed its own strategy and action plan in 2017. Through a participatory budgeting mechanism, Rustavi residents can elect representatives to the Council of Civil Advisors, which reviews and selects civic initiatives for inclusion in the municipal budget. This approach has led to the incorporation of 20 local infrastructure improvement initiatives in the 2021 and 2022 budgets.

Within the scope of the OGP Local Programme another key priority for Rustavi is promoting youth participation in local policymaking. To support this, the City Hall co-finance youth groups for civil participation projects. Another priority is the enhancement of municipal services, exemplified by the establishment of the Rustavi Municipal Inspection in 2022, which provides improved supervision services. Rustavi's efforts in open governance and civic engagement have been supported by the Rustavi Innovations Hub in the previous years, a partner organisation from the civil sector.

Participatory assessment

Participatory assessment interviews with local authority representative highlight that over the past five years, the local government of Rustavi municipality has actively pursued several initiatives aimed at enhancing citizen participation. These efforts have focused on diverse areas such as budgeting, environmental conservation, and the development of recreational zones.

The local government has implemented notable initiatives to promote citizen participation, fostering a culture of inclusion and responsiveness to community needs. One of the most significant initiatives was the participatory budgeting process. This process involved extensive consultations with citizens, allowing different groups to express their priorities. The active involvement of citizens in these discussions ensured that the municipal budget reflected their concerns and needs, establishing a robust practice of participatory governance.

Another landmark initiative was the Citizens' Assembly focused on the Rustavi riverside forest's development. This assembly addressed the preservation and restoration of a 320-hectare forest area, which had been degraded since the 1990s. Citizens were randomly selected to participate in this assembly and underwent training phases with experts to gain historical and expert knowledge on the issue. This inclusive process, supported by non-governmental organisations, the municipality, and international bodies culminated in the development of 54 recommendations. These recommendations were largely incorporated into the strategic development document, elaborated as parallel processes with The Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency (SIDA) and

¹⁰ Rustavi Municipality OGP Action Plan 2022-2025, available in English at opengovpartnership.org/documents/action-plan-rustavi-georgia-2022-2025/

the Ministry of Agriculture of Georgia, for the Rustavi Riverside Forest development, demonstrating the assembly's effectiveness.

In collaboration with the German Agency for International Co-operation (GIZ), the local government also launched a neighbourhood recreation zone project. This initiative aimed to create recreational spaces tailored to the needs of Rustavi residents. Initial consultative meetings with citizens, attended by the mayor, informed the creation of two project renderings. A subsequent survey allowed residents to choose their preferred option, ensuring that the final project was citizen-approved and included in the 2024 municipal budget.

As described by local authority representative, these initiatives were widely regarded as successful by both local elected representatives and civil society organisations. Based on their observations, the success of the citizens' assembly and the neighbourhood survey can be attributed to the genuine integration of citizen inputs into official documents and budgets. This approach moved beyond tokenistic engagement, achieving tangible results that reflected the community's needs and priorities.

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and eco-activists, such as the local organisation Eco Centre, played a crucial role in citizen assembly. Their involvement in planning and implementing the citizens' assembly ensured a comprehensive and inclusive approach. The support from the Council of Europe further reinforced the process' credibility and its compliance with the Council of Europe's standards. Nevertheless, according to CSOs, while the benefits of this participatory mechanism are notable, translating the recommendations gathered from assembly members into practical actions remains a challenge.

The level of citizen engagement in these initiatives was qualitatively high. Diverse groups participated actively at all stages, although specific measures to target vulnerable minorities were not explicitly implemented. The focus was more on random selection to maintain objectivity in the decision-making process.

CSOs have noted several additional remarkable initiatives introduced in 2018-2021, including C-Bot, which aimed to simplify the process of providing information and municipal services, especially for vulnerable groups. Other initiatives include the board game "Rustavi," developed to identify problems in the municipality, and a co-funding programme for youth initiatives. However, these programmes, as well as participatory budgeting no longer exist.

Despite the lack of targeted measures within these specific initiatives, the municipality has demonstrated a commitment to inclusivity through various other projects. The "Taoba Rustaveli" project, for instance, involves regular meetings between the mayor and young people to discuss issues relevant to them. Additionally, the mayor's advisory council, which includes representatives from diverse fields, provides a platform for broader community engagement. In contrast to the local authority representatives, CSO representative has expressed critical attitudes toward the advisory council, particularly concerning its formation process, and changes in its charter (selection process, criteria and number of members).

Challenges and looking ahead

Rustavi municipality plans to continue and expand its participatory initiatives. Positive feedback from the Citizens' Assembly has encouraged the local government to consider similar processes in the future. Potential topics for future assemblies include library reform and other community-centric projects. While there are no immediate plans for targeted initiatives focusing solely on women, people with disabilities (PwDs) or other vulnerable groups, the municipality aims to maintain proportional representation and inclusivity in its participatory processes.

Several challenges hinder the effective implementation of participatory initiatives. One significant barrier is a lack of interest in engaging with municipal issues. Additionally, citizens may lack the necessary knowledge or competence to contribute effectively to certain discussions, posing a

challenge for meaningful participation. The civil assembly model proved successful in mitigating this issue by incorporating an initial training phase to inform participants before soliciting their recommendations. To overcome these barriers, the municipality recognises the need for better-informed decision-making processes and increased citizen education. There is also an emphasis on leveraging competent professionals to guide decision-making while ensuring citizen input is adequately considered. From the perspective of CSOs, key barriers to participation include political will and lack of formalisation. The implementation of initiatives aimed at enhancing citizen engagement often relies heavily on individuals, which poses challenges for sustainability.

If the political situation becomes less tense and an opportunity for co-operation emerges, CSOs consider working on youth and PwDs issues for future perspectives, aiming to identify their needs and develop solutions with their inclusion.

The local government's civil assembly initiative, part of a Council of Europe's project, stands as a notable example of effective citizen participation. Rustavi local government representatives have presented its assembly practice at various forums, highlighting its commitment to sharing and learning from best practices.

In terms of the OGP Local Programme, the municipality has taken significant steps to enhance citizen participation. The local government is keen to continue practices that promote decentralisation and local decision-making. Plans to expand engagement mechanisms within the OGP framework aim to protect human rights and foster greater citizen involvement.

Recommendations

- ▶ Develop specific outreach initiatives to engage women, PwDs, and other vulnerable groups. This could include tailored participatory budgeting sessions, focused surveys, and dedicated workshops to ensure their unique needs and perspectives are adequately represented and addressed in municipal decisions;
- ▶ Introduce ongoing educational programmes to enhance citizens' knowledge and competence in municipal matters. This could involve regular information sessions, online courses, and accessible resources that explain the local government processes, budget allocation, and participatory opportunities;
- ▶ Implement robust data collection and monitoring mechanisms to track citizen participation across various initiatives. This should include detailed records of participant demographics, feedback, and engagement levels to assess the inclusivity and effectiveness of participatory processes;
- ▶ Build on the success of the Citizens' Assembly and participatory budgeting by institutionalising these practices and expanding their scope. Plan and execute regular assemblies on different topics, ensuring proportional representation from all community sectors;
- ▶ Introduce interactive tools such as mobile apps and online platforms to facilitate continuous dialogue between the municipality and citizens.

3.2 Kutaisi Municipality

General overview

Kutaisi, a self-governing city in the Imereti region, has a population of 125,600, with a gender distribution of 47% women and 53% men. Predominantly urban, 95% of its residents live in urban areas while only 5% reside in rural parts of the municipality. Based on the internal statistics, the city accommodates various vulnerable groups, including 6,475 individuals with disabilities, 7,162

socially vulnerable people, 12,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs), and 150 single mothers. Ethnic and religious minorities each make up 1% of the population.

Since 2022, Kutaisi municipality has been part of the OGP Local. However, it was already a pioneer among Georgian municipalities, having undertaken commitments under the OGP National Action Plan 2016-2018. Through this action plan, Kutaisi focused on increasing citizen participation in municipal budget planning, developing a local anti-corruption strategy and action plan, and creating an open data strategy and action plan using participatory methods. Notably, consistent and effective collaboration with an experienced civil sector helped the local government in Kutaisi successfully implement community need-based initiatives.

Kutaisi Municipality has made significant strides in promoting citizen participation through various initiatives, including participatory budgeting and youth engagement projects. These initiatives have been successful due to effective planning, active involvement of CSOs, and tangible outcomes that have encouraged further citizen participation. Moving forward, the municipality aims to address existing barriers by increasing awareness and enhancing participatory mechanisms, ensuring inclusive and effective citizen engagement.

Participatory assessment

Participatory assessment interview with local authority representative highlights that over the past five years, Kutaisi municipality has implemented several initiatives to enhance citizen participation. One prominent initiative has been participatory budgeting, introduced initially as a project funded by the European Union. This process involved a comprehensive awareness-raising campaign designed to educate citizens about how they could influence the municipality's budget according to their interests and needs. The first stage of this initiative focused on training civil servants through forums and workshops, with involvement of the CSOs.

After the initial training phase, informational meetings were conducted across all 12 municipal units, targeting different age groups, including both young and elderly citizens. In the first year alone, about 1,200 people participated in these meetings. The practice of participatory budgeting has since become an annual exercise, with public meetings held each year to gather and discuss citizen initiatives, ensuring their integration into the municipal budget. Additionally, the establishment of an advisory council at the City Hall has been a significant step, with the council actively participating in developing initiatives and offering recommendations.

Another notable participatory project focuses on youth engagement. The municipality has allocated funds annually (10-15 thousand GEL per project) for youth-initiated projects, allowing young people to propose and implement various infrastructural, educational, or other community-beneficial projects. Moreover, the "Your Idea for the City" project invites general initiatives from youth, fostering a culture of active civil participation. The presence of a youth council further underscores the municipality's commitment to involving young citizens in local governance.

The participatory budgeting process sees the involvement of several hundred citizens each year. Initial information meetings saw participation from over 1,200 individuals, a number that has likely increased over the years. Women and young people are notably active participants, and there is engagement from people with disabilities and socially vulnerable populations. Ethnic and national minorities are generally less presented in the municipality.

Social programmes in Kutaisi include specific initiatives for vulnerable groups. According to the local authority representative, the municipality's social service actively communicates with persons with disabilities and socially vulnerable individuals. Training and information meetings are periodically held for single mothers and PwDs. Recent initiatives include business plan and project writing training for women and computer skills training courses for single mothers. A sign language training course for PwDs and their families has also been sponsored.

Local elected representatives view these participatory initiatives as highly successful. The partic-

ipatory budgeting process, in particular, has been effective in reflecting and financing numerous citizen initiatives through the municipal budget each year. This success is attributed to the high degree of citizen engagement, which creates a virtuous cycle of involvement and satisfaction. When citizens see their needs addressed through their involvement, it boosts their confidence in the process, leading to increased participation.

The European Union and National Democratic Institute (NDI) have been instrumental in organising and facilitating informational meetings and forums. Despite the above-mentioned aspects, the CSO representative highlighted substantial obstacles associated with the implementation of prioritised projects within participatory budgeting programme, which potentially affects the population's motivation to continue participating in the process.

Efforts to increase participation from vulnerable groups have included adapting facilities for PwDs. Future plans include improving electronic service systems to enhance accessibility and participation for all citizens.

A notable best practice, as viewed by the CSO, was the establishment of an advisory council (currently inactive), which served as the deliberative body at the mayor's office. The group boasted a diverse composition in terms of sectors and gender, with a representative from CSOs serving as its chairman. This advisory body deliberated on important topics, acting as a bridge between citizens and the mayor. The council was approached both by the citizens to advocate for specific issues and by the mayor to solicit their ideas on various solutions. Several aspects were outlined as key success factors of this mechanism including the political will and interest of the mayor in considering recommendations from the advisory council; the diverse composition and leadership of the council; the awareness level of council members and the council's readiness for co-operation, which enabled them to achieve tangible results and prevented it from being merely symbolic advisory board. Gaining trust from society was identified as a challenging factor, but it was overcome through timely and transparent announcements about council meetings, the practice of presenting annual reports, and overall openness in the council's activities. This mechanism is presently inactive in the Kutaisi municipality according to the CSO representative.

Challenges and looking ahead

In the next 12 months, Kutaisi municipality plans to continue its current practices, focusing on providing information adapted for PwDs. The Gender Equality Council and the Council of PwDs will continue to work on inclusion issues. The municipality is also exploring the introduction of electronic voting to facilitate broader citizen participation. Additionally, the municipality aims to enhance its website to provide accessible and understandable information to all population groups, including feedback mechanisms tailored for PwDs. These topics were also highlighted by the representative from CSO. In line with above-mentioned initiatives, developing an SMS system to proactively disseminate information was pointed out as a commitment within the framework of Kutaisi OGP action plan. Notable, that the elaboration of this Action Plan followed a participatory approach, integrating needs assessment workshops with diverse stakeholders and culminating in a consultative meeting involving 50 participants, encompassing women, youth, and PwDs. The objective was to increase awareness about the OGP Local Programme and gather feedback on the proposed commitments.

As described by local authority representative, the main challenge in promoting citizen participation is the general passivity of the population. Despite improvements in engagement levels, many citizens remain sceptical about the impact of their involvement. Increasing awareness about participatory processes and effectively utilising existing open governance mechanisms are crucial to overcoming this barrier.

According to the CSO representative, the primary factor contributing to the low level of citizen participation is the ineffective and delayed delivery of information. Additionally, the absence of allocated funds from the municipality budget hinders the effective functioning of advisory boards,

which are deemed crucial actors in advocating for the interests of vulnerable groups. The ambiguity surrounding the definition of a “Public meeting” and the lack of standards for such events present significant challenges. Moreover, the lack of resources to identify the needs of vulnerable groups hampers their inclusion in policy-making processes.

Kutaisi municipality looks to Batumi for best practices, particularly their use of electronic voting for the priority initiatives during the budgeting process. The municipality aims to adopt and adapt such practices to enhance its participatory processes, not only for PwDs, but also for citizens in general. Youth council empowerment is considered an important focus for future activities from the Civil sector perspective.

Kutaisi municipality’s long-term vision¹¹ aims to introduce the concept of a “smart” city and encourage the participation of vulnerable groups in the policy-making process. The 2022-2025 OGP commitments support this vision by enhancing access to information, inclusion, and citizen participation through innovative methods and modern technologies. Consequently, three key commitments have been undertaken:

1. To increase access to information on the website of Kutaisi Municipality and to promote the engagement of PwDs;
2. To introduce an SMS platform aimed at proactively informing the citizens;
3. To introduce the online platform for citizen feedback.

Within the OGP framework, the municipality has focused on increasing the participation of PwDs by creating a working group involving non-governmental organisations and representatives of PwDs. This group has identified challenges related to information access, leading to the adaptation of the municipal website and the creation of a user-friendly guide for electronic services. The municipality aims to continue and strengthen existing practices while raising citizen awareness about OGP and its benefits. Enhanced information dissemination and the implementation of new participatory mechanisms are key priorities for future OGP action plans.

Recommendations

- ▶ Implement comprehensive campaigns to educate citizens about participatory processes and their impact as well as motivate citizens to leverage participatory mechanisms to voice their needs. Utilise various media, including social media, community radio, and local newspapers, to reach a wider audience;
- ▶ Develop specific participatory budgeting and project initiatives targeting vulnerable groups such as, PwDs, socially vulnerable individuals, and single mothers. Ensure these groups have dedicated platforms to voice their needs and preferences, and allocate funds specifically for initiatives benefiting them;
- ▶ Increase funding and support for youth-initiated projects and the “Your Idea for the City” initiative. Empower the youth council to take a more active role in municipal decision-making and ensure their proposals are integrated into the municipal budget;
- ▶ Facilitate regular training and awareness raising sessions for vulnerable and minority groups on civil participation and human rights;
- ▶ Look to successful models from other cities, e.g., electronic voting system for budget priorities. Adapt these practices to suit Kutaisi’s context, ensuring they are inclusive and accessible to all citizens, especially vulnerable groups.

11 Kutaisi Municipality OGP Action Plan 2022-2025, available in English at opengovpartnership.org/documents/action-plan-kutaisi-georgia-2022-2025/

3.3 Khoni Municipality

General overview

Khoni municipality, located in the Imereti region, has a population of 19,200, with a gender distribution of 51% women and 49% men. The majority of its population, 62%, resides in rural areas, while 38% live in urban settings. The city is home to small ethnic and religious minority groups, each constituting 1% of the total population. The municipality supports citizen participation through various formal mechanisms, including general assemblies, petitions, a council of civil advisors, and participatory budgeting. Additionally, advisory councils focusing on youth, gender issues, and disability matters are actively involved in the governance process.

Khoni municipality has been part of the OGP Local since 2020. The municipality was selected for the OGP local programme due to its innovative approaches to open governance and robust co-operation with the civil sector. However, implementing principles of open governance began in 2017 through participation in the national process within the OGP Georgia action plans.

Several notable initiatives were implemented under the OGP framework. A transparency and integrity strategy for 2019-2022 was developed as part of the OGP National Action Plan. Furthermore, Khoni municipality, in efforts to improve public service delivery, launched a hotline service, a citizen feedback platform, and a social engagement strategy targeting vulnerable groups such as PwDs, internally displaced persons, women, and the elderly. Additionally, forming the Council of Civic Advisors, the Gender Equality Council, and the Council for Persons with Disabilities facilitated gathering initiatives from various citizen groups, ensuring their voices were heard.

Participatory assessment

Participatory assessment interview with local authority representative highlights that over the past five years, Khoni municipality has undertaken several citizen participation initiatives, with a particular focus on inclusion and human rights. Most of these ideas have been incorporated into the OGP Local action plan and are carried out within its framework. Notable among these initiatives is the implementation of the electronic civil budgeting, modelled after the system used in Ozurgeti municipality. This project involved contracting the "Participation and Involvement Centre" (Ozurgeti based CSO) to create a platform where citizens could propose and vote on initiatives electronically. The lists of citizens were integrated into the platform, and work is ongoing to finalise the website design.

In addition, Khoni municipality has been proactive in engaging its youth through the establishment of a youth council. The council's formation involved a transparent selection process, with public information meetings, including those at Akaki Tsereteli Kutaisi State University, where the majority of youth representatives of the municipality study. Selection process, including interviews, resulted in the selection of 17 young members from a pool of 45 interview candidates and a few more dozens of applications. The council, supported by the humanitarian centre "Abkhazia," whose mission is to increase access to sources of livelihood of conflict-affected and other socially vulnerable persons and ensure their social and economic integration, has been working on the council's strategy and action plan as well as actively conducting needs assessments in local schools and engaging in various community activities. The Youth Council was also evaluated as an effective mechanism by the CSO representative. As was mentioned, the municipality committed to incorporating two initiatives from this council into the budget under the OGP framework.

Furthermore, the municipality has an active gender equality council and advisory councils, which work closely with local elected representatives and non-governmental organisations. These efforts have been largely successful, with high levels of engagement, particularly among young people, and a notable increase in inclusivity, as IDPs and people living in rural areas are represented in aforementioned councils according to information from the CSO.

As described by local authority representative, local elected representatives and CSOs view these initiatives as successful due to the transparent processes and the high degree of youth involvement. The support and active participation of non-governmental organisations have been crucial in the preparation and implementation of these initiatives. Citizen engagement levels have been commendable, with significant participation from young people and active involvement from gender and disability councils.

Challenges and looking ahead

Despite the successes, the municipality faces challenges such as the general passivity of the population and a lack of awareness about civic engagement platforms. To overcome these barriers, increased efforts to inform and raise awareness among citizens are necessary. The municipality also aims to retain its youth by engaging them in local decision-making processes. The CSO representative had the same perspective. He highlighted challenges such as the low level of motivation and awareness among the population to be engaged in the decision-making process, the passive role of the City Council (unlike City Hall), the lack of formalisation of participatory approaches, absence of vulnerable groups' needs assessment practices and the specific programmes tailored to them.

To support engagement from other vulnerable minorities, specific steps have been taken, such as involving representatives from all city hall services, as well as citizens including IDPs and socially vulnerable population, in the preparation of the online initiative platform. Continuous efforts are made to engage these groups and improve their access to participatory mechanisms.

Looking ahead, Khoni Municipality plans to continue these initiatives, with a focus on enhancing inclusion for minorities, promoting gender equality in local politics, and supporting PwDs. For instance, due to the high level of involvement from the council for PwDs, the issue of creating adapted stadium and simulators was brought up. Previously, the focus was solely on standard stadiums. Based on citizen requests, work on developing these adapted fields has already begun. The creation of an adapted sports field for PwDs is a specific example of how citizen feedback is being incorporated into future plans. Furthermore, CSO noted several initiatives addressing the needs of IDPs, such as financing diabetes test strips for children identified during a meeting with their parents, a partnership programme (development is currently in progress), and supporting start-up businesses.

Regarding the OGP Action Plan 2023-2025¹² Khoni municipality endeavours to bolster citizens' participation in the formulation of the local budget, enhance youth engagement, and ensure the engagement of PwDs through inclusive mechanisms in the policy-making process. Accordingly, in line with the consultation with stakeholders, three commitments are outlined in Khoni municipality OGP action plan:

1. To introduce a participatory budgeting programme in the City of Khoni;
2. To create a mechanism and space for youth participation;
3. To strengthen the inclusive mechanism of participation of PwDs.

As highlighted and described above, the implementation of these initiatives has already commenced. Furthermore, the municipality's future vision includes the themes outlined in the OGP plan.

The municipality has drawn inspiration from several others for their citizen participation initiatives, particularly around human rights. The online initiative platform was adopted from Ozurgeti municipality, which had a ready-made electronic system. This system required only integration of the information on Khoni municipality. Additionally, examples from Keda and Tskaltubo were considered, but Ozurgeti's system was the most practical. Additionally, the local authorities showcased their successful initiative on infrastructure projects for the Council of Persons with Disabilities at the OGP local event in Tallinn, where it was well received.

¹² Khoni Municipality OGP Action Plan 2023-2025, available in English at opengovpartnership.org/documents/action-plan-khoni-georgia-2023-2025/

In perspective, a representative from CSO believes that initiatives such as introducing personal assistant services for PwDs, live streaming municipality council and committee sessions, inclusively developing social programmes, and building personal capacity within the municipality enhance effective participatory practices and promote the realisation of human rights.

Within the OGP platform, Khoni has introduced the above-mentioned participatory practices and effectively implemented them. These practices have helped strengthen citizen engagement in decision-making processes. Despite the lack of direct funding from OGP membership, Khoni has successfully involved vulnerable groups and the general population through these initiatives. The municipality's success in securing a €1 million grant from the EU and being prioritised in the "Mayors for Economic Growth" project highlights the effectiveness of these participatory platforms and strategies.

Recommendations:

- ▶ Implement comprehensive and continuous campaigns to educate citizens about civic engagement opportunities and the impact of their participation as well as encourage citizens to use available mechanisms to convey their needs to the local authorities. Use multiple communication channels, including social media, local radio, community meetings, and partnerships with schools and universities, to reach different demographic groups, especially those in rural areas; awareness-raising initiatives, communication sources, and materials must be customised to meet the needs of vulnerable groups and ensure accessibility for them as well;
- ▶ Formalise the participatory budgeting process and other civic engagement platforms by establishing clear guidelines and regular schedules. Regularly publicise council meetings and decisions to enhance transparency and build trust;
- ▶ Conduct regular needs assessments of vulnerable groups for targeted initiatives and participatory opportunities; This process will support the fulfilment of OGP Local action plan commitment aimed at strengthening an inclusive mechanism for the participation of persons with disabilities;
- ▶ Improve and expand the functionality of the online initiative platform to make it more user-friendly and accessible to all citizens;
- ▶ Enhance the municipality's efforts to provide timely and transparent information about participatory processes and decisions.

3.4 Akhaltsikhe Municipality

General overview

Akhaltsikhe municipality, located in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, has a population of 39,300. The gender distribution is fairly balanced, with 52% women and 48% men. The urban population slightly surpasses the rural population, making up 57% and 43%, respectively. Vulnerable groups include 1,035 PwDs, 7,338 socially vulnerable people, 295 IDPs, and 50 single mothers. Ethnic and religious minorities constitute 32% and 31% of the population, respectively. The municipality hosts 26 CSOs and has several advisory councils, including those focused on civic, youth, disability, and gender issues.

Akhaltsikhe joined the OGP Local Programme in 2020 and was implementing two commitments from its 2021-2022 action plan.¹³ These commitments focused on improving corruption risk man-

¹³ Akhaltsikhe Municipality OGP Action Plan 2021-2022, available in English at opengovpartnership.org/documents/action-plan-akhaltsikhe-georgia-2021-2021/

agement within the municipality and enhancing open data management practices at the City Hall. A key part of their strategy was to improve service delivery quality by introducing e-services and ensuring better access to municipal programmes. The municipality had identified three priority areas:

- ▶ eliminating corruption risks and strengthening anti-corruption mechanisms at the local level;
- ▶ increasing the accountability and transparency of local authorities;
- ▶ enhancing citizen participation in the decision-making process.

As part of the OGP Local the municipality has actively involved local CSOs in developing the 2019-2020 Transparency and Integrity Strategy and Action Plan through a multi-stakeholder roundtable, which included soliciting feedback from various stakeholders.

Participatory assessment

Participatory assessment interview with local authority representative highlights that over the past five years, the Akhaltsikhe municipality has implemented several initiatives to enhance citizen participation, primarily through the OGP Local Programme. One notable initiative is the Rural Development Programme, which involves annual meetings of informal village councils to prioritise local projects. These projects typically focus on infrastructure improvements, such as road construction and street lighting, which are crucial for both the general rural population and specific vulnerable groups, including women. Another recurrent issue addressed through this programme is the water supply, reflecting the consistent needs of the community. As a local CSO representative mentioned, the information about the Rural Development Programme is primarily disseminated in Georgian through the municipality's Facebook page and official website, despite the high concentration of ethnic minorities in the municipality.

Inspired by the implementation of the Rural Development Programme, the Mayor's office has extended similar participatory practices to urban areas of Akhaltsikhe city (Urban Development Programme). For this purpose, the city was divided into four administrative units, each allocated 25,000 GEL for project funding. The process involved district meetings to select projects, aiming for initiatives that benefit broader neighbourhoods rather than individual buildings or families. Successful projects included the renovation of a local stadium and the development of a fitness area. Additionally, the municipality is exploring the feasibility of creating an umbrella alley in a city park, which was another chosen project.

Local elected representatives have consistently viewed these initiatives as successful, evidenced by their continuous implementation and positive evaluations from both officials and residents. According to them the support from CSOs has also been significant. International organisations such as the USAID and the EU have been long standing partners for the municipality, along with local CSOs, actively participating in thematic councils addressing issues related to disabilities, youth, gender and civil participation. Concerning advisory councils, respondents from CSOs pointed out that there is good practice of forming mayor's advisory council, where the balance between gender and sectoral perspectives is maintained, and representatives from CSOs and active citizens are selected via focus-groups and open call. Through this council several small-scale issues were advocated and solved, including providing food and sanitary supplies to children who are socially vulnerable. However, as a non-governmental organisation representative assessed, the mayor's advisory council is less effective and more symbolic, as meetings are called at the mayor's request, there is no elected chairman, more difficult issues remain unresolved, and members are not proactive in offering suggestions and recommendations.

CSO representatives noted several good cases of public participation: through this petition mechanism, problems such as public transport in the municipality and the public kindergarten rehabilitation issue have been solved; a co-funding programme for children with disabilities in collaboration with a local NGO; and the mayor's weekly office hours.

Citizen engagement, particularly from vulnerable minorities such as ethnic minorities, women, and youth, has shown improvement over the years. The involvement of these groups has been partially ensured through their representation in village and district assemblies. However, specific steps to enhance engagement from these groups were not systematically planned, suggesting room for more targeted outreach.

■ Challenges and looking ahead

Vulnerable minorities in Akhaltsikhe have had varying degrees of participation opportunities over the past five years. While specific programmes and sporadic initiatives have addressed their needs, there has been no institutionalised system for regular feedback from these groups. The municipality acknowledges the need for more structured and consistent engagement mechanisms.

Looking ahead, the municipality plans to continue its focus on human rights initiatives, such as the political inclusion of minorities, gender equality in local politics and support for PwDs mostly through existing councils and programmes. For instance, the council working on disability issues has initiated a project to adapt multi-storey buildings for wheelchair users, following a detailed field analysis and upcoming market research for the potential service providers.

One barrier identified by the local authority is the general lack of awareness and confidence among citizens regarding the importance and impact of their involvement, which has been prominent through other municipalities as well. The Akhaltsikhe local authority representative recognises the need for continuous education and engagement efforts to overcome this challenge, especially with vulnerable and minority groups, especially with ethnic minorities. The CSO representative also cited citizens' passivity and low level of motivation as a significant challenge. In line with this, a language barrier in villages with ethnic minorities and a lack of an adapted environment for the needs of PwDs remain to be addressed.

In terms of best practices, Akhaltsikhe municipality is aware of experiences of other municipalities both within and outside Georgia. For example, the idea of creating an online platform for reporting municipal damages, known as "Fix My City," (implemented in Tbilisi) is especially appealing for them, though they do not have upcoming concrete plans to prepare and institutionalise it. This platform generally aims to streamline the process of gathering information on issues such as road and street lighting damage, facility damages at sport stadiums, green spaces, etc, for facilitating quicker municipal response.

Overall, the Akhaltsikhe municipality's efforts within the OGP framework have enhanced civil participation, though there is a recognition of the need to improve these efforts and better inform citizens about the benefits of such engagement.

■ Recommendations

- ▶ Implement ongoing educational campaigns to inform citizens particularly the youth, vulnerable and minority groups, about the importance and impact of their participation in local governance. Utilise various communication channels, such as local media, social media, community meetings, and partnerships with local CSOs and educational institutions, to reach a wider audience;
- ▶ Establish structured and consistent engagement mechanisms for vulnerable groups, ensuring regular feedback. Regularly publicise council meetings, decisions, and participatory opportunities to build trust and encourage involvement;
- ▶ Develop specific outreach programmes for ethnic minorities, women, youth, and PwDs. These programmes should include regular needs assessments and tailored initiatives to address their unique challenges and encourage their active participation in local governance;
- ▶ Holding online conferences for citizens (for example through Facebook platform), where the mayor will answer their questions and understand the constituency's needs.

3.5 Tbilisi Municipality

General overview

Tbilisi city municipality, the capital and a self-governing city of Georgia, has a population of 1,258,500 residents. The gender distribution in Tbilisi is 55% women and 45% men. Ethnic minorities constitute 10% of the population, while religious minorities make up 6%. The city allocates significant resources for citizen participation and implements various formal participatory mechanisms. These include general assemblies, petition processes, councils of civil advisors, participation in Municipal Assembly sessions. The city also has several active advisory councils, including those for youth, persons with disabilities, and gender issues, ensuring diverse representation and active civic engagement.

Tbilisi joined the (OGP) Local Programme in 2016, as one of the first municipalities. The municipality outlined five key commitments in their 2018-2020 action plan¹⁴ that aimed to enhance transparency, civic engagement, and access to services. The initiatives included the development of an Information and Civic Activities Portal called “SMART MAP,” the introduction of a Budget Participatory Planning Mechanism, and the implementation of mechanisms to improve service access and civic engagement. Additionally, Tbilisi focused on establishing a Good Faith and Transparent Governance Strategy for the City Hall and promoting transparency through electronic mechanisms. These efforts reflect Tbilisi’s commitment to fostering an open and accountable local government.

Participatory assessment

Over the past five years, Tbilisi municipality has implemented various initiatives to enhance citizen participation, particularly within the framework of the OGP Local Programme. One significant project, “Your Idea to the City Mayor,” launched in 2017-2018, allows citizens, including vulnerable groups and youth, to present their projects and initiatives directly to the City Hall. This initiative has led to numerous infrastructure and community-based projects, demonstrating its success and popularity. Additionally, the municipality has established civil advisory councils in all ten districts also under the scope of OGP Local, comprising professionals and residents from diverse demographics. These councils have been particularly effective in some districts, such as Saburtalo, where numerous district projects focused on recreation and sports zones have been implemented successfully. The municipality plans to share these successful practices with other districts, aiming to expand citizen participation further.

Another notable success is the Council for Ethnic Minority Issues, which won a grant from the Council of Europe for an awareness project aimed at informing ethnic minorities about engagement mechanisms. This project specifically targets the engagement of ethnic minorities, informing them about various participation mechanisms and the functions of the council through information meetings.

Additionally, the “Fix Tbilisi” application is highlighted as a best practice example of citizen participation. This electronic platform allows citizens to report infrastructure issues, ensuring quick responses from municipal authorities. The increasing popularity and effectiveness of this tool demonstrate the potential of technology in facilitating citizen engagement.

According to the local government representative, both local elected representatives and CSOs have recognised the success of these initiatives, reflected in the ongoing implementation and expansion of projects. The active involvement of CSOs and international organisations like the Council of Europe further underscores the positive impact of these initiatives.

Looking ahead and challenges

Citizen engagement in Tbilisi is relatively high, especially compared to other municipalities, given its large population. However, while the absolute number of active citizens is significant, the pro-

14 Tbilisi Municipality OGP Action Plan 2018-2020, available in English at opengovpartnership.org/documents/tbilisi-action-plan-2018-2020/

portion of engaged citizens might still be low. Efforts to increase engagement among vulnerable groups include dedicated budgets and social programmes. However, their involvement in general issues, such as, infrastructural projects, occurs alongside other citizens without specific practices, except within thematic councils. The municipality recognises the need for more targeted practices to ensure their active participation in general affairs.

Vulnerable groups have various avenues for participation, including adapted online tools and thematic councils. While formal needs assessments may not be consistently conducted, information meetings and feedback mechanisms ensure their voices are heard. For instance, the Gender Equality Council's strategic document was informed by a study of women's needs and gender issues.

Despite these efforts, barriers to engagement remain, such as, the resource-intensive nature of participatory processes and the voluntary involvement of citizens in thematic councils. However, Tbilisi as a capital benefit from a vibrant civil society and active citizenry, reducing the perceived severity of these barriers. The municipality's approach to overcoming barriers to participation includes leveraging the active civil society and the large number of non-governmental organisations in Tbilisi.

Looking ahead, Tbilisi municipality is considering the introduction of new participatory formats, such as, citizens assemblies and CivicLab consultations. These initiatives, inspired by the Council of Europe's successful projects, aim to enhance the engagement of different segments of society, including the youth, ethnic minorities, and PwDs. Participatory budgeting is also identified as a key practice to involve a larger number of residents in decision-making processes.

Majority of the discussed practices have been implemented under the OGP Local platform, demonstrating the municipality's commitment to enhancing civil participation. The creation of thematic councils, the "Your Idea to the City Mayor" project, and the establishment of civil advisory councils across Tbilisi are key components of this commitment.

Recommendations

- ▶ Develop and implement targeted outreach programmes to engage specific vulnerable groups, such as, ethnic and religious minorities, women, youth, and PwDs. Conduct regular needs assessments and organise community meetings to understand and address their unique challenges;
- ▶ Introduce innovative participatory formats, such as, citizen assemblies and CivicLab. These formats can provide platforms for in-depth discussions and collaborative problem-solving on local issues;
- ▶ Consider implementing participatory budgeting citywide to involve more residents in the allocation of municipal resources;
- ▶ Provide additional resources and training to advisory councils, especially those focused on youth, gender, and disability issues. Ensure diverse representation within these councils and empower them to have a more significant influence on decision-making processes;
- ▶ Promote the "Fix Tbilisi" app extensively to increase its usage and effectiveness.

3.6 Ozurgeti Municipality

General overview

Ozurgeti municipality, located in the Guria region, has an estimated population of 56,300 residents. The demographic composition reveals that 97% of the population is Georgian. Gender distribution is relatively balanced, with women constituting 51.92% and men 48.08%. Regarding religious affiliation, 86.3% of the population adheres to the Orthodox, while 12.4% are Muslim. In terms of age categories, the largest demographic group in Ozurgeti consists of individuals aged 40-59, comprising 29% of the population, whereas only 4% are aged 80 and above.

Ozurgeti municipality has extensive experience with the OGP programme. In 2016, it became one of the pioneering local authorities to join the OGP Georgia national action plan. Since 2020, it has been involved in the OGP Local process, committing to promote open, responsive, and inclusive governance. Within the framework of the OGP Local, numerous innovative and noteworthy initiatives were launched, leading to Ozurgeti municipality being recognised as a successful reformer. A key factor in this success was considered robust co-operation between the local authority and local CSOs, particularly “Institute for Change and Innovation”, Centre for Innovations and Civic Development “Progress House,” and “Democratic Development Union”, along with partnership with international organisations.

Exercising practices of participatory democracy and implementing initiatives bolstering human rights and inclusiveness contributed to fostering a more engaged and equitable community in Ozurgeti municipality. In addition to the participation mechanisms defined by the Local Self-Government Code, several innovative instruments and Advisory Councils have been introduced in Ozurgeti municipality to support citizen engagement. These include participatory budgeting, Citizens’ Assembly, CivicLab, E-petition, specific programme in municipal budget focused on public participation, a council addressing issues of persons with disabilities, and a council focusing on gender issues, among others. Generally, several local CSOs exclusively focus on the needs of particular groups in Ozurgeti. However, the activities of most organisations involve working with vulnerable groups such as women, youth, religious and ethnic minorities, and PwDs as a cross-cut issue, thereby addressing the needs of various segments of the population to some extent.

Participatory assessment

Within the scope of the OGP Local, in line with other initiatives, notable achievements can be highlighted concerning citizen engagement and human-right-based approach. These accomplishments encompass the introduction of digital services, such as, Municipality Assembly (Sakrebulo) sessions live transmissions, an SMS system, an online petition platform, and an online platform “Be a co-ruler” for participatory budgeting. Furthermore, efforts have been made to raise awareness regarding opportunities for participation, open governance, and municipal budget. Additionally, to address the needs of vulnerable groups and enhance their access to public services, two comprehensive research studies were conducted, leading to the elaboration of recommendations for improvement.

Several initiatives can be highlighted over the past five years in Ozurgeti municipality aiming at enhancing public participation in the policy-making process. Some of them were included as commitments in OGP Local action plans.

The Citizens’ Assembly mechanism was implemented in 2023 to ensure inclusive decision-making regarding the improvement of the parking system in City of Ozurgeti. The 36 members of the assembly were randomly selected using a pre-defined methodology to form a diverse, demographically representative group based on criteria such as age, gender, education level, and residential area. Notably, the process included an awareness-raising component related to urban planning and road safety issues. Through thorough discussions in sub-groups with experts and municipality representatives, the assembly members elaborated and voted on recommendations focused on the parking system. The selected recommendations were submitted to the municipality. This inclusive selection and deliberative process ensured that the parking policy would be need-oriented and effective.

Another successful case of fostering citizen participation was the public consultation held to develop the Ozurgeti OGP Local Action Plan 2023-2025.¹⁵ This process was implemented using the innovative “CivicLab” mechanism (elaborated by the Council of Europe) for the first time in Georgia. Through an open call, citizens from various sectors - including public authorities, CSOs, media, education, the private sector, and active citizens - were invited to register. From the applicants, 30 individuals were selected based on their applications. During the consultation day, participants used a pre-prepared digital matrix to identify problems, develop ideas for solutions, and elabo-

¹⁵ Ozurgeti Municipality OGP Action Plan 2023-2025, available in English at opengovpartnership.org/documents/action-plan-ozurgeti-georgia-2023-2025/

rate realistic steps to achieve these goals within three thematic directions: anti-corruption, public finances, and service delivery. Group discussions and plenary sessions allowed participants to express their thoughts and needs regarding these issues. The results of this public consultation were used to develop the Ozurgeti OGP Local Action Plan 2023-2025.

As previously mentioned, “Be a Co-Ruler,” a form of participatory budgeting, is one of the prominent initiatives for citizen engagement in Ozurgeti municipality undertaken within the OGP framework. This mechanism is based on the principles of direct democracy and is carried out within the administrative boundaries of the city of Ozurgeti. Under this initiative, citizens define priority projects by presenting initiatives and deciding which projects to finance through electronic vouchers. As a commitment defined in the OGP Local action plan, “Be a Co-Ruler” has been launched in Ozurgeti municipality since 2019 and utilises the VOLIS digital system for voting, created by the E-governance Academy. The percentage of involved citizens in this initiative is high (40%) and demonstrates the motivation level of citizens and the effectiveness of the process. It should also be mentioned that not all of the prioritised projects within this initiative have been implemented for various reasons and overall, the programme requires refinements. However, in some cases, the City Hall has allocated additional funds to finance these projects. Notably, Ozurgeti municipality shares this best practice with Khoni municipality, supporting the launching of participatory budgeting.

Public Participation Benchmarking, which the Ozurgeti municipality has implemented twice (in 2020 and 2023), was mentioned as an example of good practice for enhancing participatory approaches. This benchmarking, based on an e-questionnaire, serves as a self-assessment tool for the municipality to identify and outline challenges and best practices regarding citizens’ engagement. It evaluates the process and results of participatory initiatives, the effectiveness of formal and additional mechanisms, and the regulatory framework, etc. Notably, Public Participation Benchmarking has enabled the Ozurgeti municipality to have a vision and develop an action plan to bolster citizens’ engagement.

Local elected representatives and CSOs have deemed the aforementioned initiatives successful according to the municipality. A key factor contributing to their effectiveness was the robust co-operation between the public sector, local CSOs, and experts, with support from donor organisations such as USAID, CoE, GIZ, NDI, among others, playing a crucial role in this success. In the case of initiatives like CivicLab and Citizens’ Assembly, local CSOs and experts were actively involved in the planning process and methodology adoption, tailored to the realities of Ozurgeti, in line with effective facilitation during deliberative phases. Building on this successful experience, the application of the Citizens’ Assembly mechanism focusing on the issue of stray animals is already planned in Ozurgeti municipality. Regarding “Be a Co-Ruler,” the unique method of voting via digital vouchers was initiated by local CSOs and became an important motivating factor for the population to be engaged in the process. The meaningful participation, tangible results, and the acknowledgment that people’s voices are heard and reflected in municipal policies are also considered crucial factors contributing to the success of these cases. These initiatives were not exclusively focused on vulnerable groups, but methodology enabled them to be involved in the process.

The CSOs emphasised that participatory budgeting is an effective mechanism, along with live transmissions of municipality assembly sessions and an online petition platform. The process of creating a programme budget for 2021-2022 also stood out, marked by the first-ever public hearings in the municipality, fulfilling a commitment made in the OGP action plan. Despite the challenges posed by Covid-19, online workshops were conducted, recommendations were gathered, and the final budget document addressed the needs of citizens, including vulnerable groups. The co-financing of women’s initiatives aimed at their economic empowerment, funded equally by the UN and the municipality, has been highlighted as a good practice from civil society organisations’ perspective. Through an open contest, outstanding ideas were identified and financed. This successful process showcases the high motivation and interest of women and prompts the municipality to proceed with this programme.

Looking ahead and challenges

Despite the presence of innovative mechanisms and initiatives in Ozurgeti municipality, these efforts remain fragmented and require further institutionalisation. An essential factor is the need for increased synergies between the civil and public sectors, along with a willingness for co-operation from both sides. Transferring the results of participatory mechanisms into policies remains a challenge for Ozurgeti municipality, compounded by the lack of feedback from local authorities on how citizens' ideas and recommendations are incorporated into the decision-making process. The absence of statistical data regarding vulnerable groups and situational analysis acts as a barrier to the participation of diverse groups, which must serve as the foundation for developing a specific vision and plan to enhance citizen engagement. Additionally, the lack of competence and capacity among municipality personnel to study, adapt, and introduce various participatory approaches effectively can be considered a hindering factor.

CSOs also have highlighted several obstacles, noting a shift in the level of co-operation between the civil sector and the municipality over the past two years. According to the interview results with CSOs, compared to the active involvement and close co-operation resulting in the launch of various innovative mechanisms to enhance citizen engagement and inclusion, including OGP commitments, the effectiveness of these mechanisms has decreased as collaboration practices have weakened. CSOs refer to the decreasing motivation from the municipality in implementing participatory approaches. Moreover, initiatives in which the municipality was actively involved in planning, such as the online platform aimed at ensuring municipality transparency via interactive touchscreens, have not been implemented.

In the future, as the respondent from the municipality mentioned, Ozurgeti intends to continue and broaden its participatory initiatives, with a particular focus on engaging vulnerable groups. For example, the action plan of the Gender Equality Council includes a new direction aimed at enhancing women's economic empowerment. The implementation of the action plan is expected to positively impact the well-being of women. Additionally, the Ozurgeti Forum as a space for co-operation, established in line with the OGP and bringing together municipal representatives and local non-governmental organisations, presents a unique opportunity for implementing innovative and participatory mechanisms, including facilitating the inclusion of vulnerable groups in the policy-making process. Developing relevant legal frameworks, regulations, and guidelines for this forum will support its effectiveness and the forum can serve as an institution focusing on advancing public participation goals. It is noteworthy that the aforementioned issues are largely reflected in the commitments that have been undertaken by Ozurgeti municipality in the OGP Local Action Plan 2023-2025:

- ▶ Strengthening participatory democracy and civil participation using innovative participation mechanisms;
- ▶ Strengthening legislative oversight;
- ▶ Improve public service delivery.

However, a notable challenge remains the political climate, which impedes co-operation between local government and CSOs harming the implementation of meaningful participatory processes.

When it comes to engaging vulnerable groups, respondents from the civil sector emphasise the importance of conducting need assessments to accurately reflect the needs of vulnerable groups in budget planning, in conjunction with collecting statistics and crafting a long-term vision. They view effective communication and information dissemination as sustainable methods to reach citizens who are less engaged in the self-government processes. Strengthening a council working on disability issues, coupled with upgrading the physical environment for PwDs - such as making the municipality assembly meeting hall accessible - and improving services like personal assistance, will facilitate the integration of diverse groups in social and political life of the municipality. As some CSOs are working locally on issues of PwDs, synergies and joint initiatives with the council would be valuable.

Enhancing participatory democracy through innovative mechanisms and fostering the inclusiveness of marginalised groups is also included in the previous and existing OGP Local action plans. The improvement of public service delivery and ensuring better access for vulnerable groups is one of the commitments of Ozurgeti municipality, which is based on the need analysis conducted during the Covid-19 and specific guidelines elaborated to address the above-mentioned issues. However, unlike in previous years, CSOs are not as actively involved in the implementation of OGP commitments. According to a representative from local governance, the implementation of the aforementioned commitments is currently being pursued more through co-operation with international donors than with local organisations.

Recommendations

- ▶ Apply a participatory approach on relevant and important issues. This can serve as a significant factor to consider when encouraging citizens' participation, as well-chosen topics consistently ignites interest among citizens;
- ▶ Gather and analyse statistical data on vulnerable groups to promote their inclusivity. This process can serve as the foundation for developing a comprehensive vision and action plan, facilitating the implementation of a systemic approach for engaging vulnerable groups and enhancing their access to public services, which is one of the commitments outlined in the OGP Local action plan;
- ▶ Periodically conduct needs assessments for vulnerable groups, particularly during the municipal budget development process, to ensure their inclusion and representation in municipal policies;
- ▶ Establish robust cooperative relationships between the public sector and civil society, recognising that CSOs are pivotal in promoting participatory approaches and implementing OGP commitments. Their role is essential for addressing the needs of diverse groups and fostering meaningful public participation processes;
- ▶ Identify effective methods of communication with citizens and provide them with relevant information in terms of human rights and participation opportunities, as this is a key factor in effectively implementing participatory approaches;
- ▶ Raising awareness and enhancing the capacity of municipality representatives regarding public participation, including the OGP process, is vital to establish a sustainable and development-oriented environment for citizen engagement;
- ▶ Ensure the institutionalisation of specific innovative participatory mechanisms. This will underpin their sustainability and support their implementation in a systematic way. Additionally, it will contribute to the enhancement of participatory democracy within the municipality, which is the first commitment of the OGP Local action plan.

4. INTEGRATING HUMAN RIGHTS INTO LOCAL SELF-GOVERNANCE: OVERVIEW OF INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS

Participatory democracy is a core principle of good governance and human rights implementation.¹⁶ Local authorities are close to citizens' everyday needs and they deal with human rights issues on daily basis.¹⁷ This proximity allows them to understand and address specific local concerns effectively.

Local governments have a duty to respect, protect and fulfil human rights. To achieve this, integration of a human rights-based approach is essential. The latter is about empowering people to be aware of and claim their rights¹⁸ and putting human rights at the centre of public policies. As a key element of the human rights-based approach, human rights mainstreaming needs to be considered for strategies, policies, decisions and day-to-day activities.¹⁹ For human rights commitments to be effectively realised at the local level, they must be taken into account in policy planning and the allocation of funds in line with the established budgetary processes.²⁰ This approach ensures that all stakeholders are involved, their rights are considered in the decision-making process, and the resources are directed toward addressing human rights issues.

Municipalities are at the level that best knows the problems people face in their daily life and how to find lasting solutions in the interest of citizens.²¹ The following three-step model is considered the most efficient way for integrating human rights at local level: assessing the local context, pertinent issues and identifying the human rights aspects involved; considering best practices; shaping new or adapting existing policies.²²

A crucial aspect of this approach is the use of data. Local elected representatives need data to identify a problem, to define priorities, to substantiate political decisions, to dedicate budget to vulnerable groups, to define target groups of policies, etc.²³ The availability of data helps to identify in which areas it is most sustainable and useful, from a human rights perspective, to allocate budget.²⁴ All data collection exercises should include means for free, active and meaningful participation of relevant stakeholders, in particular of the most marginalised population groups.²⁵ By

16 Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, Local Authorities' Efforts, Challenges and Needs in the Implementation of Human Rights Commitments, 2024, pg. 26, available in English at rm.coe.int/baseline-assessment-report-for-web-eng/1680af721a

17 Role of local government in the promotion and protection of human rights – Final report of the Human Rights Council Advisory Committee, A/HRC/30/49, 2015, § 26.

18 Council of Europe, Human Rights at Local Level in Georgia, Assessment Report, 2021, pg. 26, available in English at rm.coe.int/assessment-report-eng/1680a87cbf

19 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Human Rights Cities in the European Union, A Guide to Support Local Authorities in Making Human Rights Part of People's Daily Life, 2022, p. 33.

20 Council of Europe, Human Rights at Local Level in Georgia, Assessment Report, 2021, pg. 26, available in English at: rm.coe.int/assessment-report-eng/1680a87cbf

21 Council of Europe, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, Human Rights Handbook for Local and Regional Authorities, Vol. 1, 2019, pg. 14, available in English at rm.coe.int/human-rights-handbook-for-local-and-regional-authorities-vol1-eng/1680a87cc7

22 Council of Europe, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, Human Rights Handbook for Local and Regional Authorities, Vol. 1, 2019, pg. 20.

23 Human rights at local level, 10 reasons why local leaders need data, available in English at rm.coe.int/10-reasons-why-data-for-decisionmaking-eng/1680af2d47

24 Ibid.

25 United Nations, A Human-Rights Based Approach to Data, Leaving No One Behind in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 2018, pg. 3, available in English at ohchr.org/en/documents/tools-and-resources/human-rights-based-approach-data-leaving-no-one-behind-2030-agenda

integrating data-driven insights into policy planning, local authorities can make informed decisions that effectively address human rights issues and ensure that resources are used efficiently.

This approach fosters an environment that ensures inclusivity and social cohesion. Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe recommends supporting and stimulating intercultural communication, empowering diverse voices within communities to be heard and to become active city members, all enjoying equal rights.²⁶

Moreover, good practice envisages a formalised commitment to human rights: adopting a declaration, decision or resolution at the highest political level formalises the city's commitments to human rights.²⁷ The declaration, decision or resolution can include references to key human rights instruments and to mechanisms and tools that support human rights work.²⁸ This formalisation reinforces the importance of human rights within the local governance framework and ensures alignment with international human rights standards.

The Congress recommends promoting public procurement procedures that protect social rights, using public tenders to create job opportunities, decent work, social and professional inclusion, and better conditions for disabled and disadvantaged people.²⁹ Similarly, a guide developed by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights suggests that in procurement processes, human rights provisions ensure that external providers deliver services that fulfil and respect human rights.³⁰

In addition, the Congress recommends protecting the right to a healthy environment when it comes to urban planning and housing, along with measures against homelessness as well as engaging existing municipal architecture for the purpose of promoting social rights and solidarity towards citizens in need.³¹

Moreover, the 2024 baseline assessment report developed within the co-operation project of the Congress "Strengthening participatory democracy and human rights at the local level in Georgia" highlights the importance of human rights education as it can enable local authorities to reflect human rights topics in their strategic documents, consider them in planning and budgeting, effectively monitor the implementation, and assess the impact.³² Similarly, a guide developed by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights suggests that training and human rights education can help to develop capacities and equip city administrations and other local actors with the knowledge and skills they need to protect and implement human rights.³³

In addition, local administrations should routinely assess how their policies and actions affect human rights. Through monitoring and evaluation, they can identify what works best, detect issues requiring further action, help generate fresh ideas, and increase the accountability and transparency of public service.³⁴

26 Council of Europe, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, Human Rights Handbook for Local and Regional Authorities, Vol. 2, 2021, pg. 116.

27 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Human Rights Cities in the European Union, A Guide to Support Local Authorities in Making Human Rights Part of People's Daily Life, 2022, pg. 21.

28 Ibid.

29 Council of Europe, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, Human Rights Handbook for Local and Regional Authorities, Vol. 2, 2021, pg. 36.

30 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Human Rights Cities in the European Union, A Guide to Support Local Authorities in Making Human Rights Part of People's Daily Life, 2022, pg. 21.

31 Council of Europe, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, Human Rights Handbook for Local and Regional Authorities, Vol. 2, 2021, pg. 71.

32 Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, Local Authorities' Efforts, Challenges and Needs in the Implementation of Human Rights Commitments, Baseline report, 2024, pg. 25.

33 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Human Rights Cities in the European Union, A Guide to Support Local Authorities in Making Human Rights Part of People's Daily Life, pg. 35.

34 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Human Rights Cities in the European Union, A Guide to Support Local Authorities in Making Human Rights Part of People's Daily Life, pg. 39.

To complement these efforts, the introduction of period reporting would be beneficial. A mechanism for reporting annually on a city's human rights performance allows its administration to monitor progress, identify lessons learned and propose new activities.³⁵ It further enhances transparency and accountability, driving continuous improvement in human rights performance at local level.

In conclusion, participatory democracy serves as a cornerstone of effective governance and realisation of human rights. International standards and good practices underscore the integral role of human rights in local governance, highlighting the need for mainstreaming human rights in a cross-cutting manner. By embracing the above-mentioned principles and practices, local authorities can create environments where the rights of all citizens are respected and protected.

35 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Human Rights Cities in the European Union, A Guide to Support Local Authorities in Making Human Rights Part of People's Daily Life, pg. 26.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study was undertaken during a time of political crisis in Georgia. Despite mass demonstrations, protests and forceful criticism both within Georgia and internationally, the Parliament of Georgia adopted the controversial Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence, which threatens the functioning of civil society and media. The findings of the present research illustrate the experiences from a period before the crisis intensified.

The study has shown that in Rustavi, proactive efforts by the local government have led to significant strides in citizen participation, particularly through initiatives like participatory budgeting and the Citizens' Assembly for strategic development projects. The municipality's collaboration with organisations such as, GIZ has further enhanced inclusivity and responsiveness to community needs. This is demonstrated by successful projects, for example, neighbourhood recreation zones. CSOs, including the Eco Centre, have played a crucial role in ensuring comprehensive and inclusive citizen engagement.

Similarly, in Kutaisi, participatory budgeting and youth engagement initiatives have been instrumental in fostering active civil participation. The municipality's efforts to involve diverse groups, including women, young people, and socially vulnerable populations, have been widely successful, with significant participation in decision-making processes.

Meanwhile, in Khoni, the implementation of electronic civil budgeting and the establishment of a youth council exemplify the municipality's commitment to inclusion and human rights. Despite challenges such as citizen reluctance, Khoni plans to continue and enhance these initiatives, drawing inspiration from good practices in other municipalities and within the OGP framework to strengthen citizen engagement and promote inclusivity.

In Akhaltsikhe, the municipality has prioritised citizen participation through initiatives like the Rural and Urban Development Programmes, which engage residents in decision-making processes regarding local projects. The implementation of participatory mechanisms such as the Rural Development Programme has allowed citizens to actively contribute to infrastructure improvements and other community-based projects, ensuring that the municipality addresses the diverse needs of its population. Despite challenges such as general passivity among citizens, Akhaltsikhe plans to continue promoting human rights initiatives and enhancing inclusivity, particularly by focusing on the political inclusion of minorities, gender equality, and support for persons with disabilities.

Tbilisi municipality, as the capital city, has implemented various initiatives over the past five years to enhance citizen participation, particularly through the Open Government Partnership (OGP) Local Programme. For example, the project "Your Idea to the City Mayor" has empowered citizens to propose and implement projects directly, fostering a sense of ownership and community involvement. The establishment of civil advisory councils across the city has also facilitated engagement from diverse demographic groups. Despite relatively high citizen engagement levels, the municipality recognises the need for more targeted practices to ensure active participation from vulnerable groups, such as youth, elderly, persons with disabilities, women, ethnic and religious minorities, internally displaced persons and plans to introduce new formats such as citizens assemblies and CivicLab consultations (civil participation methodology developed by the Council of Europe) to further enhance engagement.

In Ozurgeti, participatory democracy practices have led to a more engaged and equitable community, with initiatives like the Citizens' Assembly and the CivicLab enhancing citizen involvement in policy-making processes. The municipality's collaboration with civil society organisations and international partners has been crucial in the success of these initiatives, which have yielded tangible results and increased citizen satisfaction. Despite fragmented efforts and challenges such

as the lack of statistical data on vulnerable groups, Ozurgeti plans to continue broadening its participatory initiatives, with a focus on engaging marginalised groups and enhancing public service delivery. The municipality remains committed to promoting inclusiveness and strengthening participatory democracy through innovative mechanisms within the framework of the Open Government Partnership.

At the same time, the study has revealed several challenges that impede effective promotion of human rights and citizen participation at the local level. In particular, the scepticism and the lack of trust towards public institutions potentially lead to citizens' disengagement. In addition, participatory mechanisms are not properly institutionalised. More structured and consistent engagement would ensure their sustainability. Furthermore, the absence of statistical data concerning participants from different groups presents a challenge in objectively assessing the level of engagement of citizens from vulnerable groups at the local level.

Human rights are universal legal standards for public authorities at all levels of government. Being closest to the citizens, municipalities have a prominent role to play in respecting, protecting and fulfilling human rights. They are uniquely positioned to create people-centred and place-based solutions for the social needs of their citizens.³⁶ In addition, due to its proximity, the emphasis on the respect and protection of human rights enhances public visibility and provides an important foundation for human rights in wider society. At the local level, applying the principles of open government – transparency, civil participation and public accountability – is an important tool for advancing human rights.

The study has revealed the need for better integration of a human rights-based approach in local governance, namely, putting human rights at the centre of public policies. The human rights-based approach is a conceptual framework that helps to operationalise respect for and protection of human rights in practical steps and activities.³⁷ It addresses the results and the process to achieve them, through a human rights lens.³⁸

Citizen participation mechanisms can play a crucial role in the identification of key human rights challenges, defining priorities, and integrating human rights perspectives in governance, policies and decisions.

While participatory budgeting in municipalities is a commendable practice, it is also essential to design a budget that contributes to effective realisation of human rights. Human rights principles should be considered at all stages of budgeting work. This will ensure that the budget allocation contributes to human rights priorities.³⁹

In conclusion, there remains a need for sustained efforts to enhance collaboration, inclusion and participation at the local level. Through incorporating a human rights-based approach in their local governance, municipalities can contribute to creating inclusive communities where every individual's rights are protected.

36 Council of Europe, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, Human Rights Handbook for Local and Regional Authorities, Vol. 2, 2021, pg. 14, available in English at rm.coe.int/congress-human-rights-handbook-volume-2-en/1680a87cc2

37 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Human Rights Cities in the European Union, A Guide to Support Local Authorities in Making Human Rights Part of People's Daily Life, 2022, pg. 34.

38 Ibid.

39 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Human Rights Cities in the European Union, A Guide to Support Local Authorities in Making Human Rights Part of People's Daily Life, pg. 36.

6. GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings from all six municipalities, there are several recommendations addressed at the municipalities to enhance citizen participation, especially focusing on the participation and human rights protection of vulnerable groups:

- 1. Tailored participatory initiatives:** Develop targeted participatory initiatives specifically designed to engage vulnerable groups such as women, persons with disabilities, socially vulnerable populations, and ethnic minorities. These initiatives should address the unique needs and challenges faced by each group, ensuring their voices are heard in decision-making processes. For example, in Rustavi, initiatives like the Citizens' Assembly and participatory budgeting could include targeted outreach and accessibility measures to ensure the inclusion of vulnerable populations.
- 2. Inclusive representation:** Foster inclusive representation in decision-making bodies and advisory councils by actively recruiting and appointing members from diverse backgrounds, including vulnerable groups. Ensure that these bodies reflect the demographic diversity of the community and have mechanisms in place to amplify the voices of marginalised populations. Encourage participation from youth, women, persons with disabilities, and ethnic minorities to ensure a broad spectrum of perspectives and experiences are considered in governance processes.
- 3. Institutionalisation of mechanisms:** Work towards institutionalising participatory mechanisms to ensure their sustainability and continuity beyond individual administrations or projects. Develop clear guidelines, regulations, and frameworks for implementing participatory initiatives, making them integral parts of the municipality's governance structure.
- 4. Identification of human rights challenges and defining priorities:** Utilise open governance and citizen participation mechanisms effectively to identify key human rights challenges at the local level and define priorities. By involving citizens, including vulnerable persons, local authorities can gain insights into the specific human rights concerns faced by different groups. Such an approach will ensure that priorities for action are grounded in the needs of the people, which will ultimately contribute to the advancement of human rights at the local level.
- 5. Education and awareness campaigns:** Implement comprehensive education and awareness campaigns to inform citizens, especially vulnerable groups, about their rights, the importance of civic engagement, and ways to actively participate in governance processes. This could involve workshops, informational sessions, and community outreach programmes tailored to the specific needs and interests of different groups. Collaborate with civil society organisations and educational institutions to ensure the effectiveness and reach of these campaigns.
- 6. Capacity building and training:** Provide capacity building and training programmes to empower vulnerable groups with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to engage meaningfully in participatory initiatives. This could include training sessions on civil rights, advocacy, leadership, and effective communication. In Kutaisi, for example, initiatives like business plan and project writing trainings for women and computer skills training courses for single mothers could be expanded and replicated to reach a wider audience of vulnerable individuals. In addition, in terms of social inclusion, improving the digital skills of senior citizens is also crucial.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Council of Europe, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, Human Rights Handbook for Local and Regional Authorities, Vol. 2, 2021, pg. 25.

7. **Accessible platforms and tools:** Ensure that participatory platforms and tools are accessible and user-friendly for all citizens, including those with disabilities. This may involve developing electronic voting systems, online platforms (including official websites), and mobile applications that accommodate various accessibility needs, such as screen readers, sign language interpretation, and easy-to-understand interfaces. In Khoni, the implementation of electronic civil budgeting and the online initiative platform could be further enhanced to improve accessibility and usability for vulnerable groups.
8. **Partnership development:** In times of political stability and opportunity for co-operation, foster closer collaboration between the public sector, civil society organisations, and international donor organisations to develop and implement participatory initiatives. Establish formal partnerships and co-operation agreements to ensure sustainable support for citizen engagement activities, particularly those targeting vulnerable groups.
9. **Continuous data collection and research:** Establish a structured framework for continuous data collection and research focused on monitoring the participation levels and needs of vulnerable groups over time. This framework should involve regular surveys, interviews, and focus groups with representatives from vulnerable communities to gather ongoing feedback and insights into their experiences with civic engagement processes. Furthermore, collecting and analysing the statistics about vulnerable groups is essential for local authorities to develop programmes tailored to vulnerable groups and address their needs within their municipality.
10. **Continuous evaluation of initiatives and their impact on human rights:** Regularly evaluate the effectiveness and impact of participatory initiatives, both in terms of process and outcomes, soliciting feedback from citizens, civil society organisations, and local elected representatives. Use this feedback to identify areas for improvement and adapt initiatives to better meet the needs of vulnerable groups. Continuous monitoring and evaluation will ensure that participatory processes remain inclusive, and relevant to the evolving needs of the community.
11. **Applying feedback practice:** Process and analyse information acquired through participatory approaches, communicate to citizens how their perspectives have been incorporated into municipal policies, and provide feedback on the results of their engagement.
12. **Formalised commitment to human rights:** Adopt a decision at the highest level to formalise municipality's commitment to human rights. By making a public commitment to international human rights standards, local authorities will affirm that they will protect and respect these rights, putting them at the heart of their decision making.⁴¹
13. **Designation of a person responsible for human rights protection:** Having a human rights officer within the administration is an important way to advance human rights protection. This role will contribute to integration of human rights standards into policies and decisions, foster a human rights-based approach, and raise awareness of human rights.
14. **Taking human rights into account in budgeting and procurement:** Consider human rights principles at all the stages of budgeting work and ensure that budget decisions reflect human rights standards. Such an approach will affirm that the decisions on budget allocation are determined by their impact on human rights and are in line with the state's human rights obligations. It will ensure that local budgets are oriented towards the rights-holders in need. In addition, in procurement processes, it should be ensured that external providers deliver services that fulfil and respect human rights.⁴²

41 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Human Rights Cities in the European Union, A Guide to Support Local Authorities in Making Human Rights Part of People's Daily Life, 2022, pg. 14.

42 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Human Rights Cities in the European Union, A Guide to Support Local Authorities in Making Human Rights Part of People's Daily Life, 2022, pg. 36.

- 15. Reporting on human rights performance:** Periodic reporting on human rights performance allows to monitor progress, identify lessons learned and propose new activities.⁴³
- 16. Public participation supporting budget programme:** Elaborate specific budget programme aimed at enhancing public participation to bolster the implementation of participatory approaches defined by the Organic Law of Georgia Local Self-Government Code, while also supporting launching additional mechanisms.
- 17. Develop long-term vision:** Work towards forming vision and strategies tailored to vulnerable groups inclusion in municipalities to ensure implementing specific need-oriented programmes and impact-oriented initiatives for these groups.

⁴³ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Human Rights Cities in the European Union, A Guide to Support Local Authorities in Making Human Rights Part of People's Daily Life, 2022, pg. 26.

ANNEX

Annex 1 - The list of research participants

No	Municipality	Title/role
1	Rustavi	Head of Municipal Reforms and Services Development Centre from Rustavi municipality
2	Rustavi	Rustavi Innovation Hub representative (CSO)
3	Kutaisi	Head of Foreign Relations and International Projects Department Kutaisi municipality
4	Kutaisi	LDA Georgia representative (CSO)
5	Khoni	Head of the Child Protection and Support Department of Hall of Khoni municipality
6	Khoni	Khoni IDPs Initiative Group representative (CSO)
7	Akhaltzikhe	First Deputy Mayor from Akhaltzikhe municipality
8	Akhaltzikhe	Head of Samtskhe-Javakheti Development Centre (CSO)
9	Akhaltzikhe	Former member of Civil Adviser Council of Mayor of Akhaltzikhe
10	Tbilisi	Head of Office at Tbilisi City Hall Administration
11	Ozurgeti	Head of Staff from Ozurgeti municipality
12	Ozurgeti	Institute for Change and Innovation representative (CSO)
13	Ozurgeti	Democratic Development Union of Georgia representative (CSO)
14	Ozurgeti	Centre for Innovations and Civic Development "Progress House" representative (CSO)

The participatory research study has been designed to evaluate the integration of human rights considerations, citizen participation, and inclusivity within the governance processes in six municipalities of Georgia, Tbilisi, Rustavi, Kutaisi, Khoni, Ozurgeti, and Akhaltsikhe. These municipalities are active members of the OGP Local Programme under the Open Government Partnership – a unique partnership of government representatives and civil society advocates that promotes transparent, participatory, inclusive and accountable governance. This report was developed within the Council of Europe Action Plan for Georgia 2024-2027.

The study revealed notable progress in the last five years (2019-2024) in citizen participation and inclusivity. Proactive efforts by local governments, collaboration with organisations, and innovative initiatives such as participatory budgeting and citizens' assemblies have been instrumental in fostering active civil participation. Ongoing challenges such as citizen passivity and the lack of general statistical data on vulnerable groups, as well as data on their engagement levels were identified, underscoring the need for continuous improvement and participation practices targeted at vulnerable groups.

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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member States, including all the members of the European Union. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities is an institution of the Council of Europe, responsible for strengthening local and regional democracy in its 46 member states. Composed of two chambers – the Chamber of Local Authorities and the Chamber of Regions – and three committees, it brings together 612 elected officials representing more than 130 000 local and regional authorities.

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