LOCAL AUTHORITIES' EFFORTS, CHALLENGES AND NEEDS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITMENTS

BASELINE ASSESSMENT REPORT

Congress of Local and Regional Authorities
of the Council of Europe

The Congress
Le Congrès

COUNCIL OF EUROPE

CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

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ABBREVIATIONS

CoE	Council of Europe
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
ETC	European Training and Research Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, Graz
GEC	Gender Equality Council
GRB	Gender Responsive Budgeting
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
LA	Local authorit(ies)y
LSG	Local self-government
MLG	Multi-Level Governance
NALAG	National Association of Local Authorities in Georgia
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OHCHR	United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
PDO	Public Defender's Office
PwD	Person(s) with Disabilities
SSA	Social Services Agency
SOGIESC	Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The present report was developed within the project "Strengthening participatory democracy and human rights at the local level in Georgia", carried out by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe in collaboration with the National Association of Local Authorities in Georgia (NALAG) and with the financial contribution of the Austrian Development Cooperation. It presents a baseline assessment of the capacities and needs of thirteen Georgian local authorities to implement human rights, focusing on three topics of priority that were agreed as key areas of assessment: group-based rights, good governance and service delivery, as well as participation and anti-discrimination.

This baseline assessment was developed within the Forum of Exchange, a platform *of local authorities aimed* at addressing challenges for improving social inclusion, promoting equal opportunities, and incorporating a gender perspective in local political action in order to eliminate discrimination. The findings and recommendations of the assessment are based on the information provided by the municipalities on their capacities, challenges, and needs in relation to strengthening participatory democracy and human rights at the local level. Local consultations were carried out in each participating municipality to assess the local authorities' views on their capacities as well as to anticipate challenges in human rights implementation.

The report positively notes the role and the efforts of local authorities to enhance the realisation of human rights, eliminate discrimination and promote participatory democracy. The actions undertaken by local authorities, such as establishing thematic consultative councils and creating additional tools for citizen participation are worthy of mentioning. Still, the self-assessment shows that the efficiency of the existing tools and mechanisms needs further improvement.

In fact, the report highlights some challenges primarily related to the lack of resources (including human resources), information on human rights, and underused multi-level cooperation and coordination mechanisms. The report delineates various proactive steps and recommendations for local and national authorities to further advance and support the efforts of local self-government. In particular, tailored capacity building for local authorities and elaboration of efficient cooperation instruments are recommendations developed towards NALAG as the representative of local authorities within the Georgian multilevel governance system.

The baseline assessment concludes with two sets of recommendations: the first focuses on strengthening efforts for capacity building on human rights and civil participation at local level while the second provides inputs towards the development of structures for internal, horizontal, and vertical cooperation and exchange among public authorities and civil society organisations for strengthening local democracy and human rights implementation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The present report is the result of a baseline assessment of the capacities of 13 Georgian local authorities to implement human rights. The local authorities that participated in this exercise were Bolnisi, Borjomi, Chokhatauri, Dedoplistskaro, Dmanisi, Marneuli, Oni, Ozurgeti, Tbilisi, Tetritskaro, Tsalka, Tskaltubo, and Zestaponi. These 13 local authorities have come together to form a Forum of Exchange, a unique platform which aims to generate a dialogue on human rights implementation at local level and discuss challenges, solutions, and ways forward. The Forum was developed under the auspices of the project on "Strengthening Participatory Democracy and Human Rights at Local Level in Georgia" of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (hereinafter "Congress") and in collaboration with the National Association of Local Authorities of Georgia (NALAG) within the Council of Europe Action Plan for Georgia 2020-2023 and with the financial contribution of the Austrian Development Cooperation.

As members of the Forum of Exchange, the 13 Georgian municipalities reflected upon their existing capacities and challenges in respect to the protection and promotion of human rights with the support of local and international consultants. They shared recommendations on strengthening participatory democracy and human rights at the local level. The local consultants compiled all this information into 13 local reports, which reflect municipality-specific information and opinions. The present report provides an analysis of the content of the local reports and additionally includes the contributions made by the National Association of Local Authorities in Georgia and the Public Defender's Office (hereinafter "PDO") through further interviews and focus groups.

The baseline assessment was carried out between March and July 2022 and included a mapping of capacities and local consultations in all thirteen local authorities. Moreover, it encompasses exchanges between municipalities in the framework of the Forum of Exchange and the Spring School on Human Rights Data and Evidence-based Policy Making carried out in June 2022 within the framework of the Project.

The report focuses on capacities, challenges and needs of local authorities in the topical areas of priority: group rights, good governance and equality and participation. Based on the present baseline assessment report, further advocacy efforts as well as co-created capacity development measures will be defined within the Forum of Exchange.

The local reports outline the municipality specific capacities, challenges and needs, while perspectives of the NALAG and the PDO provide general basis for existing challenges and needs as well as reflect upon the ways forward. Based on the above-mentioned sources, the current baseline assessment report compiles all these findings and provides two sets of recommendations for further advocacy and cooperation as well as capacity building.

2. METHODOLOGY AND DATA GATHERING

The baseline assessment's methodology is based on the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) framework for indicator-based human rights monitoring as well as Congress' recommendations.[1] It includes three-levels: the structural level, the process level, and the outcome level.

First, the structural level of human rights obligations and their implementation in municipal laws, regulations, and institutions. At the structural level, the local authorities' commitments to human rights are considered.

Secondly, at the process level, the local authorities' efforts to implement human rights commitments are assessed. Programs, strategies, action plans and challenges, which may be faced due to lacking capacities, competences or resources are mapped.

Thirdly, the OHCHR's framework includes the outcome level as the third level, which evaluates the impact of the efforts on the population. The baseline assessment considered the outcome level (effects on the population) by means of assessing whether data on beneficiaries from municipal services is available.

The structure of the baseline assessment is based on the local authorities' human rights priorities, as outlined in their letters of interest for the participation in the Forum of Exchange.[2] Group-based rights, good governance and service delivery, as well as antidiscrimination and participation were agreed as key areas of the assessment.

During the first meeting of the Forum of Exchange, the baseline assessment was launched, and its methodology was agreed upon. The members of the Forum agreed to actively participate in the baseline assessment and to transparently provide relevant data.

Data on local authorities' structures and process-oriented capacities were collected by local consultants through extensive mapping. The mapping gathers detailed information about local authorities' efforts in implementation of human rights commitments. The following methods were applied while gathering the relevant data:

- ▶ Desk research (including online sources);
- ▶ Written information requests, sent to responsible contacts in the respective departments of local municipalities and to relevant CSOs;
- ▶ Telephone interviews.

The output of the mapping is a compilation of the institutions/agencies, guidelines/ directives/regulations and public services that were relevant in the preliminary selected thematic areas. The mapping provides for each local authority detailed information on capacities needed for implementation of human rights. For each measure, information is provided on the implementing institution or responsibility within the local authority and/or target groups, as well as reference to a corresponding underlying national law, strategy or resolution and, if relevant, the number of beneficiaries.

Local consultations were carried out in each participating city and town to assess the local authorities' views on their capacities as well as to anticipate challenges in human rights implementation. The international consultants developed guidelines for the local consultations, which were based on the three topical priorities (group-based rights, good governance and service delivery, as well as antidiscrimination and

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1   UN OHCHR (2012), Human Rights Indicators: A Guide for Measurement and Implementation. The Congress proposed human rights monitoring and data collection mechanisms in different fields of everyday policy making Report CG(21)10 - Resolution 334 (2011)

2   Within the framework of the project, an open call for interest to create a Forum of Exchange on human rights at local level was launched in Autumn 2021. Participants to the Forum have access to capacity development sessions on human rights at local level, including gender equality and non-discrimination, as well as international and local peer-exchange. They meet online and in person to discuss relevant advocacy strategies as well as best practices for the protection and promotion of human rights at the local level.

participation) and included the findings of the mapping. Face-to-face local consultations were carried out in each municipality. Thirteen focus group discussions, involving local authorities at political and administrative level, as well as members from civil society organisations, the NALAG and the PDO were held.

The mapping and the local consultations provided extensive and in-depth information on priority areas. Moreover, national-level individual interviews conducted with the NALAG and PDO complemented the municipality-specific mapping. The individual interviews with NALAG and PDO addressed nationwide topics and cross-cutting matters as well as provided additional information on issues such as anti-discrimination, participation, and multi-level government cooperation.

Six local consultants collected all data for the baseline assessment to facilitate data collection and access the information; moreover, each local authority designated a contact person for the local consultants. The national level interviews[3] were conducted by one local expert.

The international consultants coordinated the implementation of the baseline assessment. For this purpose, three meetings with local consultants took place. During the meetings, the local consultants were guided in the implementation of the baseline assessment methodology and were provided with feedback on the respective deliverables.[4] Moreover, the international consultants developed questionnaires to take stock of the local consultants' experiences gathered during the implementation of the baseline assessment, mainly in respect to the capacity building achievements. Peer discussions among the experts during these meetings complemented the reflection upon the methodology.

The key findings regarding the quality of the methodology, upon self-reflection by the consultants, are:

▶ A participatory and cooperative approach has been applied throughout the implementation of the baseline assessment, among participant local authorities, local experts, and international experts.

▶ The designated contact persons were crucial to access data and to facilitate the focus groups;

▶ The focus groups contained a lot of relevant information which was missing on the mapping. In a physical environment, the members of focus groups were much more open and prone to collaboration than in responding to written information requests or at the telephone.

▶ Information and data are hardly available online on the municipalities' websites, making desk research difficult;

▶ The baseline assessment foresaw too few meetings with the local authorities;

▶ The baseline assessment included too many questions and topics.

Overall, the implementation of the baseline assessment methodology constituted a capacity building and learning process. All participating actors, the local consultants, the international consultants, as well as the representatives of the local authorities obtained knowledge in the course of the implementation of the baseline assessment. The baseline assessment particularly strengthened the awareness, competence, and dialogue on human rights at local level.

The proposed methodology gave sufficient results to compile a general picture on the understanding and capacities of preliminary selected municipalities on implementation of human rights in a participatory way. The cooperative approach throughout the implementation of the baseline assessment contributed to its success. The open atmosphere during the local consultations initiated a trust building process, which significantly contributed to the quality of the findings.

As a final methodological note, the international consultants observed that some group-specific topics were either not addressed at all or were reflected upon at an unsatisfying level. For instance, considering the ethnic and religious diversity of the population in Georgia, despite having been mentioned as a human rights challenge by some focus groups, still the group-based rights were discussed rarely and superficially, mainly lacking in-depth insights. Likewise, SOGIESC issues was not a topic at all. Finally, the consultants observed that welfare systems and their beneficiaries were mapped in without any reference to group-rights and intersectionality.

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3   One of which was a focus group discussion with five NALAG Executive board representatives. The local expert who carried out the national level interviews was Nino Zurabishvili, member of the Group of Independent Experts on the European Charter of local self-government of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe.

4   Namely Mapping Tables and Focus group reports.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Commitments

The legal basis of the actions/measures/policies described in the mapping table consists of the Constitution of Georgia, ratified international treaties and agreements (which are directly applicable in Georgia); national legislative acts, namely the Organic Law of Georgia Local Self-Government Code, Law of Georgia on Gender Equality, Law of Georgia on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination, Law of Georgia on the Code on the Rights of the Child, Law of Georgia on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; and National policy documents such as, the National Strategy for the Protection of Human Rights in Georgia, Decentralisation Strategy 2020-2025, and Georgian National Youth Strategy. All these documents oblige municipalities to plan and perform actions aimed at the implementation, promotion, and enhancement of human rights at the local level.[5] The organic law on the Local Self-Government Code describes the main functions of the municipality and the matters in which the municipality has the authority to act (for example, social assistance, health care, gender equality, etc.).[6]

3.2 Efforts and Capacities

The information on municipalities' capacities and efforts stem from an extensive mapping. In particular, local consultants mapped relevant institutions, agencies, policies, strategies, action plans, directives / regulations, and public services in each municipality. The latter included the name, title, topic / priorities, actor, target group, the legal reference, and the availability of data on beneficiaries / monitoring. The legal reference referred to the structural level, while the reference to the availability of data regarded the outcome level of the baseline assessment. The local consultants gathered the data for the mapping through desk research and filled in the tables. The tables were discussed and reviewed by local authorities during the local consultations. The local consultants prepared narrative summaries of each mapping, which point out all local authorities' capacities and efforts.

Commonalities and results at a glance

Advisory Councils are institutionalised in all local authorities to represent the interests of PwDs, children/youth as well as to deal with gender equality issues. Councils' tasks include participation in programming and advising local authorities. Local authorities attribute a leading role to these councils in implementation of human rights, good governance, anti-discrimination, and participation. Moreover, welfare services for persons in vulnerable situations are implemented in all municipalities. There are in-kind and cash benefits available for the elderly, veterans, IDPs and those with care needs. The beneficiaries' access to these services, as well as all related communication, is realised through relevant databases. Some good practices were also identified, particularly when it comes to participation of the local population and communication between local authorities and the local population.

Methodological note: Neither the individual mapping tables nor the narrative sections and summary claim to be complete or exhaustive. The data collection involves mainly local authorities' views and is complemented with the CSOs reports, depending on their availability. Moreover, contact points within each municipality facilitated the organisation of the local consultations and consequently "preselected" the participants. Thus, a selection bias is to be recognised when reading the findings and the good practices reported in this section.

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5 See Report on Ozurgeti Municipality, p. 4.
6 See Report on Tetritskaro Municipality, p. 3

3.2.1 Group rights

The local authorities institutionalise group rights by setting up structural units to focus on the realisation of the rights and interests of specific groups of residents. These units deal with gender equality, the rights of PwDs, the rights of the child and the youth. These institutions are differently titled. They are all established as **consultative bodies**, representing the interests of the respective groups, and counselling the local authorities in implementing their respective commitments. Apart from these consultative bodies, the local authorities protect group-based rights by means of **financial support and welfare services**. This kind of support is available for persons in vulnerable situations, such as the elderly, veterans, orphan children, IDPs, persons with health care needs. The eligibility criteria are defined narrowly by the local authorities.

Despite the fact that local authorities support people in vulnerable situations, some of the municipality reports reveal that measures to prevent these vulnerabilities are lacking.

3.2.1.1 Gender Equality

The municipal Gender Equality Councils are the most important entities to advocate for gender equality. Eleven out of the thirteen municipalities[7] reports mention a Gender Equality Council. There are no concrete and clearly defined tasks that are attributed to the Council, and their objectives and composition differ in the municipality reports. The following tasks of the Gender Equality Councils were mentioned in the municipal reports:

▶ ensuring planning and implementation of measures and programs for the realisation of equal rights of women and men;

▶ evaluation of local governments' normative acts and activities from a gender point of view;

▶ discussing cases of gender equality violations.

The objectives of the Gender Equality Councils are in line with the Action Plan on Gender Equality (2019) and are expected to be coordinated with the Gender Equality Council of the Parliament of Georgia.

Policies and strategies for empowering women and fostering gender equality reported by local authorities are:

▶ Development of municipal gender equality action plans with different focuses, e.g.: raising awareness on gender equality and women's rights among the broader population and among local civil servants; ensuring gender mainstreaming in municipal policies and legal acts, collecting gender related statistics, eliminate discrimination in employment;

▶ Setting up a separate women's council in the local authority, which actively collaborates with the Gender Equality Council by means of meetings and experience sharing;

▶ Implementing UN Resolution 1325 and sister resolutions (on Women, Peace and Security);

▶ Ensuring gender equality trainings for local authorities.

Services to empower women and to foster gender equality applied by local authorities are:

▶ One-off financial support for single mothers;

▶ Paying rent for victims of domestic violence;

▶ Creation of a "free municipal space" solely for women, which is used as a support and advisory centre.

3.2.1.2 Persons with disabilities

Almost all local authorities have established consultative bodies which represent the interests of PwD, the so-called Disability Rights Councils. These councils are authorised to provide recommendations to the local authority for the realisation of the group's rights to work, education, social protection, and inclusion.

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7 Two municipalities did not refer to the GEC.

The municipality reports provide heterogenous information on actual working of the councils - it is stated that the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent restrictions massively hindered the council's work. Other municipal reports[8] stated that the council was not yet developed. Finally, according to some municipal reports[9] the council worked very actively and successfully.

One of the local authorities aims at including members of civil society and PwDs in the council. This implicitly indicates that the inclusion of this group and the respective CSOs is not per se foreseen,[10] which casts doubt on the effective representation of PwDs in this body.

Apart from the council, the following policy goals and measures were mentioned by the local authorities:

- ▶ Ensuring the accessibility of different parts of physical infrastructure in the local authority;

- ▶ Provide quality inclusive education for children with special needs in kindergartens and pre-schools;

- ▶ Provide a rehabilitation centre for children with disabilities under 18 and a day care centre for children with disabilities;

- ▶ One-off financial assistance for PwDs and for children suffering from cancer or other severe illnesses;

- ▶ Provision of a free dinner initiative (and transport for those with limited mobility) and providing food for elderly and poor residents;

- ▶ Individual initiatives to eliminate the stigmatisation of PwDs and to involve all children in education;

- ▶ Two local authorities adopted action plans for the protection of the Rights of PwDs. These action plans focus on adapting buildings so that they are physically accessible to PwDs as well as it offers trainings to municipal staff.

3.2.1.3 The rights of the child and youth

A consultative body is established for the representation of the rights and interests of the children and the youth. Almost all local authorities have established such a council. One local authority has even established a Child Rights and Support Department at the Mayor's Office, following the Code on the Rights of the Child.[11] This department is staffed with a lawyer, a psychologist and a social worker and has the purpose to support families. Support is carried out by social workers, who visit the families to evaluate and manage the case. Other support services for children as mentioned in the local authority reports are:

- ▶ A program to support families experiencing extreme poverty and being in crises;

- ▶ Providing positive parenting courses for parents in need with the collaboration of local NGOs;

- ▶ Providing psychologist's services to children and parents in need;

- ▶ Referring child victims of violence to support agencies;

- ▶ Considering the needs of children in conflict with law and including them in policy-making and programming (relevant resources are not yet allocated);

- ▶ Financial support, such as, monthly allowance for heating costs;

- ▶ Financial support for new-borns.

For the youth, one local authority has established a Youth Advisory Council and another local authority envisages it by the end of 2022. The youth council ensures the protection of the interests of children and young people in public administration. One local authority has approved the Youth Development Strategy and Action Plan, which supports the process of defining local policies for the youth.

Other policies and services for the youth include:

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8   Two municipality reports provided this information.
9   This is the case for two reports.
10 This assessment is supported by the information provided during the 2022 Spring School on Data collection and management.
11 The Code of the Rights of the Child, LEPL Herald of Georgia, matsne.gov.ge

▶ Promoting the involvement of young people in volunteer activities;

▶ Supporting youth employment and promoting a healthy lifestyle among the youth;

▶ Offering a free space to the youth;

▶ Elaboration of a youth strategy;

▶ Financial support for projects initiated by the youth;

▶ Elaborating a training program for local authorities on the rights of the child. The training program includes the monitoring of municipal services to ensure that child welfare services reach their beneficiaries.

3.2.1.4 Other underrepresented groups

Local authorities mentioned also other rights and services for groups in vulnerable situations. Examples are financial support services for persons over 90 years of age, allowances for IDPs, financial support for orphan children or members of large families. Examples for non-monetary support includes free medicine, food and healthcare services for special target groups.

3.2.2 Good governance and service delivery

Local authorities have a variety of services in place to support persons in vulnerable situation. In addition to those named above, the following services were mentioned:

▶ Cash benefits and subsidies for communal services for the elderly, socially unprotected persons, veterans and the relatives of victims of war.

▶ Free municipal transport and free daily mail for the elderly and vulnerable persons;

▶ Retirement home including a day care centre for homeless elderly people;

▶ Home care services;

▶ Healthcare services;

▶ Free preschool education, free arts, music education for children;

▶ Social housing and apartment rent for the homeless;

▶ Crisis centre for victims of violence.

Generally, the reports indicate (or explicitly state) that social and financial support services are provided to those in severe vulnerable situations only. The level of service offered by the local authorities is linked to the level of vulnerability. Prevention or protection services are rather lacking.

Eleven municipal reports focused on service delivery. However, two municipal reports and the national level report also referred to capacities in relation to **good governance**. Municipal reports relate good governance to three local authorities' capacities, namely:

▶ A systematic approach is applied to policy making;

▶ Local authority's decision making is supported by advisory councils;[12]

▶ Communication with the local population is adequate.

The **systematic approach to policy making** includes the development of local strategies and action plans in order to set goals. The Action Plans on Gender Equality, and the Youth Development Strategy also include means of achieving these goals and performance indicators to measure the made achievements. Municipal reports refer to these strategies, action plans and social programs as examples of good governance. But the question that arises is whether these local policy documents and programs are the results of a comprehensive, inclusive and participatory process. The Gender Equality Council participates in the elaboration of the relevant action plans. However, two municipality reports suggest involving larger groups of

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12 Also the national level report referred to these councils, which create the platform for the involvement of local CSOs, representatives of local communities and vulnerable groups in decision making processes.

residents and local CSOs into these processes too. Also, the examples of **advisory councils** to support local authorities in decision-making and to represent the interests of the respective groups were already mentioned in the present report. These are the Gender Equality Council, the Youth Advisory Council and the Disability Council. These councils are to be involved in the development of policy documents and action plans. According to municipal reports, it is crucial that all these advisory boards and councils are genuinely (and not just formally) involved in the development of policy documents at the local level. However, not all municipality reports state that the councils are genuinely involved in the development of those policy documents. Examples for **good communication** with the local population as mentioned are communication via social media, active dissemination of information by village representatives and establishing constant contacts between municipal staff and service beneficiaries. Finally, good cooperation with CSOs, who provide services and information, is underlined.

It should be noted that [13] Local authorities do not mention any coordination and cooperation mechanisms that are established in relation to multi-level governance (see section 3.3.2 and 3.3.3). Two municipal reports explicitly highlight concerns regarding the absence of these mechanisms. Nonetheless, NALAG, as an umbrella organisation, serves as an intermediary of Georgian municipalities and central government in consultation processes and discussion platforms. The national level interview outlines good practices of how NALAG facilitates the local level participation in decision making, programming and multilevel governance cooperation.

3.2.3 Anti-discrimination and participation

The group-based advisory councils are mentioned also as core instruments to ensure anti-discrimination and participation. These bodies are expected to steer the implementation of anti-discrimination policies and the creation of equal opportunities at the local level. The councils review applications, develop programs and services, recommendations, and guidelines to prevent discrimination. Apart from these advisory councils, local authorities tend to have low capacities in relation to anti-discrimination (see also section 3.3.3) – Tbilisi Municipality is an exception.

The Public Defender's Office is a fundamental actor for promoting equality and non-discrimination in the country. A specific unit, the equality department, works on individual cases and general aspects of discrimination. Other departments of PDO (e.g., gender, rights of the PwDs) work on relevant topics at the policy level. Nine regional offices cover all regions of Georgia. The equality department and regional offices study individual or general facts of discrimination at the central and local levels. The mandate of the PDO covers the public and the private sector as well. PDO is conducting awareness-raising activities with local municipalities and CSOs, analysing existing policies and programmes and issuing recommendations on the state of the rights of vulnerable groups, such as PwDs, LGBTQ, and women. In addition, PDO conducts educational activities, studies cases, issues special recommendations or general proposals, and drafts parliamentary reports on human rights issues.[14]

The municipality reports indicate that local authorities have not yet received capacity development sessions on equality and anti-discrimination legislation and practice. While some local authorities request such sessions, others do not even see the need for such capacity building (most probably stemming from a lack of awareness on such inequalities). Moreover, the local authorities' anti-discrimination approach focuses on gender, PwD and children. Ethic and religious minorities, as well as SOGIESC minorities, are left out of this focus.

Georgian local authorities arguably have more capacities in relation to participation. In addition to the above-named councils, there is a strong civil society sector. According to local authorities, they effectively cooperate with local CSOs, international NGOs and service providers at the private sector. Municipal funding for projects initiated by the local population is another means to achieve participation. Local authorities do outreach work to meet the population in different settlements and hear their concerns.

Local authorities developed and implemented good practices of mechanisms for citizen participation. However, it must be considered again, that the local consultations involve mainly local authorities' views. CSOs were occasionally involved in the baseline assessment exercise. Moreover, the contact points in the municipalities facilitated local consultations and consequently "preselected" the participants. Thus, a selec-

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13 National level report, p. 3, available in Annex.
14 National level report, p. 10.

tion bias is to be recognised when reading the good practices in this section.

The Local Self-Government Code of Georgia envisages forms of open policymaking and citizen participation, such as:

▶ A general assembly of a settlement (required by law in each municipality);

▶ A petition;

▶ A Council of Civil Advisors;

▶ Participation in the sessions of the municipal council and the sessions of its commission;

▶ Hearing reports on the work performed by the Mayor of the municipality and by a member of the municipal council.[15]

According to local consultations, general assemblies are regularly held in spaces frequently visited by the local population. Moreover, municipal council sessions are live-broadcasted and recorded.[16] Some local authorities carry out meetings between population and municipal staff in different settlements throughout the territory of the respective municipality. These meetings offer a platform where the population has a real opportunity to make their opinions or hardships known to those who have the power to influence the decisions.

Good practice

According to one municipal report, the municipal council sessions are live-broadcasted, and the records of the sessions are available on YouTube channel. The residents participate in civil budgeting – the instrument that allows municipal residents to decide on the minor infrastructure projects to be carried out by local authorities. Developed rules and procedures of civil budgeting envisage the participation of the local community in the decision-making by direct voting. In 2020 the turnout of participation of residents in civil budgeting strongly increased.

3.3 Challenges and needs

The local authorities expressed and discussed their challenges openly and trustfully during the local consultations. The local consultations had between five and twelve participants and took two hours on average. Focus group discussions were held in person. They were recorded and summarised. The participants included municipal staff from different departments, elected representatives and some members of CSOs. Almost all municipal reports stated that there was a trustful atmosphere during the local consultations and the discussions were meaningful.

Commonalities and results at a glance

Local authorities face challenges in accessing information about the needs of local population. Therefore, their capacities to carry out (or commission) data collection and research on the population's needs is severely limited, as a range of focus group discussions revealed.

Local authorities' awareness on the needs of ethnic and religious minorities differs significantly throughout the country.

When it comes to institutional challenges, local authorities mention the lack of their participation in the development of human rights related strategies and action plans at the national level. Although the local authorities are responsible for the implementation of these strategies, they perceive themselves as not well included in consultation processes. Moreover, local authorities stated that they lack knowledge and capacities on how to implement the national human rights frameworks at the local level. Local authorities expressed their need for long-term training, coaching and exchange on the (inter-)national human rights framework and its implementation at the local level.

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15 Information provided by a local expert. More information is available in the Handbook on open local government and public ethics developed within this project: https://rm.coe.int/handbook-georgia-eng-final/1680a5bd47

16 The representatives of the NALAG Executive Board call the effectiveness of these mechanisms of citizen participation into question. According to them, the local population is not aware of these mechanisms – and more general, the awareness on issues regarding participation, human rights protection and municipal authorities is low. The focus group thus suggested that citizens' participation and tools should be tailored to the peculiarities of the municipality and consider its size and region.

The interview with a representative of the PDO revealed more challenges and needs in rural and multi-ethnic municipalities, compared to urban and mono-ethnic ones. Access to the different programmes and projects is relatively high in big cities. Also, service providers, CSOs and NGOs are concentrated in big municipalities. This factor positively affects the service provision and the situation of the human rights realisation in big settlements. While in small and rural municipalities, the number of municipal programs is limited due to the lack of financial and human resources. The overall knowledge on human rights protection is quite limited.[17]

3.3.1 Challenges related to group rights

Challenges are related to access to information, and they apply for both sides – local authorities' access to information about the needs of local population and the local population's access to information about the local services.

According to the statistical data collected by the PDO, the most vulnerable groups at the local level (and national level as well) are women, SOGIESC and PwDs. Discriminatory language, sexism and hate speech are further challenges related to group rights.

Another problem detected by the PDO is the violation of labour rights and discrimination on political grounds. For example, PDO has identified many cases of harassment and dismissal from the job because of different political views.

For local authorities, the availability of data and statistics on the needs and concerns of population groups is too low to effectively plan needs-based services and policies. Local authorities face challenges to collect data and information, due to their lacking competence in this field (see below in section 3.3.3). Local authorities have access to information on needs and concerns of vulnerable groups, mainly from surveys conducted by CSOs and from the social service agency (SSA) register database on social service beneficiaries. The CSO-surveys' significance is limited to the CSO's project scope, approaches, and objectives. The public register database on social service beneficiaries contains basic personal data of persons in situations of vulnerability. Moreover, some local authorities face challenges in accessing the database of the SSA. Thus, granting authorisation to local authorities in accessing the database was recommended. This challenge and recommendation are supported by the findings of the focus group with members of NALAG's Executive Board.

Additionally, there is no data available for local authorities, based on which they could plan public services or budgeting. The local authorities themselves have little knowledge on data collection and conducting surveys to gather evidence for municipal programming and policy making.

For certain groups of the local population (vulnerable persons), access to information about public services and programs is a challenge. Challenges are mainly related to low computer skills of the public service's target groups. Another challenge is related to barriers caused by language and religion. Local authorities with a high share of migrants and ethnic minorities report language barriers as challenge for an effective access to information. One focus group revealed a need for raising awareness among local authorities on the rights, challenges and needs of minorities. So far, municipal activities tend to leave religious and ethnic minorities rather behind. This is because of their lacking knowledge on religious minority's rights and a lacking awareness on the concerns and needs of those groups. Also, Roma inclusion was identified as a challenge during local consultations. Due to high illiteracy rates, Roma communities remain excluded from municipal services and cannot access the information. This is seen as particularly problematic, as the risk of the violation of rights (children, PwDs, women, and girls, including through early marriage) is perceived as higher in closed and traditional communities. The interview with the PDO confirmed that access to information is a challenge for vulnerable groups – particularly in rural areas. There are some programmes for single parents, multi-child families, victims of domestic violence, and residents of the highland settlements, but potential beneficiaries are unaware of these opportunities. Access to the information is even more problematic in cases of ethnic minorities due to the language barriers.[18]

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17 National level report, p. 9.
18 National level report, p. 9.

3.3.1.1 Challenges related to gender equality

Challenges related to gender equality, as reported by local authorities, particularly affect the inclusion and participation of women who live in rural and remote areas[19]. The transportation system in some local authorities is outdated and operated by the private sector – there is no public transport. Thus, transportation does not follow the needs of the local population, when organising transport routes and bus stops. As a result, women living in rural areas and PwDs (see below) have difficulties to participate in public life and to attend municipal meetings on gender issues. Other than that, no challenges related to gender equality were reported by the local authorities.

Representatives of NALAG see challenges in relation to the promotion of gender equality at the local level. Municipal employees need to develop skills for conducting gender audits and designing mainstreaming programs at the local level. Additional training, guidelines and instructions are highly welcomed. The interviewed representative of the PDO reported that according to their statistics, the most vulnerable groups at the local (and national level as well) are women, SOGIESC and PwDs. Likewise, at the local level, discriminatory language, sexism and hate speech are among the top three challenges.[20] The mismatch between the official statistics and local authorities self-perception of gender related challenges is an important aspect to consider. Moreover, gender-based violence and violence against women were not referred to as a challenge throughout the baseline assessment exercise.

3.3.1.2 Challenges related to persons with disabilities

Municipality reports indicate several diverse challenges related to the implementation of the rights of PwDs. These challenges concern PwDs' access to public infrastructure (buildings, transport) education and social services. Furthermore, stigmatisation of PwDs is mentioned in the reports. The accessibility of public buildings for PwDs and their mobility is restricted. However, parks, pre-schools and school buildings are accessible barrier-free.

Other challenges refer to PwDs' right to education. The methodology for inclusive pre-school education is not approved and applied in all thirteen municipalities. Moreover, there is a lack of training on inclusive education for teaching staff.

Stigma and discrimination of PwDs is another challenge. Various families did not enrol a child in school to hide their disability. Parents are not aware of their child having a disability and needing special help, or they simply hide the child's disability. These attitudes and the stigmatisation hinder the children's access to public services. These children not only suffer from physical accessibility barriers, but also from the attitude and awareness of the public, including the members of their own families.

Generally, the Covid-19 pandemic and restrictions contributed to the isolation of PwDs and made their access to services more difficult.

3.3.1.3 The rights of the child and youth

Challenges in relation to the rights of the child mainly concern families, who are affected by poverty, low education and who live in poor and remote neighbourhoods. Some families do not have the knowledge and resources to ensure welfare and protection of their basic rights. Children's hygiene and health are mostly affected by these problems. One municipality report additionally refers to the youth and emphasises challenges regarding youth integration and a lack of relevant services.

3.3.2 Institutional challenges

The lacking or ineffective participation of local authorities in the development of National Human Rights Frameworks (Human Rights Strategy and Action Plan) is a crucial institutional challenge, as mentioned in the municipal reports. Local authorities do not feel effectively involved in the development of strategies at the national level – for the implementation of which they are responsible. Local authorities report that they feel *informed* by the national government, rather than actively consulted. They are keen on actively participating in the development process.

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19   As foreseen in Art. 14 of the CEDAW.
20   National level report, p. 9.

Local authorities feel requested by the central government to report about the implementation of laws which they did not contribute to develop nor adopt. Thus, local authorities perceive their reporting tasks as high, but their possibilities to participate as low. They are entitled to express their opinion upon request by the central authorities (mostly parliamentary committees) but not on their own initiative. The interview with the representative of the PDO confirms the problem of not involving municipalities in the elaboration of national-level policies. National level policies oblige municipalities to fulfil tasks of which they are not well informed nor aware. On the other hand, it is problematic to personally invite all 64 municipalities to participate in the consultations. The PDO thus suggests online tools to ensure the voices of local authorities are heard. Another challenge is the lack of knowledge and independence of municipalities. Even if they attend the consultations, they tend not to actively participate in the discussions on national level policies. The PDO underlies the importance of the municipalities' awareness raising and involvement in the elaboration of policies and action plans, as well as of monitoring and evaluating those policies.

This finding is not confirmed by the data derived from the focus group discussion among the representatives of NALAG's Executive Board. According to NALAG, there are several effectively working mechanisms for local authorities to participate in national level decision making and programming (see also section 3.2.2).

Local authorities are ready to take active part in multi-level dialogue through forums and other cooperation mechanisms. Local authorities would request central authorities to pay higher attention to the views of local self-government as they are the voices of the local population.

Exceptions highlighted by local authorities are consultancy processes initiated by NALAG (for example, within the framework of gender equality platform) and those related to elaboration of National Youth Strategy. Here, local authorities were invited to work together and draft the policy documents.

Good practice

Recent collaborative practice has been observed with the Parliamentary Gender Equality Council - the head of the council has organised a meeting in 2022 that has been identified as one of the best practices by focus group participants. Here, they had a sense of involvement into decision-making processes and found it very useful to learn about national initiatives through the discussion with a parliamentarian.

3.3.3 Capacities needed

The Local Self-Government Code of Georgia describes local authorities' exclusive and delegated powers, e.g., in relation to budgeting, resource management, pre-school and educational institutions' establishment, freedom of assembly, cultural facilities and sports, as well as in supporting of PwDs and the homeless. The baseline assessment clearly indicates local authorities' needs for capacities to execute these powers. The local authorities request capacity building and information (including practical examples) to fulfil their tasks. Moreover, inter- and intra-municipal cooperation (Councils, Forum) would allow the coordination of efforts and exchange.

These multi-level governance-related needs are found again when it comes to the implementation of the national law on gender equality and the elimination of discrimination at the local level. National law requests local authorities to take action, but they need capacities for fulfilling these responsibilities. Thus, local authorities expressed their needs for capacity building to understand the law and build on it by implementing measures and policies in the area of equality, anti-discrimination and group-based rights in general. Methods, guidelines, and tools to implement human rights related duties and to document their efforts and successes are needed by local authorities. Study visits to EU cities are requested to access good practices, exchange, and inspiration.

An analysis of findings indicates lack of correlations between the community needs and their size, specific population compositions or urban vs. rural areas. For example, the capital Tbilisi city has similar needs to smaller municipalities. However, the municipality reports varied in their level of detail regarding the needs of the local authorities.

The baseline assessment indicates three types of needs:

- mechanisms of institutional cooperation and coordination;

- ▶ capacities to implement equality and group-based rights;
- ▶ capacities for data collection and research.

These needs are outlined in more detail in the following sections.

3.3.3.1 Capacity development on human rights and equality

In the course of a recent decentralisation process in Georgia, local authorities have received new human rights related competences and obligations. The local consultations clearly indicate need of relevant practical capacities.

The Law of Georgia on Gender Equality adopted in 2010 and the Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination adopted in 2014 provide local authorities with certain human rights obligations beyond the Local Self-Government Code that stem from other laws.[21] The Law on Gender Equality requests local authorities to identify and combat instances of discrimination, create Gender Equality Councils at the local level, eliminate gender-based discrimination within budgets, socio-economic priorities, municipal programmes and action plans.

Representatives of all local authorities requested capacity building to implement these obligations in practice. Some local authorities have a specific interest in capacity building on gender responsive budgeting (hereinafter "GRB"). GRB would allow mainstreaming of gender in local policies and budgets rather than designing separate programs for women. Other local authorities request more general capacities in the implementation and protection of human rights standards in their communities. They need information about both, the standards of equality (laws, litigation, protection mechanisms, etc.) and the practices.

Local authorities have recently received new competences also in relation to the child's protection and support[22] and contributing to inclusion and independent living of PwDs.[23] As for the anti-discrimination, they need capacities for administrating and practically implementing those human rights related responsibilities as well as for designing and delivering the adequate services.

Moreover, capacities on how to exercise the new competences of local authorities to provide and monitor the early and preschool education are needed, as well as on how to protect data while processing and sharing it with different state bodies.

As regards the **methods** of such capacity building, local authorities suggest workshops and experience exchange platforms. Mechanisms of exchange help to raise awareness and to ensure that municipal staff has a precise understanding of issues related to anti-discrimination and human rights protection. Methodological guidelines, tailored to the scope of local self-government, would have a positive impact, and strengthen the capacity of local authorities.

Capacity building is requested to take into account the whole policy-cycle, starting from the collection of evidence, participatory development/planning, implementing and documentation, feedback mechanisms, documentation of challenges and measuring impact / progress.

As regards the **usage and benefits** of such trainings, the local authorities see anti-discrimination and equality as rather theoretical concepts. However, after such trainings, managers and decision-makers could reflect these topics in developing strategy documents. Moreover, decision-makers can consider equality while budgeting or planning public services. Employees at the lower level would benefit from training on anti-discrimination and equality topics, especially in the process of delivering services. Last but not least, the users of public services would benefit from the practical implementation of anti-discrimination and gender legislation. Strengthening the communication between local authorities and the local population (general and vulnerable groups) by revising the attitudes over human rights obligations for the local authority was mentioned by several local authorities. City Hall employees are of special need for strengthening capacities on local legislation and practices, communication and mediation skills.

Generally, human rights training would strengthen human rights at the local level by developing the capacities of both 'duty-bearers' to meet their obligations, and 'rights-holders' to claim their rights.

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21 Human Rights at Local Level in Georgia, Assessment Report (2021), p. 15.
22 Human Rights at Local Level in Georgia, Assessment Report (2021), p. 16.
23 Ibid., p. 17.

3.3.3.2 Research and data collection

Local authorities need capacities to carry out research and data collection **to assess the population's needs** and tailor services and policies accordingly. Local authorities need information on how to design, plan and conduct such research. Moreover, they need capacities on how to evaluate and interpret the collected data. Local authorities request capacity building on conducting qualitative and quantitative research to identify the population's needs.

Other municipal officials draw more attention to data collection and management capacities that would ultimately support their decision-making processes.

Local authorities expect to get evidence-based policy as a result of collecting data and conducting its analysis, that in its turn, is related with the following phases:

collect evidence-based information on challenges and needs of different groups;	develop strategies and action plans based on data, research and information received;	select and implement programs/services tailored to needs;	monitor and evaluate the effectiveness and quality of the implemented actions

3.3.3.3 Institutional capacities

Local authorities need clear guidance and support to understand their tasks, powers and responsibilities according to the Local Self-Government Code of Georgia. Thus, they need capacities on human rights law and municipal obligations and their implementation in public administration.

On a more procedural note, local authorities need:

- ▶ cooperation: and effective local level participation in national decision-making processes
- ▶ coordination: and collaboration at the local levels to ensure that all local stakeholders and interested parties are involved in the development of local strategies, programs and projects.

Local authorities additionally request capacity building in the area of project management, computer skills, fundraising and applying for tenders to access financial resources.

In terms of the methods of such trainings, it is clearly stated that long-term and tailor-made trainings are preferred over single courses. Expert coaching oriented on setting procedures and implementing guidelines is preferred over theoretical lectures. International cooperation, study visits and peer exchange among local authorities equip local authorities with the best practices and inspire them to action.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions are drawn from the material gathered during the baseline assessment study including the mapping exercise, local consultations in the participating municipalities, the reports thereof, as well as the interviews carried out with the representatives of NALAG and the PDO. The conclusions follow the same structure as the baseline assessment and provide an analysis on the local authorities' capacities, challenges, and opportunities when it comes to human rights implementation at the local level.

GROUP-BASED RIGHTS:

Advisory Councils are institutionalised in all 13 municipalities of the forum in order to represent the interests of PwDs, children/youth and to work towards gender equality. Councils' tasks include participation in policy planning and advising local authorities. However, PwDs or CSOs are not necessarily members of those councils that in fact, limits effective participation and representation.

Financial and in-kind welfare services for vulnerable groups, that according to the law are social and economic in nature or are linked with the healthcare issues, are available in place. According to the consulted local authorities these measures despite of focusing on support for disadvantaged groups, predominantly lack preventive measures.

Needs

During the local consultations local authorities stated that with some exceptions, awareness for group-based rights is hardly given among local authorities. This finding was corroborated by the PDO when it comes to other than the legally protected groups.

Local authorities expressed a need for research and respective data as evidence in order to learn about the needs and concerns of the general population as well as of specific groups.

GOOD GOVERNANCE AND SERVICE DELIVERY:

The consultations with local authorities were quite diverse and not concrete enough to conclude on compliance of local service delivery to the human rights standards. However, there are in-kind and cash social benefits for vulnerable persons whose access to services is facilitated via a relevant database, that was discussed in the light of data protection legislation during the Spring School.

A gender equality approach in policy planning was mentioned to work well in terms of good governance. This effort is supported by the gender advisory councils. An important example is the General Assembly, which provides for a good and constant communication between local authorities and the local population. In case of a skilled participating population, the assemblies can function as excellent, low-threshold accountability mechanisms. Further, the reported good cooperation between local authorities, local CSOs and international NGOs can serve as an indicator for good governance.

Needs

Local authorities stated that guidelines and training on gender budgeting are needed. Local authorities need to better facilitate the access to service provision, particularly for groups that do not reveal their specific needs for societal and cultural reasons.

While NALAG reports that well established mechanisms of coordination and collaboration in relation to MLG exist, most local authorities report that they are still lacking or that the local authorities do not have the knowledge of using them properly for the purpose of representing respective municipalities' interests. The consultations also revealed a need for adequate platforms or fora, which foster the collaboration of local authorities horizontally and vertically with state and national authorities. Such a platform could provide an opportunity to discuss existing challenges in the human rights field and direct the ways towards solutions. The focus group and interview with the members of the Executive Board of NALAG refer to such

instruments and tools, which already exist for multi-level governance cooperation. Moreover, NALAG is the institutionalised mechanism of intermediary consultations between local and central governments.[24] Thus, cooperation formats for local authorities within the NALAG need to be communicated and eventually adapted.

███████ *PARTICIPATION AND ANTI-DISCRIMINATION:*

Three important instruments were reported serving the participatory engagement of citizens for ensuring their human rights interests.

First, the General Assemblies, established by the Local Self-Governance Code, were mentioned by the local authorities in the local consultations. They generally were reported as efficient in terms of opportunity for civic participation in all matters that are of citizens' concern.

The Councils for Gender Equality, PwDs, Children and the Youth are seen as the core actors in consulting local authorities in the fields of participation and anti-discrimination.

Finally, citizens' participation works through outreach of municipal staff to remote regions and meeting with local population; live-broadcast and recording of municipal council sessions.

Needs

Awareness among local authorities needs to be raised for both, discrimination as such and (structural) inequalities between different groups.

There was repeatedly mentioned the strong need for training on anti-discrimination legislation, protection mechanisms and their implementation.

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24   National level report, pp. 3; 6-7.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The baseline assessment consists of the compilation of the findings brought up by the different methods applied. In a further step, these findings were analysed and tested with additional corroboration instruments as existing reports, and further interviews and assessments by experts. This process built the basis for the conclusions drawn in the previous section. Finally, based on the collected information, the international consultant ETC Graz proposed the following recommendations on the way forwards.

The recommendations on the one hand encompass procedural suggestions concerning the process within the project on 'Strengthening participatory democracy and human rights at the local level in Georgia'. On the other hand, they focus on human rights implementation and the structural requirements thereof. The recommendations made by engaged authorities, experts and consultants were included in these two sets of recommendations.

The first set of recommendations are recommendations on capacity building contents, directly stemming from the needs assessments, mapping studies and the confirmation thereof by the PDO and the NALAG.

The second set aims at providing guidance on how to ensure an impact of the recommended capacity-building efforts on the cooperation within the cities, between the cities and among different governance levels together with the NALAG.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Continue efforts for capacity building on human rights and civil participation at local level.

Human rights education 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.

This may be achieved by:

Capacity building for human rights and participatory democracy
Within municipalities ▶ Diversity trainings, group rights trainings; ▶ Antidiscrimination trainings: legal, attitude, skill for application and implementation; ▶ Planning campaigns for raising awareness among the local population on forms of participation, human rights protection, and the role and powers of municipal authorities.
Among municipalities ▶ Human rights trainings in order to strengthen knowledge, hone skills and shape attitudes; ▶ Trainings on means and methods ensuring participation; ▶ Training on data protection; ▶ Capacity building on Self-Governance Code and multi-level governance instruments.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Build structures for internal, horizontal, and vertical cooperation and exchange for strengthening local democracy and human rights implementation.

Participatory democracy is a core principle of good governance and of human rights implementation. Both aspects require cooperation in their implementation within a local authority, between local authorities, and among different governance level actors, as they are interdependent political processes which constitute good governance. In order to facilitate this cooperation between the different actors, it is recommended to institutionalise this topical cooperation.

This may be achieved by:

Building structures for internal, horizontal and vertical cooperation and exchange
Within municipalities ▶ Tasking existing bodies with human rights steering competences, as for example a working group or sub-committee in the City Assemblies, or establishing a city human rights forum, which is also regularly consulted for the development of national human rights action plans and framework. ▶ Strengthening the position and capacities of advisory councils for persons with disabilities, youth, and gender equality. ▶ Tailoring citizens' participation mechanisms according to the particularities of the municipality and caring for appropriate opportunities of representation and participation of people concerned within the councils.
Among municipalities ▶ Enabling a coherent approach in the implementation of national human rights strategies and the responsibilities according to the local self-governance code; ▶ Facilitating peer exchange to learn from each other between local authorities in a Forum of Exchange as an intercity cooperation. ▶ Sharing experience and good practices in planning and conducting the activities/projects for the realisation of human rights, anti-discrimination, and gender equality practices and sharing good practices on forms of cooperation and involvement of CSOs in joint activities, as well as on service provision.
In a multi-level-governance setting ▶ Developing and putting in place the methodological guidelines, instruments, and tools for ensuring the proper implementation of the powers assigned to the local authorities in the field of human rights protection; ▶ Organising multi-level dialogue: national level actors constantly support and guide local authorities in the implementation of the national human rights framework and the local self-governance code, and support local authorities access to information about national strategies and their implementation (see also Rec 1); ▶ ensuring local authorities' participation in national strategy and policy development, e.g., establishing a coordinating and consultative mechanism of local authorities, like intermediary and interagency councils, for human rights policy planning at national level, on a permanent basis (currently, they are called in on an ad hoc basis[25]), and standardised and institutionalised in a consistent and uniform way.

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25 National level report, p. 7.

The baseline assessment report was developed within the project "Strengthening participatory democracy and human rights at the local level in Georgia", carried out by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe in collaboration with the National Association of Local Authorities in Georgia (NALAG) and with the financial contribution of the Austrian Development Cooperation.

The assessment was conducted in co-operation with the Forum of Exchange, a platform of local authorities aimed at addressing challenges for improving social inclusion, promoting equal opportunities, and incorporating a gender perspective in local political action in order to eliminate discrimination. The findings and recommendations of the assessment are based on the information provided by the municipalities on their capacities, challenges, and needs in relation to strengthening participatory democracy and human rights at the local level.

The baseline assessment concludes with two sets of recommendations: the first focuses on strengthening efforts for capacity building on human rights and civil participation at local level while the second provides inputs towards the development of structures for internal, horizontal, and vertical cooperation and exchange among public authorities and civil society organisations for strengthening local democracy and human rights implementation.

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