



Presidency of Georgia
Council of Europe
November 2019 – May 2020
Présidence de la Géorgie
Conseil de l'Europe
Novembre 2019 – Mai 2020



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Cities around the world are subject to a variety of contextual differences and therefore facing unique local challenges – what unites them is the overall aim to take sound and sustainable decisions that create vibrant urban landscapes, promote economic growth, foster social and cultural exchange, and contribute to better living standards of citizens.

The principles of participatory democracy and sustainable development inevitably require a more integrated approach for collaboration and networking among different sectors and actors. Until recently, the citizens/communities were only sporadically involved in decision-making and planning processes of urban green spaces in Tbilisi, which led to practices of urban development that failed to meet their needs.

Planning authorities need to open up urban green spaces development for debate. A dialogue-based participation process is crucial for the joint analysis of local problems, development of common objectives and targets, identification of urban greening strategies and selection of measures that are widely accepted and supported. While there are clear benefits from participation, there are also challenges for running an effective participation process in development and implementation. Some planning authorities lack understanding to conduct legitimate participation, which reflects basic democratic principles and takes lay and expert knowledge seriously. Furthermore, planning authorities often face limitations in financial and personnel resources required for urban development, let alone for participation. Various skills and substantial know-how are needed to plan and carry out participation activities. These need to be coordinated with other urban greening-related activities, and inputs from citizens and stakeholders need to be fed back into technical planning and political decision-making. A wide range of involvement techniques is available from which a planning authority needs to find a suitable combination. Further, it needs to guide and facilitate the discursive planning process, react adequately to conflicts that may arise and ensure constant monitoring and quality control.

Over the past several years, Tbilisi City Hall has established a new policy and administrative basis for the development of urban greening context with establishment of new municipal departments of Environmental Protection and Urban Development. On March 15, 2019 the Tbilisi City Council has approved new Land Use Master Plan (LUMP) for Tbilisi City. In the scope of LUMP elaboration important steps towards urban green spaces development were made:

- The schedule for the next phase of LUMP development was drawn up, and a map

was prepared with the areas that require Environmental Studies and Development Regulation Plans;

- Four territories were selected for the large city parks, such as Tbilisi Sea Park, Dighomi floodplain, Vazisubani Park and DIRSI floodplain park.
- In terms of technical and other inaccuracies, 7 thematic maps were revised and the general zoning map was corrected. It is well known, that in the new LUMP, green spaces within the city were missing in some areas. To ensure filling of this gap, a map of Tbilisi green spaces has been developed.

A plan-making process in which decisions of such strategic importance for a city and its inhabitants are taken needs to be rational, transparent and deliberate. It should not be driven by selected individuals, but by those who are at the heart of this urban green system: the civil society. A transition towards sustainable urban greening strategies requires active support from the public and stakeholders.

Involving stakeholders and the public is one of the fundamental requirements of sustainable urban planning. The public has local knowledge and can provide expertise and opinions, which contribute to the development of effective plans and measures. Furthermore, involvement encourages citizens and stakeholders to take ownership of urban greening ideas, policies and projects.

Overall, participation has an important function in democratically organised societies. If carried out properly, it has the potential to increase the quality of sustainable urban planning, as it ensures that different interests and requirements of society are heard and addressed in the decision-making processes.

Planning and coordinating participation activities requires substantial efforts and time. This also includes thorough monitoring and quality control to track progress and take corrective actions as needed. Resources should also be reserved for critically reviewing the effectiveness of the participation process in order to enhance participation in future. Developing a quality participation culture is a learning and knowledge development process for the authority organising participation, and also its citizens and stakeholders.

From 2019 Tbilisi City Hall in partnership with Council of Europe initiated establishment of the new participatory platform to bring together representatives of the Tbilisi public authorities and CSOs, with the aim to engage in a dialogue and make joint decisions concerning the re-designing of the Gldani Lake area on the outskirts of Tbilisi for recreational purposes.

CSOs and Tbilisi City Hall authorities have agreed on the scope and objectives of the platform:

- The issue of its future work is the re-designing of a municipal public area (no private nor national property) about which the local authorities voice a strong commitment towards developing a co-operation with environmental civil society organisations;

- The participation/consultation process is not yet quite popular among the Tbilisi CSOs/citizens and the platform will be an innovative mechanism and an opportunity to discuss in a positive way and to make decisions based on a public consensus;
- The Gldani area has not been developed so far and it has a great potential to involve various stakeholder groups in the decision-making process and to finally benefit to the local population for recreational purposes;
- The process will lead to a transparent decision-making, a solution that will meet the citizens' expectations vis-à-vis the public authorities and will reinforce their trust in the local leaders.

The implementation of this model of civic participation will help sustain the mechanism in the future so that the local authorities are able to use it in decision-making processes on various topics in Tbilisi.

For the strengthening of new platform and sharing of good practices in neighbouring countries working visit was organized to Kyiv in October 2019. The study programme featured the following learning and experience exchange elements:

- Existing civil participation mechanisms and forms in Ukraine and in Georgia matching the process of creation of public spaces: the participants learned from best practices and challenges in Kyiv and in a few other cities in Ukraine.
- Step by step engagement methodology: the participants learned techniques for engaging citizens/NGOs from an example of public consultation on the development of a small park in Kyiv.
- Visits to public spaces created through close collaboration among local authorities, citizens and NGOs: the participants visited 2 public spaces with similar conditions as the Gldani Lake area in Tbilisi.
- Overview of European standards and practices concerning public space and civic engagement.

After the return of platform members to Tbilisi participatory elaboration process of ToR for Gldani lake rehabilitation started. In the scope of the process the Platform member organizations were involved in the assessment of Gldani lake area and identification of important environmental values and threats. Based on study findings general concept and requirements for the Lake rehabilitation were formed and discussed on public workshop with the Gldani community.

Elaborated ToR was tendered by the Tbilisi City Hall and members of the platform participated in the evaluation process providing thematic comments and recommendations for selection of most appropriate development/conservation concept for the area.

In the parallel of the participatory process Tbilisi City Hall Environmental Department with assistance of Asian Development Bank drafted "Standard for Recreational Areas Development to Ensure Equal Rights for the Use" emphasizing gender aspects in the urban recreational areas planning process.

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

Civil participation in Decision-Making

We believe that established Participatory Platform and the process initiated by the Tbilisi City Hall will result in new sustainable decisions contributing to urban greening strategy for the Tbilisi City and wellbeing of Tbilisi City citizens.