



Insights into Participatory Budgeting: Discoveries and Hurdles in Georgia

Project: Support partner municipalities to effectively conduct Participatory Budgeting for FY2024

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About the project

"Georgian Development Platform" (GeoDP) within the framework of "USAID Local Self-Government Program" is implementing the project - "Support partner municipalities to effectively conduct Participatory Budgeting for FY2024". The goal of the project is to improve and strengthen diverse practices of participation in five municipalities.

The project aims to:

- Strengthen the institutional capacity of local authorities for the implementation of participatory budgeting (PB);
- Inform the population and promote their increased involvement in the target municipalities, the most important being the information campaigns, the organization of public meetings, and the population's involvement in other areas of decision-making.

Research goals and its design

- dp The purpose of the research was to analyse the experience of 11 municipalities of Georgia and share the views of experts, to study the practices of developing and implementing PB, and to identify the obstacles and success factors associated with these processes.
- dp Taking into account the studied practices, recommendations were developed in order to improve the PB process in the municipalities of Batumi, Ozurgeti, Chokhatauri, Kutaisi, and Oni.
- dp The following tools were used during the research:
 - Focus groups in 11 municipalities (participants: members of the City Council, employees of the City Hall, members of the PB Council, verification group, etc.)
 - In-depth interviews (110 respondents: former employees of the City Hall and Municipal Councils, authors of projects and their supporters, representatives of non-governmental and mass media organizations, members of the governing body of the PB process, employees of international donor organizations and experts in the field)
- dp The activities determined by the research were conducted in January-February 2024

Current Condition of PB in Georgia

- PB is still a relatively new phenomenon in Georgia, the legislative framework for PB is not yet developed, most municipalities rely on local council resolutions and mayor's decrees to regulate the process.
- Citizen participation and transparency are fundamental principles of self-government, guaranteed in national legislation.
- The priority of implementing the PB tool is declared in the decentralization strategy of the Georgian government 2020-2025

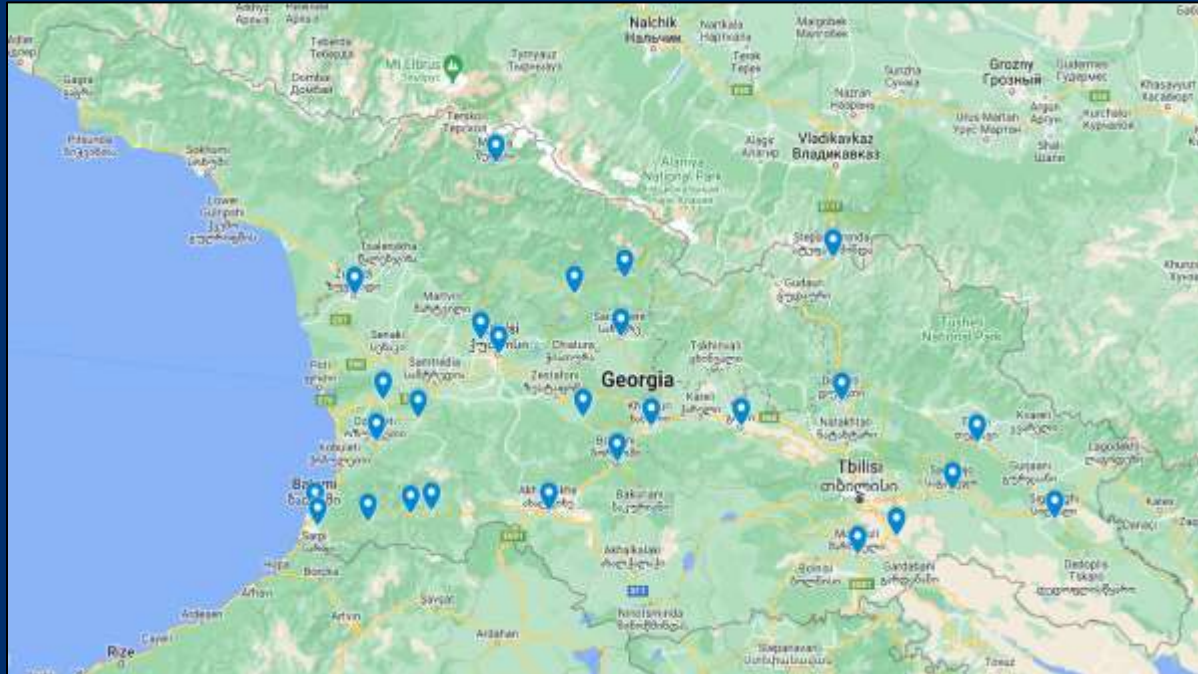
Current Condition of PB in Georgia (contd.)

- legal basis of The PB is Article 85 of the Local Self-Government Code, where it is mentioned that the municipality is authorized to determine other, additional mechanisms in addition to the forms of citizens' participation at the local level already defined by law (i.e. Citizen Advisory Council, Settlement General Assembly, and Petition).
- The overall scale of PB in Georgia is relatively modest. As a rule, most municipalities allocate between 50,000 and 500,000 GEL (USD 20,000-200,000), which is a small portion of their budgets, although there are exceptions
- PB has taken root in only a few municipalities of Georgia where it has generated significant public interest and involvement in local governance
- The implemented PB process includes submitting project proposals by citizens, pre-assessment and selection of viable projects by the municipality, citizen voting, and financing and implementation of winning projects by the municipality.

Current Condition of PB in Georgia (contd.)

- After the introduction of PB, many municipalities have gradually increased their budgetary allocations
- To properly conduct the PB process, most municipalities have approved rules and procedures through council resolutions and/or mayor's orders.
- In the framework of information campaigns, municipalities used various methods, including meetings with the mayor, door-to-door campaigns, printed information materials (posters and flyers), and local/social media. Volunteers, youth organizations, and municipal employees such as mayor's representatives were involved in disseminating the information in some municipalities.
- Several municipalities tried to make the process inclusive, such as lowering the minimum age to 14-16 years, allowing teenagers to submit project ideas, and measures aimed at involving different groups of the population.
- Electronic voting platforms have been introduced in many municipalities to facilitate voting. Online voting was more transparent, convenient, and accessible according to many respondents. However, some noted that there is a risk of excluding older and vulnerable groups, as they may not have access to the internet or the skills to use digital platforms.
- In several municipalities, active citizens' initiative groups have self-organized for the promotion of project ideas. Active citizens' groups united around priority projects for their communities and played a crucial role in mobilizing votes.

Municipalities where PB was practiced since 2015



Akhaltsikhe, Ambrolauri, Batumi, Borjomi, Bolnisi, Gori, Dusheti, Zugdidi, Telavi, Lanchkhuti, Marneuli, Mestia, Ozurgeti, Oni, Rustavi, Sagarejo, Sachkhere, Signaghi, Keda, Kutaisi, Kazbegi, Shuakhevi, Chokhatauri, Tskaltubo, Kharagauli, Khashuri, Khelvachauri, Khulo municipalities, etc.

Main discoveries of the study

- PB is usually considered by municipalities as an isolated project and not as a systemic approach to the transition to participatory principles of local governance, which limits its potential for positive, transformative impact
- One of the main challenges is the lack of awareness among citizens about the current processes, and as a result - lack of trust. Citizens are often not familiar with the concept of PB, nor do they know how to get involved
- A significant challenge is the availability of sufficient resources and lack of capacity in municipalities to effectively implement the PB process. Many of them lack the financial and human resources, and the technical expertise to manage the process, which can lead to delays, communication gaps, and less optimal outcomes.

Main discoveries of the study (contd.)

- Also, problems related to project selection and implementation are an important barrier. In some cases, the project selection criteria were not clearly defined or consistently applied, which led to a feeling of unfairness among the process participants.
- In addition, there was a delay in the implementation of the winning projects or their incomplete implementation, which can greatly damage the legitimacy of the process for the population and can become a reason for their demotivation to participate in the processes in the future.
- A lack of systematic monitoring, evaluation, and learning hinders the improvement and sustainability of PB practices

Hurdles

- Territorial model of PB was introduced in practically all municipalities, although respondents of the study were actively proposing the introduction of both, thematic and mixed models.
- Low public awareness and involvement in some municipalities, especially in the early stages. Many respondents noted initial public scepticism and distrust of PB. To overcome this inertia of the population and increase their involvement in the processes, raising their motivation was a commonly identified challenge.
- Ensuring equal access to participation for all citizens is also a significant barrier, particularly for older, rural, and vulnerable populations. In some communities, low levels of digital literacy and low access to the Internet hindered their participation.

Hurdles (contd.)

- Where electronic platforms have been implemented, there have been technical and legal challenges related to the voting process. Municipalities had to deal with issues such as voter authentication, preventing multiple votes, and filtering the votes of those registered locally.
- It is common for most municipalities to delay the implementation of winning projects due to various reasons, such as insufficient funds, bureaucratic obstacles, changes in cost estimates, tender failures, etc.
- In most municipalities, there are no mechanisms for effective monitoring and evaluation of the winning projects' implementation. Both citizens and representatives of municipalities noted that there is no monitoring of project implementation and there are no clear systems for evaluating the results.

Hurdles (contd.)

- The low sustainability of the PB process is striking. The majority of municipalities have relied heavily on technical assistance from donors to implement PB, which raises questions about the sustainability of the process. Respondents emphasized the need for municipalities to allocate adequate funds and personnel to the PB campaign.
- Managing public expectations and maintaining trust in the process, especially when projects do not perform as expected, undermines the legitimacy of the process and leads to nihilism towards PB. Consequently, it was difficult for municipalities to communicate with citizens and create a positive mood for them.

Recommendations

- Maximum efforts should be made to conduct broad, accessible and continuous information campaigns to increase citizens' awareness, understanding, and involvement in the PB process. This should include a combination of online and offline channels, clear and compelling messaging, and information delivery to different target groups;
- It is necessary to develop the capacity of local self-government employees through training to effectively support PB processes. Training should be directed towards public relations skills, facilitation, project management, and M&A;
- Regulatory rules, instructions, and descriptions of the rights and responsibilities of the involved parties should be developed within the framework of the PB process, in cooperation with civil society and experts, to ensure trust in the processes and accountability of the body leading the process;

Recommendations (contd.)

- To overcome barriers related to gender, age, ability, language, and socio-economic status of the population, ensure inclusive and equal participation by offering different channels of engagement;
- Strengthen transparency and accountability in project implementation processes by clearly setting timelines, regularly communicating progress and challenges, and involving citizens in M&E;
- Project selection processes and criteria should be clear, fair, and balanced to reflect the diversity of community needs and priorities

Recommendations (contd.)

- In order to create a favorable environment for participatory governance, PB should be integrated into the local governance system, namely project planning, budgeting, and other accountability processes;
- Ensure systematic monitoring, evaluation, and learning of the PB process in all phases, to continuously improve the PB practice and evaluate its impact. Evaluation should include a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods, participatory approaches, and feedback and adaptation mechanisms;
- Promote PB cooperation between municipalities, civil society organizations and other stakeholders to share experiences, innovations, and resources. For this, conferences, workshops, and online platforms should be held and inter-municipal or joint initiatives aimed at strengthening participation with the involvement of various stakeholders should be implemented.

Thank you!