NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF POPULATION IN 8 MUNICIPALITIES OF WESTERN GEORGIA IN THE PROCESS OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION REFORM (PAR) IMPLEMENTATION

CONSOLIDATED

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NEEDS ASSESSMENT
OF POPULATION IN THE PROCESS OF
PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION REFORM (PAR)
IMPLEMENTATION
CONSOLIDATED REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

Within the Association Agreement framework, Public Administration Reform (PAR) is crucial to achieving effective and transparent public administration in Georgia. The legalization of an open and transparent governance system promotes and strengthens the building of a democratic state.

Since 2015, the state has developed many government documents, and action plans to successfully implement Public Administration Reform, which aims to implement fair and effective policies, establishing flexible and efficient public administration focused on challenges.

Within the Public Administration Reform, the Action Plan outlines two key objectives for self-government: the first is to develop the capacity of public servants to ensure the effective functioning of self-governing units. At the same time, it implies increasing self-government powers and granting more autonomy at the expense of decentralization. The action plan second task implementation envisages the development of e-services in local self-governments and improved citizens' access to them.

To contribute to the effective implementation of PAR at the local level and primary objectives for the self-governments, Cultural-Humanitarian Fund "Sukhumi" with Fund of Women Entrepreneurs and Imereti Scientists` Union "Spectri" is implementing the project - "A common forum for CSOs from Guria, Imereti and Racha-Lechkhumi for PAR Roadmap monitoring".

Several monitorings have been carried out within the project, which identified the reform positive aspects and challenges in the project target municipalities. The

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work of the working groups set up in the municipalities helped implement the recommendations identified through the monitoring and improve the local government efficiency.

One of the project`s essential activities is to study the population`s needs in establishing e-services in the target regions as part of the PAR implementation. The primary vector in the needs survey was to identify the benefits of e-services and the level of citizens` inclusiveness in local policy-making. The first needs study was conducted in April/May 2020, and the second one in May/June 2021.

The document includes consolidated data from eight municipalities (Vani, Baghdati, Terjola, Lanchkhuti, Ozurgeti, Ambrolauri, Tsageri, Khoni) obtained through the citizens needs study on indicators of service efficiency, transparency and inclusiveness provided by local authorities.

16 civil society organizations operating in 8 municipalities of Imereti, Guria, Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti were involved in studying the needs. Based on the study of research materials, recommendations have been developed. Their implementation will be directed to local and central level recipients. Considering these recommendations will contribute to the successful implementation of the tasks set for self-government in the process of Public Administration Reform.

1. NEEDS ASSESSMENT DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This document is based on qualitative and quantitative research results conducted in Imereti, Guria, Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti. In addition, 16 civil society organizations operating in Terjola, Baghdati, Vani, Khoni, Lanchkhuti, Ozurgeti, Tsageri, Amrolauri municipalities were involved in the research. The research findings analysis will contribute to positive change in the participating municipalities and accelerate the reform process.

1.1 Study tasks and objectives

The study aims to find the information and benefits of PAR processes in the 8 municipalities participating in the study based on the citizens` needs, considering the components of transparency, efficiency and inclusiveness, and develop relevant recommendations.

The tasks of this particular component were:

➢ To study citizens' awareness on Public Administration Reform in the municipality;

➢ To assess the local government accountability to the population for access to e-services and their activities;

➢ To identify the tendency of reflecting the needs of vulnerable groups in municipal programs;

➢ Develop relevant recommendations based on the study findings.

1.2. Quantitative and qualitative study methodology

Study methods - to achieve the above goal, quantitative and qualitative method techniques were used. A quantitative study was conducted with a predesigned structured questionnaire. Focus group discussion and face-to-face interview techniques were used as part of the research component.

Study time - the survey was conducted in May-June 2021. The study is based on the results obtained via studying the data of this period.

It should be noted that the research was preceded by a needs study conducted in April-May 2020. Comparing the results of both studies allows comparing progressive and regressive trends.

Quantity and target groups - a total of 1455 people from eight target municipalities were involved in the study, including 849 women and 606 men. Respondents were selected according to different socio-demographic specifications.

2. STUDY RESULTS: MAIN FINDINGS AND TRENDS

2.1. Transparency

➢ *Citizens' awareness of Public Administration Reform, main sources of information:*

The population`s awareness affects the citizens` inclusiveness and participation in the municipality ongoing processes using e-services.

The quantitative study results make it clear that the low level of in-depth public awareness of public governance in municipalities remains a significant challenge in implementing PAR. However, progress is still being made regarding the previous study results. The number of uninformed citizens is reducing in several municipalities.

Needs quantitative study data confirms that Ozurgeti and Lanchkhuti municipali-

ties have the maximum number (54%-57%) of uninformed citizens. The number of uninformed citizens in Vani, Tsageri, Terjola, Ambrolauri municipalities varies from 22% to 31%. The trend has significantly improved in Khoni and Baghdati municipalities, where the number of those unaware of Public Administration Reform has been reduced to 8%-15%.

Gender segregation data show that in almost all municipalities, informed women are predominant and range from 55% to 65%. The obtained data do not raise any questions. According to the qualitative data, in all types of meetings and activities, where citizens' inclusiveness is necessary, the number of women exceeds the number of men.

Citizens in different municipalities use different sources to get information on Public Administration Reform. Quantitative study materials confirm that television is the primary source of information in Vani municipality and 41.60% of them get aware through it. On the other hand, the population of Lanchkhuti municipality receive information from relatives, social networks and newspapers. Accordingly, the number of users of these sources is 55.3%. In the rest of the municipalities, 18% to 29% primarily use televisions.

Compared to the previous survey data, it is evident that using NGOs as primary sources of information is growing and varies from 26% to 32% in the represented municipalities. Khoni municipality stands out in this respect, where NGOs' share of informed citizens is 37%. According to qualitative materials, this trend is related to the activation of civil society organizations in the municipality.

The situation is different in Lanchkhuti municipality. Only 9.4% recognize non-governmental organizations as a source of information. It is related to the lack of activities of local civil society organizations in this municipality.

The quantitative study results provide alarming information. The figures indicate that the website's mission as an information provider needs to be strengthened in almost all municipalities. The number of users in all eight municipalities ranges from 7% to 12%. However, the changes compared to the results of last year's survey are insignificant.

In terms of progress, the activation of government bodies in informing citizens is observed and ranges from 11% to 24%. It is related to the establishment of working groups on the ground and strengthening cooperation with the authorities to accelerate the reform.

The surveyed citizens in all eight municipalities have an unequivocally positive assessment of the e-services results and the usefulness of Public Administration Reform: 35-70% of survey participants confirm that the reform can improve services. Terjola municipality is distinguished where 70% of positive answers are recorded.

From 2% to 10% is the number of nihilistic citizens whose answers are unequivocally radical and believe that no public reform can change the service quality. It is notewor-

thy that from 40% to 60%, have not yet established an answer on the service benefits. Therefore, there is a need for systematic work with this category.

According to qualitative materials, local experts have their own arguments for the positive outcomes of the reform. They believe the e-governance system is a valuable tool to improve electronic communication with citizens. Unfortunately, the expectations of focus group participants are much weaker. It is difficult for them to see and assess the positive impact of public administration reform.

> ### *Awareness, usefulness and accessibility of the population to e-services in the municipality*

The introduction of the e-governance system is one of the essential segments of Public Administration Reform in municipalities. However, the data obtained from the quantitative survey directly show that the information about e-services has not yet reached a significant part of the citizens. For example, in Vani municipality, the number of citizens unaware of e-services was 41.72%. The rate is up to 40% in Ozurgeti, Ambrolauri municipalities. In the rest of the municipalities, uninformed people generally range from 14 to 25%.

The data comparison shows that the number of those less interested in e-services is still high compared to the previous year and is 45-47%. Even more important is the information obtained through data breakdown, according to which the share of young people in the category of the least interested is 18-20%.

Positive dynamism is noticeable, and 23-25% of respondents confirm the activation of the municipality as a provider of information. According to the previous study results, this data did not exceed 8%. Despite the positive dynamics, local experts and participants in the focus discussion point to the need for more inclusiveness and activism on the part of the municipality. According to their arguments, making new, innovative methods of raising citizens' interest should become the municipality`s action plan integral part.

Following the multifaceted benefits of e-services, the purpose of their use in the population is diverse. Quantitative survey data show that 15-26% of respondents in Abrolauri, Tsageri, Terjola and Baghdati municipalities most often use e-services to find job vacancies. 16-19% have visited the online portal in Khoni and Ozurgeti because of **electronic petitions.** A small part of the citizens (8-10%) has used the electronic space to get information about the City Council decisions and procurement reports.

In Terjola, Vani, Tsageri, Ambrolauri, Lanchkhuti municipalities, the number of website users to get information reaches -10-12%.

Compared to last year, the progress is insignificant, and the number of citizens (45-56%) who did not use any of the listed services is still high. However, the obtained

results do not raise any questions, as it is most likely reasoned by the lack of internet and insufficient skills and experience for online work.

When discussing improving the quality of e-services, local experts involved in research point to the impact of working groups set up within the project:

> **"The working group established in the municipality, whose members are representatives of self-government and civil society organizations, promoted the development of e-services in the municipality" (local expert, Terjola municipality).**

Qualitative survey respondents note the positive outcomes of the e-governance system introduced in the self-government, especially in pandemic conditions:

> **"Against the Covid-Pandemic background, it has gained even more importance, simplified and made flexible communication with the local population. As a result, the citizens did not need to go through many bureaucratic processes to get the information they needed, to come from a long way and wait" (in-depth interview with a self-government expert, Khoni Municipality).**

Quantitative research participants offer their versions to improve the e-services provided to the population in the process of Public Administration Reform: 38% of respondents in Lanchkhuti Municipality believe that the knowledge and skills of public servants need to be improved. 26%-35% of respondents in Khoni, Tsageri and Ambrolauri municipalities consider it reasonable to create services tailored to the needs of particularly vulnerable groups. Improving services and increasing territorial coverage of the Internet is considered a priority tool in Ozurgeti and Baghdati municipalities by 18-20% of respondents. Simplifying the process of receiving e-services is considered an essential step by 10-12% of respondents in Vani, Terjola municipality. The advantages of this version are recognized by the focus group participants and local experts. According to their arguments, the service quality and the number of its users are directly related to introducing simplified forms for obtaining services. The simplification forms also imply considering the needs of the population left out of the Internet.

2.2. Local service efficiency

> *Identifying the self-government service efficiency quality*

The study of local service efficiency quality is mainly based on the evaluation of electronic service users. Respondents' assessments are unequivocally positive when evaluating e-services as an effective service tool. The use of e-services by any logic saves citizens` time, finances, and effort and contributes to creating high standards of

efficient service in municipalities. Nevertheless, the study data show that today, in the target municipalities, the number of citizens who did not use the electronic application form to obtain different services is equally high - 57-70%. Consequently, they cannot evaluate its effectiveness.

For most respondents (50%-60%), applying for services to self-government agencies electronically is a simple procedure. However, 15-20% of respondents indicate the complexity of the same procedures. In addition, age filtering reveals that receiving electronic services is most difficult for middle-aged citizens and pensioners.

Effective self-government work should be based on the creation of programs tailored to the citizens` needs. There is already political readiness for this issue in the municipalities. The results also seem to be more visible. Still, the dynamics necessary in this direction are significantly hampered by the illegal practice of needs study, which negatively affects efficiency. The local experts involved in the study also confirm that the existing practice in the municipalities in terms of needs assessment is weak and is often tied to a project of a civil society organization. Or, more often, rely on the monitoring and evaluation of individual programs by internal audit. The same pathos follows the opinions of citizens from focus groups. They only remember separate studies conducted by civil society organizations.

Despite the existing data, there are still some trends in some municipalities regarding strengthening communication with citizens. It is welcome that these trends are becoming stronger from year to year. For example, in Ambrolauri municipality, the quality of service efficiency is studied through monitoring by the social service. Likewise, the practise of monitoring and evaluating the services provided has been actively used in Baghdati.

Respondents prefer rural meetings as a format of active communication between the population and the self-government. Still, at the same time, they talk about its shortcomings, where in many cases, the priority programs of the population are not met.

According to the quantitative survey, 20-25% of the respondents in Lanchkhuti, Khoni, Tsageri and Ambrolauri municipalities apply to the local government for issues of healthcare and medicines. 16-20% of the respondents visit the municipality to receive social and financial assistance in Ozurgeti, Baghdati and Terjola municipalities. The number of people wishing to visit the municipality for land registration ranges from 9% to 12%.

The research shows that citizens' interest in public information is low. In all eight municipalities, the rate ranges from 2% to 3.5%. And the number of citizens who do not have access to online services ranges from 25% to 35%. 13-25% of them do not have proper skills.

Compared to the results of the previous study, the number of citizens satisfied with the services of the City Hall and City Council has increased. The figure is 44-55% in all eight municipalities and exceeds the dissatisfied citizens (30%-35%). It is noteworthy that 60.63% of respondents are satisfied with the quality of services provided by the mayor's representatives in the administrative units.

> ## *Identifying the local governments` powers in the local resource`s effective management processes*

Given the lack of needs assessment practice, it is interesting to identify the needs of which groups are considered by the municipality and which tendencies are reflected in the programs. The majority of respondents (45-65%) in the target municipalities believe that the municipality's policy is more or less neutral and addresses the needs of almost all vulnerable groups. However, while considering the high degree of vulnerability of specific target groups, respondents point to the need for the municipality to implement programs favourable to them. For example, young people are on the list of vulnerable target groups in qualitative data. In their opinion, the needs of this target group are especially aggravated by the lack of youth space, lack of job opportunities and employment prospects. Accordingly, the municipality should address the primary vector to consider their needs.

The pensioners indicate a high degree of vulnerability. Therefore, they think it is necessary to introduce even one-time assistance programs for disabled people over 80.

The list of specific groups includes **children with disabilities and their family members** who face many challenges. **Single mothers, women victims of violence are among those groups.** The municipality should express its responsibility for introducing the programs addressing their needs.

> ## *Citizens` visions on improving service efficiency*

The mechanism of service efficiency is significantly weakened by the existing problems in terms of decentralization. The interviewed experts unequivocally confirm that the municipalities should be given more independence within the scope of their authority in identifying priorities and implementing them. Acceleration of the decentralization process is considered to be a necessary precondition for this.

> **"Many problems that are concentrated on the ground are affected by the inability to access basic resources. Consequently, self-government in most cases turns out to be an organized structure that manages the funds allocated from the centre based on the population`s needs. So, it does not seem to be a full-fledged self-governing institution" (local expert Lanchkhuti Municipality).**

The study actively raises the need to separate the competencies of municipalities and line ministries in water supply, real estate and natural resources management. According to experts, Article 16 of the Self-Government Code sharply separates the powers of local self-government. However, it cannot be adequately implemented because of inadequate financial provision.

The data obtained from the qualitative survey on self-government participation in granting socially vulnerable status are similar.

> **"Involving the self-government in granting the status of the socially vulnerable would be more convenient than a social agency because the local representatives are better aware of the problems and hardships of the population"** (a teacher, focus group participant, Vani Municipality).

3.3. Inclusiveness/Participation

➢ *Citizens` inclusiveness in local processes, challenges, available resources*

The inclusiveness level in the municipalities was assessed by the existence of various formats of citizens` inclusiveness, activism, participation in reporting processes, communication and feedback on the ongoing processes in the self-government.

The data from the study confirm how well public servants are aware of the importance of citizen inclusiveness. It is noteworthy that the majority of respondents in the target municipalities, 40-60%, still do not have an answer to this question. Only 15-30% think that municipal public officials have partially realized the importance of citizens` inclusiveness. Positive responses are equally low in all eight municipalities, with 9-15% of respondents believing that officials understand the importance of self-governance built on the principle of participation. If we look at last year's results, the dynamics are unchanged. There is a need for more initiatives on the part of the municipality to change the citizens` general attitude.

Quantitative survey materials make it possible to assess which form of inclusiveness prefer those involved in the study. In Lanchkhuti municipality, 47% of respondents believe that reviewing the local budget creates an important environment for citizen inclusiveness and interaction in the municipality, where the population enjoys the full right to participate in the process. In Ozurgeti, 38.5% of respondents consider the civil budgeting process the most democratic form of inclusiveness. In Vani Municipality, 49.70% considered the citizens` inclusiveness in identifying local priorities as an ideal communication format. In other municipalities, village/settlement meetings are preferred (20-35%). It is noteworthy that citizens show little interest in Gender Council and Advisory Council. Therefore, they are not so active regarding these councils. Experts in the study believe that self-government should have a diverse incentive format to enable the population to choose.

Qualitative research materials obtained from the focus groups confirm that the population's interest in budget issues has increased. It refers to municipalities where a practice of civil budgeting (Terjola, Ozurgeti) is introduced or is now beginning to be established. In contrast to recent years, the introduction of the e-petition, the best practice of which is the Khoni municipality, has significantly increased the level of citizen inclusiveness.

Despite these positive trends, the overall picture of activity does not change. The citizens` inclusiveness indicator is still low in the surveyed municipalities. 55-70% of the participants in the quantitative survey directly state that they have not participated in any event. 10-13% participated in hearing reports, whereas the number of participants in rural meetings comprises 15-36%.

Experts involved in the study explain the reasons for the low activity of citizens with their arguments. In their opinion, the most pressing problems for citizens (e.g. employment, poverty eradication, social protection) are not within the competence of local governments. In many cases, they affect a low level of public activism and further reinforce the sceptics` attitude.

➤ *Prospects for the use of civil society and private sector resources*

To ensure constructive dialogue and greater inclusiveness with the self-government, respondents give preference to civil society organizations. Especially in Vani, Baghdati, Ozurgeti, Amrolauri and Tsageri municipalities (45-60%).

Qualitative research materials support this view. Therefore, it is necessary to support and strengthen regional civil society organizations to ensure citizens` inclusiveness.

Respondents see the mission of civil society organizations in different directions. 48-55% of respondents see this role in informing the public. 20-30% consider the monitoring of the reform process as a goal of the civil sector.

In implementing Public Administration Reform, a need to involve another important figure, the private sector, is identified. Local experts are particularly interested in this issue.

> **"There is an impression that people engaged in commerce and private business on the territory of the municipality, whose cash income is equal to the cash income of the middle class of Eastern Europe, do not participate in the municipality governance. However, their share of taxes in the local budget is much higher than that of other social strata. It damages and renders the political and socio-economic landscape of the municipality" (local expert, Lanchkhuti Municipality).**

The study has revealed that creating a format of cooperation between the public and private sectors is still far from desirable because there is no willingness and readiness to cooperate on both sides.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study results made it clear that the Public Administration Reform in the eight target municipalities is slow but still dynamic. Therefore, the municipalities should develop appropriate strategies to create more visible dynamism.

A high rate of unaware citizens about PAR is typical to all municipalities and remains a significant challenge. **Despite the public and informational meetings, the content, purpose and expected positive benefits of the reform are still unclear to the population.** Municipalities should introduce different formats of communication to inform the citizens thoroughly.

The research shows that e-governance systems are set up, although access is unequal for all segments. It is reasoned by inadequate skills to receive e-services in a specific category. Consequently, it highlights the need to simplify existing services.

None of the municipalities has **an appropriate strategy for disseminating information about public administration and e-services**. Consequently, it deprives the municipality of the function to be the primary source of information dissemination, and the process of informing the citizens is non-systematic but spontaneous.

It turns out that the population mainly uses e-services to find vacancies. Only some of them have used to get public officials` contact information. Some of them look for budget programs electronically.

The study data show that to make e-services more efficient, **it is necessary to simplify using the website to increase its mission as an informant**.

There is a lack of practice in conducting needs assessments in almost all municipalities, including gender needs.

Positive trends are identified: the survey participants positively assess the services of the mayor's representatives in the municipalities, the City Council and the administrative units.

It turns out that during the Covid-19 pandemic, electronic services acquired particular importance. However, access to the Internet is still relevant, especially in peripheral areas.

The study materials show that the awareness about Gender Council and its mission is low regarding inclusiveness. In addition, the population is also less aware of the purpose and responsibility of the Advisory Council, the Council of Persons with Disabilities.

It is also clear that local **civil society organizations** are of particular importance in

successfully implementing Public Administration Reform. At the same time, the lack of regional civil society organizations remains a challenge.

The need to separate municipalities and line ministries have been highlighted, as often the activities of ministries conflict with the law on local self-government.

RECOMMENDATIONS

TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT:

- *It is advisable to increase public servants` responsibility in the listed municipalities in response to citizens' unawareness of Public Administration Reform and establish a coordinated system of systematic communication and feedback with citizens using local resources (mayor`s representatives in villages, civic activists, NGOs);*

- *It is crucial to promote the positive results of e-governance through constant communication with citizens, considering all target groups and segments;*

- *It is advisable to promote e-websites to activate them, increase their consumption by the population and initiate incentive activities by municipalities to increase e-interaction of users;*

- *To increase access to e-services, it is necessary to create a simplified e-portal for all the vulnerable groups and at the same time provide information campaigns to equip citizens with relevant skills.*

EFFICIENCY

- *Self-governments need to lobby for the Internet coverage expansion throughout the municipalities and create a balanced environment for access to e-services for citizens living in the peripheral part;*

- *It is recommended to establish and legalize studying the citizens` needs (including gender needs) in municipalities and create programs tailored to these needs.*

- *It is essential to promote local CSOs and use them as partners to increase effective service quality.*

INCLUSIVENESS

- *It is essential to make full use of the resources of the Gender Equality Council, the Mayor's Advisory Council and other institutional mechanisms set up in the municipalities to consider the needs of the various vulnerable groups in the municipality and increase citizens` participation in self-government ongoing processes;*

- *It is necessary* to legalize the municipality's online reporting process before citizens and diversify the online space to create the necessary feedback: monitoring, evaluation, and online surveys;

- *It is advisable* to introduce incentive activities in rural communities and other formats to strengthen the municipality's insufficient inclusiveness;

- *It is recommended* that the self-government facilitate the inclusiveness of local civil society organizations and make full use of their resources to increase citizens' awareness of the e-governance benefits;

- *It is essential* to study the needs of different vulnerable groups (e.g. citizens living below the poverty line, retired women/men, families of persons with disabilities, large families, young people, women victims of violence) and address these needs in local programs;

- *Local governments should intensify* partnership with the private sector to increase their inclusiveness and participation in local policy-making.

To NGOs:

- *It is advisable* to intensify the mission of NGOs as a source of information in informing citizens about the processes of Public Administration Reform;

- *It is desirable* to expand the cooperation space for the non-governmental and municipal sectors to identify the population`s needs and initiate advocacy processes;

- *It is recommended* to evaluate and monitor the benefits of e-services in cooperation with the self-government to accelerate the Public Administration Reform, to manage the processes thoroughly;

- *It is essential* to support the precedents of establishing civil society organizations on the ground through partnership and coalition projects.

To the local government:

- *It is advisable* to facilitate the decentralization process by legalizing local municipality's powers, separating functions from self-governments and line ministries;

- *It is also vital* to accelerate the social work decentralization by increasing the self-government role in assessing the social status of families;

- *It is essential* to increase the local self-governments` authority regarding management of the real estate, water and natural resources in the municipality geographical area.

IMERETI REGION

THE REPORT ON NEEDS

ASSESSMENT OF POPULATION

IN THE PROCESS OF PAR IMPLEMENTATION

IN VANI MUNICIPALITY

www.fsokhumi.ge

INTRODUCTION

Successful implementation of a Public Administration Reform (PAR), which fulfills a fundamental role on Georgia's path to European integration, represents a main precondition for development of the country and improving the welfare of the population.

Participation of citizens within the process of the reform is a prerequisite for the success of this aforesaid reform. It not only ensures the introduction of democratic and open governance in the country, but also increases the trust of the population in terms of the political systems and enhances the legitimacy of taken decisions. The pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus, even more clearly outlined the need for the proper PAR, particularly, towards the introduction of an electronic governance, which will enable citizens to report their problems and needs remotely, easily and promptly without any additional bureaucratic procedures to local government as well as to solve them.

In order to effectively implement the Public Administration Reform at the local level, the Cultural-Humanitarian Fund "Sukhumi" in a partnership with Fund of Women Entrepreneurs and Imereti Scientists Union "Spectri" implements the EU funded project "A common forum of CSOs from Guria, Imereti and Racha-Lechkhumi for PAR roadmap monitoring". The findings identified as a result of the study and generated recommendations will be the basis for reflecting the priority needs of citizens in the action plan of the municipality.

1. PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY OF THE NEEDS STUDY

The purpose of the citizens needs study is to research and evaluate effectiveness, transparency and inclusiveness of the service provided to the citizens by the local government of Vani and to elaborate specific recommendations on the basis of the evidence based information for improving the local service. The objectives of the study are to advocate for the problems and challenges defined as a result of the citizens needs study in relevant agencies at the local and national levels and to integrate the citizens' priority issues in the municipality's action plan.

Methodology of the study: The needs study was carried out in May-June, 2020. In order to achieve the goal, combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was used. In the first stage, a research tool was elaborated and the indicators of it were agreed with the project partners. A structured questionnaire was developed for quantitative research, which mainly consisted of closed-ended questions, although the respondents were given the opportunity to express their opinion on the issue, or to choose several options of an answer.

A total of 183 respondents were interviewed within the frames of the study. ***The quantitative research*** included 151 respondents (female - 77, male - 74). ***The qualitative research*** included 31 respondents. There were 4 in-depth interviews with local experts (female-2, male-2) and discussions of 4 focus groups with local social groups. The qualitative research consisted of 28 respondents (female - 23, male - 5). The target groups of the qualitative research were local civic groups, including women, members of families having many children and socially vulnerable families, housewives, parents of children with disabilities, young people, pensioners, entrepreneurs, teachers of school and preschool educational institutions, local experts in self-governance issues.

The study revealed the attitude of the respondents towards the progress of PAR and its primary results. What results and challenges do they see in terms of the improving of local governance? What is the assessment of transparency, efficiency and inclusiveness for local self-government activities? How well did they cope with e-service and what is needed for more efficient use of it? In what areas do they need more protection, empowerment, new approaches. What initiatives do they have and in what direction do they consider it necessary to apply self-government resources.

2. SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDY

During the selection of participants for the quantitative research, the special status, age, place of work, education and other socio-demographic indicators were taken into consideration. The target groups were socially vulnerable people, people with disabilities, small entrepreneurs, IDPs, young people, parents with many children and single parents. 51% of the respondents included in the study were women, 49% - men. ***Age category***: 18-34 years - 41.72%, 35-64 years - 26.49%, 65 years and over - 31.79%. As concerns ***the marital status***, 49.70% of respondents are married, 28.50% are not married, 17.20% are widowed, 4.60% are divorced.

The distribution of respondents ***according to the education*** is as follows: 37.09% of the participants have full secondary education, 21.20% have secondary special education, 19.86% have full higher education, and 21.85% have incomplete secondary education. This last indicator can be considered as an obstacle for the mentioned beneficiaries to use the electronic services provided by the self-government.

Pursuant to the social status, socially vulnerable, internally displaced persons, small entrepreneurs, young people -16.56% are represented in an equal number among those involved in the study. As for elderly people, engagement is 17,20%.

According to the employment status, the majority of those involved in the study

are pensioners (32.68%), as well as a large share comes to the unemployed people (32%), the self-employed (30.70%), a small number of public servants (3.30%), representatives of budget organizations (0, 66%) and students (0.66%).

Average household income was refused to indicate by the 9.90% of respondents. Income from 101 Gel to 500 Gel per family has 63,60%, and up to 900 Gel - 16,60%, more than 901 Gel - 7,90%, and less than 100 Gel - 2%. r 63.60% of the family has income from 101 to 500 GEL, 16.60% up to 900 GEL, 7.90% more than 901 GEL, and 2% less than 100 GEL.

3. BASIC FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

TRANSPARENCY

(See. Diagram 1)

Do you have information on public administration reform?

12.60%

31.80%

55.60%

■ a) Yes   ■ b) Partially   ■ c) No
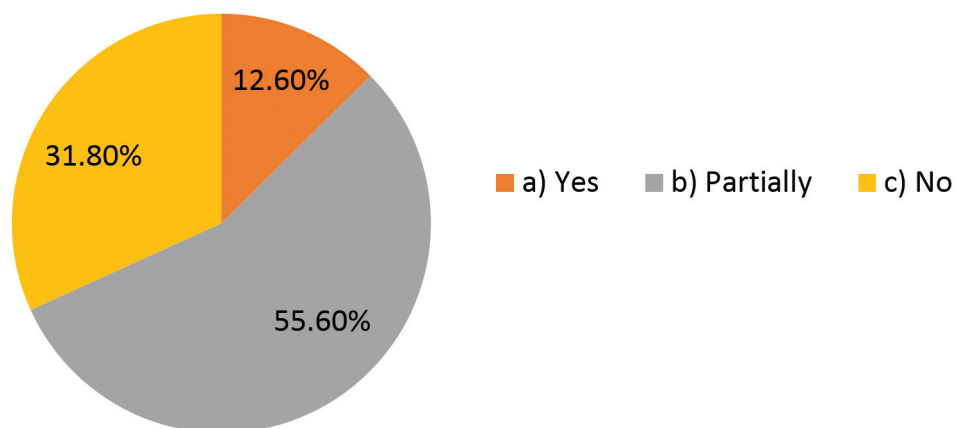
The source of information was television (41.60%), non-governmental organizations (24.60%), government agencies (19.20%), the municipality's Facebook page and website (10%). 4.60% did not answer this question.

As it is revealed from the qualitative data, some respondents believe that in order to raise public awareness about the reform, it is important to activate the print media, especially for the elderly people and those in whose villages the Internet is not available yet:

> **"Even if there is an Internet in many villages, there are left only elderly people, and they are not able to use it. That's why the print media is necessary. Thus, many are not interested in consuming it" (the pensioner).**

> **"As far as I am aware, the population is informed with the help of the representatives and their assistants, as it is mainly impossible to access the Internet in the village" (the teacher).**

The problem of Internetization is also emphasized by the local experts and they talk about the importance of e-management system:

> "It is necessary, that electronic management system to be actively used. Due to the time factor, it is very justified, it is not necessary for a person to arrive, as it used to be, to travel several kilometers, if /she has internet and appropriate equipment can receive and register. However, here we meet one problem, many people do not have access to the Internet or the relevant equipment. I think, that this problems needs to be solved" (the head of the resource center).

The attitude of the interviewed respondents is interesting on *whether public administration reform will improve the quality of citizens' services or not*. According to the data, it is clear, that the majority of participants (50.33%) believe that it will improve, 4.63% think that it will improve less, and 45.04% find it difficult to answer the question. It should be mentioned, that none of the respondents indicated as an answer - "cannot improve". This directly indicates that the respondents are confident that the reform will facilitate the improvement of the quality of their services. The same approach is apparent in qualitative research as well, where both beneficiaries and industry experts talk about the need for reform and its benefits:

> "First of all, I will evaluate it positively, slowly, but still in progress anyway. The positivity of this reform is that, it will sharply improve the works of the state agencies, and will spare time and resources and simplify relaetions of the citizens, the example of this is the SMS service" (a person with disabilities).

> "The positive condition of the reform is that, the information is actively posted in the municipality, both on the website of the municipality and social network. It becomes accessible to the population, but the hindering factor is that the entire territory of the municipality is not covered by the Internet" (the director of the Arts, Education and Tourism Centre).

Respondents emphasize the importance of citizens' awareness for the maximum success of the reform:

> "I also think, that Public Administration Reform is going well, but if we bring the news to each citizen, that the work is in progress for the development of our services, it will probably be better" (a housewife).

Quantitative research reveals the *level of awareness of respondents about e-services*: only 9.93% are fully informed, 43.72% are more or less informed, 41.72% are not informed, and 4.63% are not interested in e-services.

How well are you informed on municipal e-services ?

4.63%
9.93%
41.72%
43.72%

- ■ a) We are not informed
- ■ b) More or less informed
- ■ c)I am informed
- ■ d) I am not interested in
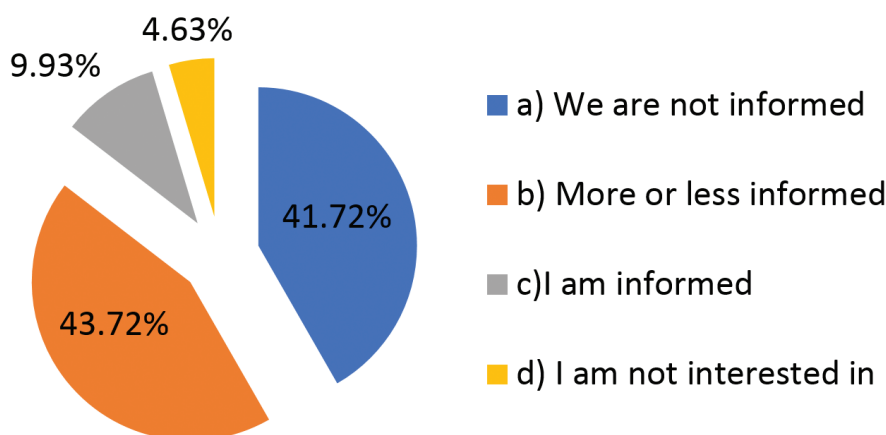
Those, who are informed about the reform, *information was mainly received* from meetings with government officials (29.17%), as well as from the representatives of the NGOs (22.50%), television (19.90%), the relevant municipal website / Facebook (15.23), and 13 , 20% name the other sources, in which they consider the resources of relatives / acquaintances.

Pursuant to the quantitative research, to the question *"Which e-services have you used in the last year",* the majority of respondents, particularly 10.67%, answered that they received on a local "Budget", 7.90% - "Online statement on a vacancy", 2.67% of the participants on "the normative acts of the City Council", 3.30% "Finding contact information for the municipal employee", 5.33% "Getting acquainted with the reports", 4% "Procurement plan, report", 10% "registered for the meeting" and "got familiar with the agenda / minutes of the City Council sessions" 1.33% did not use complaints, proposals and electronic petitions at all, while the skeptical attitude "I do not care" was recorded by 5.33% , 25.33% do not have access, while -13.33% do not have proper skills.

According to the qualitative data, the part of the respondents noted, that the interesting public information for them is published on the official website of the local self-government and can be accessed according to their desire. The use of electronic systems became especially important during the pandemic, that simplified for citizens to receive the necessary services:

> **"The e-management system is important in the self-governing unit. I use the Internet to read information on people with disabilities" (a person with disabilities).**

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> **"E-management systems, made it very easy to serve the citizens in local self-governments, especially during this pandemic period. There is more security, as the notices are sent electronically. Even if it is not a pans demic, I welcome this form of service. The time is allocated for you, you have your own segment"** (a housewife).

In addition to the problem of the Internetization, in terms of the existing challenges, the low level of public awareness was noted, which is a hindering factor in the implementation of the reform:

> **"The electronic system is better, it saves more time as well as nerves, but people need to be aware of that. There should be an appropriate awareness. As you start the alphabet from the beginning, the same it needs"** (a teacher).

> **"Unfortunately, we do not have our own print media agency in the municipality, which, to some extent, puts the population of highland villages in an information vacuum"** (a member of the City Council).

According to local experts, e-services are effective, but the results may be ineffective due to low knowledge and access to them:

> **"There are different ways of informing, but I consider, that individual meetings with citizens are the best. Meetings are held, but I mean in terms, that it will simplify the case for self-government representatives when a citizen can receive any services electronically. MPs and representatives of the City Hall should also be involved in this regard"** (by the public official).

According to the respondents, *in order to improve the services provided to the population within the reform process,* the public should be informed about state e-services in a timely and complete manner through television, news flyers, Facebook and the website (25.20%). 14.56% of respondents consider, that it is necessary to simplify the service process. 15.23% think that in order to improve e-services, the municipality should develop service tailored to the needs and priorities of vulnerable groups. An increase in the salaries of public servants was stated as a significant component by 2.65% of respondents; Only 1.98% of the participants considered, that in order to ensure the access, it is necessary to increase the number of services and territorial coverage, while 37.73% found it difficult to answer.

In order to obtain the local services, citizens mostly use - www.my.gov.ge - citizen portal (10%), the official website of the municipality (10.60%), the Facebook page of the City Hall (14.70%). 0% of the respondents use the Facebook page of the City Council and the official website of the regional administration, in which

serious state resources are invested. The fact that 64.70% of those listed above did not receive the information, arises the doubt on the effectiveness of e-services in the municipality.

While assessing the issue of transparency and accountability, the importance of the activity of the mayor's representatives was outlined, they were referred to as information mediators by local experts:

> **"I think, all citizens living in the municipality have information about municipal programs. We have already talked about the means of obtaining information, but in this case I will talk about one reliable pillar of coma munication staff, which is a mediator between the management and the local population. This is the mayor's representative in the administrative units. Representatives provide information to the population not only on municipal programs, but also on other important issues. They provide meetings of the population with the executive unit and this is very important" (the public official).**

EFFICIENCY

One of the manifestations of the success of Public Administration Reform is efficacy of local service. The primary issue in this regard is how the existing programs and projects are tailored to the needs of different groups of citizens.

Quantitative research data made us available to find out how easy it is for the population *to apply for services electronically to self-governing agencies.* The majority (69.50%) find it difficult to answer, 24.50% think it is a simple procedure and 6% consider it a difficult procedure.

Within the last year, only 6.60% have used the *principle of electronic recording to meet with the representative of the desired agency*, 53.60% did not use it and 39.80% did not have information about it.

According to the quantitative data, *issues, that the municipalities have been addressed by the respondents to be tackled over the last year,* have been related to healthcare, assistance with medicines, operation financing - 49.66%, social assistance (mainly includes financial assistance) - 18.67%, issuance of certificates - 12.58%, receiving of firewood - 13.90%, roof repairing / provision with construction materials -7.94%, land registration -25.16%, legalization of space -1.32%, receipt of vouchers -6.60%, construction of a playground -1.98%, improvement of public transport -5.29%, garbage remove - 1.32%, water supply (including quality water) and maintenance of drainage canals -3.97%, employment

-5.29% and city urbanization project / arrangement of small public gardens / street lighting -1.98%.

This data analysis allows us to conclude, that the social issues are the utmost importance for the population.

While determining the quality of response to the problem, the **satisfaction with the received service** was assessed as a result of a quantitative research as follows: 68.88% of respondents are satisfied with the service received by the City Hall, only 21.85% dissatisfied, 1.32% very dissatisfied and 7.95% very satisfied; 62.25% of the respondents are satisfied with the **City Council**, 21.85% are dissatisfied, 7.95% are very dissatisfied and 7.95% are very satisfied. 58.28% of the respondents expressed satisfaction with the **mayor's representative in the villages**, 10.60% are dissatisfied in this regard, 1.32% very dissatisfied and 29.80% very satisfied.

As for the **solution of problems** by the self-government in case of citizens' complaints, 50.34% of the beneficiaries answered, that their problems had been partially solved, while 16.55% stated that their problem had been solved, 3,97% answered, that: "they promised us, but the process was too long", while 1.32% stated that none of the problems had been resolved and nor reasoned written refusal had been sent. For 1.98% there was an attempt for solution, but a reasoned reason in terms of the uns solved problem was reported in writing. Quite a large part of the respondents (25.84%) did not have an answer to this.

The participants involved in a qualitative research also talk about the problem solving and timely response by the self-government. They note, that there are responses to the complaints as follows:

> **"When I raised the issues of people with disabilities living in the village, the population was surveyed. I think, that the problems provided to the municipality have been partially resolved. In particular, in terms of the improvement of the conditions of people with disabilities" (a family member of a person with disabilities).**

> **"Mainly in the village, there was a local road problem. The City Hall considered the requirements and fulfilled them step by step. "Every government, organization, its services exist to serve the people" (a socially vulnerable person).**

To the question, **which specific group needs are considered by the local self-government,** we got the following result: 69.10% of the participants think that the needs of the entire population of the municipality are taken into account, 30.90% believe that the needs of people with disabilities are considered, 10.60% think that the

needs of women are reflected in the budget, while 7.40% think, that these are mothers with many children. A low rate was observed for the needs of women and young people victims of domestic violence. The rate for both vulnerable groups is 3.40%. Based on these answers, the specific needs are less taken into account, which is the opinion of 25.50% of the participants.

Qualitative research participants actively discussed the **needs and problems of specific groups** and what areas are crucial to be improved. The need to improve the health program and youth support was identified:

> **"To increase costs in the healthcare system is a bit difficult issue, but it is possible to find a sponsor and build a good clinic, bring in modern equipment and hire qualified doctors. We have not had a maternity hospital in the district for many years" (a housewife).**

> **"Socially vulnerable people, people with disabilities, orphans are mostly in need to increase the costs. The solving of this problem represents the local self-government liability" (a teacher).**

Issues in need of a special attention were named by local experts. The problems of the socially vulnerable people and youth support and to stop the migration were allocated as points. It was said, that without proper support they would leave the municipality and this process would become irreversible. According to the citizens, more attention should be paid to the problems of the youth part of the community, but they should be involved in these processes themselves as well. Unfortunately, there is no mechanism for evaluating the effectiveness of services in the municipality:

> **"We often use the word equality in order to make it really happen. There is a need for integration of social groups, more support, more assistance and as the more assistance and programs there will be in the municipality, which will serve the interests of this group, we will get better results" (the head of the resource center).**

> **"It is known overall to the population of the municipality that the local self-government finances many social projects. In addition to social projects, it would be great, if the organization of youth, cultural-creative and cognitive events is paid more attention, more young people will be involved in this direction and another direction will be given to their lives" (the public servant).**

The heavies condition of children with disabilities and their families, whose existing social services cannot alleviate the situation in the long run, has been identified. They need expensive medicines, systematic physiotherapy, specific nutrition, programs tai-

lored to their condition, or complex care and self-support by the self-government. The issue of financing the physical rehabilitation was also mentioned, which cannot be afford by the municipality:

> **"Yes, they have helped me many times indeed, but my son needs expensive medicines. In this situation, when we are not employed, there is almost no way out. I am very desperate. I walk physically, but I am empty inside" (the parent of a child with disabilities).**

> **"There are rehabilitation programs that are not financed by the self-government. We do not even know whether the state will finance it or not or, what documents are needed" (the parent of a person with disabilities).**

Quantitative research allowed us to find out whether the local government fully informs the population about the activities / services provided by them. Most of the participants think that partially - 45.00%, "Yes" was answered by the 15.90%, and "No" by 7.30%. Only 31.80% had no answer to this question.

(See. Diagram 3)

Do you think, that the local government fully informs the population on provided activities/services ?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Partially
- d) I have no answer

15.90%
7.30%
31.80%
45%
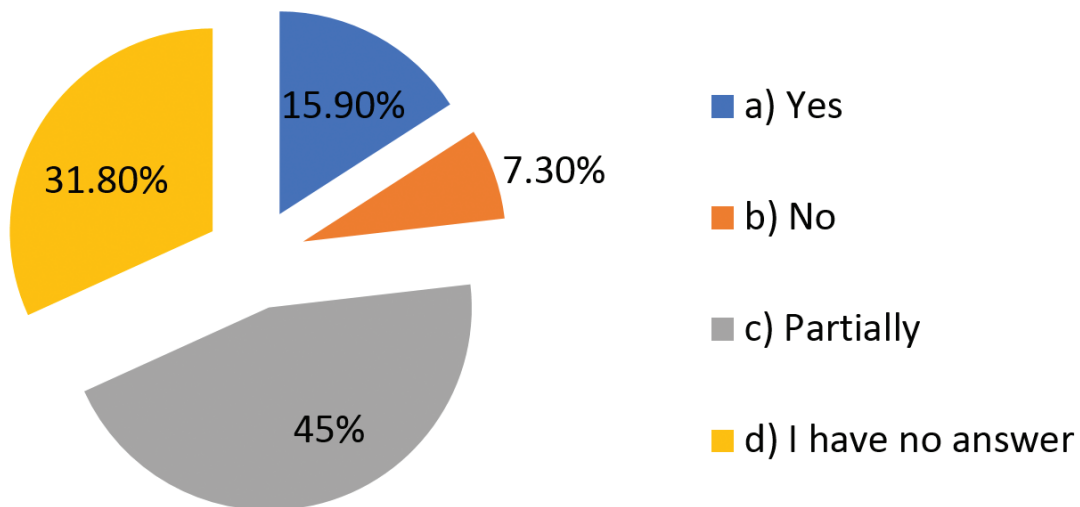
INCLUSIVENESS

Involvement of civil society in policy planning and implementation is considered to be one of the most important elements of democratic governance. Citizen involvement depends on their interests. Participants of the qualitative survey are less interested to be involved in municipal life:

> "I believe, that the local self-government and you, the civil society organizations, should work in this direction in order to raise the self-awareness of the society regarding the involvement. Involvement of citizens generally takes place in the meetings of the settlements, when the local leaders meet w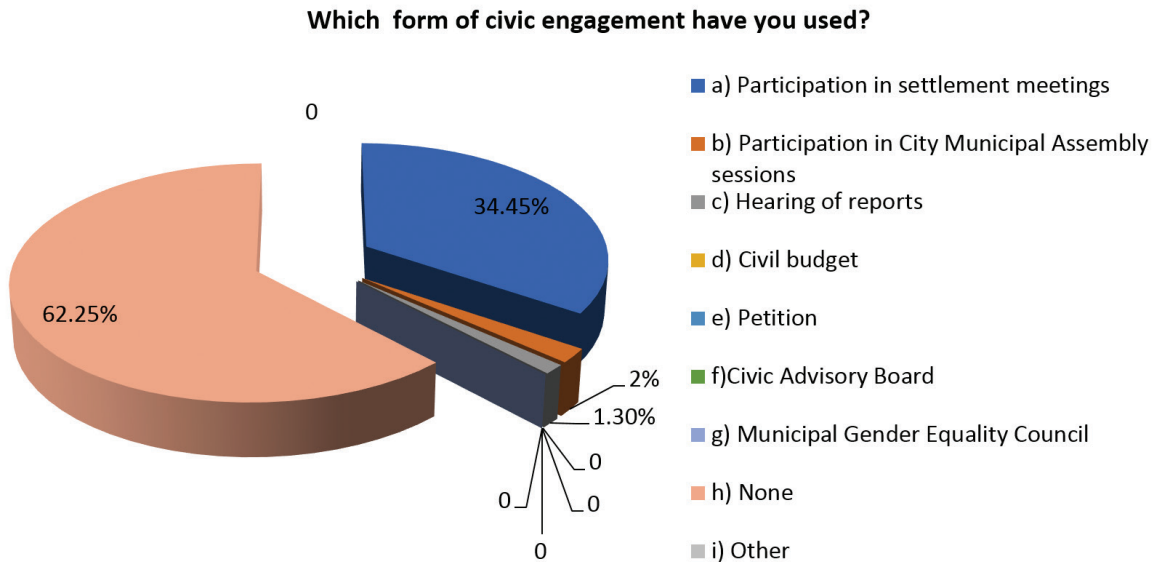ith the population, find out what do they need, what is their priority, try to introduce innovations, express support to the local population, consider the appropriate funds in the budget. This has a crucial meaning and priority. It should be taken into consideration, that in such a case, the trust of the population is higher, that increases the involvement. As for the City Council sessions, there are no restrictions in this regard and I am witness of the fact that when the budget was being discussed in the hall, several local citizens were presented at the session. There are no restrictions. The most important is to be interested in terms of involvement in the discussion of such projects" (the public servant).

Within frames of the quantitative research, the position of citizens has been revealed on the following issue, *whether the local public officials are aware of the importance of citizens' involvement.* The answers were distributed as follows: Yes - 23.20% and partially - 41%; No - 3.30%, 32.50% of respondents do not have an answer. As for *what are the issues the citizens' are encouraged/provided to be involved,* a relatively large proportion of respondents believe that this is the process of setting local priorities (49.70%), as well as the development of municipal programs (23.20%), identification of the citizens' needs (11, 90%), review of citizens' initiatives (6.60%) and review of local budget (1.30%) as well.

Quantitative research has made it clear, that *the population has more or less information about the forms of citizen involvement.* The most common form of participation, according to quantitative data, is participation in settlement meetings, which is highlighted by the 34.45% of respondents. A very low rate was observed for the other forms: hearing of the report -1,30%, participation in City Council sessions -2%. Overall 0% was observed on forms such as civil budget, petition, civic advisory council, municipal gender equality council, and 62.25% did not benefit from any form.

(See. Diagram 4)

Which form of civic engagement have you used?

- a) Participation in settlement meetings
- b) Participation in City Municipal Assembly sessions
- c) Hearing of reports
- d) Civil budget
- e) Petition
- f) Civic Advisory Board
- g) Municipal Gender Equality Council
- h) None
- i) Other

0
34.45%
62.25%
2%
1.30%
0
0
0
0

Increasing of citizen engagement was also discussed on the focus group discussion. It was revealed, that they are inert and it is important to activate them:

"Citizens' participation will be very good, especially if the involvement of young people in the management process is enhanced and people with disabilities who have the ability become active members of society" (a teacher).

"Many projects are being implemented in Vani, but the population is not informed. The Ministries of Economy and Agriculture do not have local representatives in the region, except for the information service. The government involvement in terms of the tourism and economy is essential, for example, arrangement of a wine road as well as the cellars and family hotels" (the pensioner).

"Citizens are more passive in this regard, a large part of the population does not even know that they can attend City Council sessions, they do not know that they can participate in decision-making, even in the form of submitting proposals, petitions, initiating meetings. They need more awareness in this regard" (a person with disabilities).

"I think, that the responsibility and self-awareness in terms of the citizens' involvement should be increased. We all need to work hard to raise awareness to provide information on any issue that needs to be discussed, or to further explain how priority is their role in the discussion and how important their opinion will be in the implementation of this project" (Director of the Arts, Education and Tourism Development Center).

In case of desire, whether they were able to submit service-related comments to the relevant agency, it was found that the majority, which amounts 65.60% of the participants, had no attempt, only 8.60% answered that they had an attempt and "No" was answered by 25, 80%. The main forms for submitting remarks were as follows: personal meeting with the representatives of the relevant agency (11.92%), posting a position on the Facebook page of the municipality (0.66%) and a letter (1.32%).

To the question, what is their main *need for constructive dialogue with the self-government and more involvement*, the answers were distributed as follows:

Respondents state their position on the role of civil society organizations in terms of promoting the well-being of citizens. 58.30% of them can name one, more than one - 39.10% and more than three - 2.60%. According to the respondents, periodic meetings of local government representatives with citizens are necessary for consultation (73.50%), as well as involvement of citizens in the process of developing municipal programs and budget review (11.90%), existence of a responsible public servant permanent staff for more specific sectoral profile / specific issues (3,97%), taking into account citizens' initiatives by strengthening civic budgeting practices (6%), increasing the effectiveness of the format of gender equality, civic advisors and other councils as well (3.97%).

Pursuant to the local experts, in order to ensure the citizens' involvement, activity of the community is essential, which will be facilitated by the activity of civil society organizations:

erly directed and delivered to each family. The information will be best delivered by the magazines and newspapers, booklets, banners, social networks, website and people will respond. Meetings are also very important. If local government officials plan to meet with the public at 3 o'clock, not everyone may be able to attend the meeting at this time, but in the evening, in their free time, they can read the print version and get acquainted with information, so having a print media is very important" (a public servant).

To the question*, how effective is the cooperation of the population with the local government for promoting the welfare of the citizens,* it was found out to be effective for the majority (77.50%), 11.90% consider it ineffective, and very effective for 10.60%.

We got an interesting picture in the quantitative research on *where do they see the role of local civil society organizations in the process of Public Administration Reform implementation*. 27.80% of the participants see this in informing and education. According to the majority, it is also important to bring the needs of the population to the government (48.7%); Advocating for problem solving at the local level by them (29.80%), control / monitor the reform process (15.90%), promote dialogue / local involvement between the population and local government (22.50%), and protect the rights of citizens (36, 40%), implementation of measures to support the socio-economic development of citizens (7.30%), lobbying for the adoption of local legal acts, alterations and amendments (3.30%) and only 6.62% have no answer to this question.

The views of the respondents were interesting, in terms of *which direction do they consider necessary to apply more human and financial resources of the local government.* The answers were classified as follows: Social assistance (38.40%), healthcare (70.90%), infrastructure (31.10%), promotion of economic development and creation of appropriate on spots (13.20%), drinking water (20.50%), sanitation (18.50%), adapted environment for people with disabilities (19.90%), repairing of damaged houses / yards (4.60%), management of stray animals (15.90%), support services for the elderly people lack of care (16.60%), parks and greening issued (11.90%), food safety (11.30%), public transportation (10.60%), cleaning / waste Management (8.60%), sports events (7.90%), drainage networks (6.60%), culture-education (4.60%), creation of support services tailored to the needs of women victims of violence (2.60%). In order for the municipality to meet the needs of the population, it is necessary that the existing local resources are in compliance with the authorization of the local government:

"In order to take into account the interests of the citizens, it is essential to give the local government the right to make decisions, for example, who should be granted the status of socially vulnerable and who should not. Even the mayor or the mayor's representative, know much better how this or that family lives than the central government according to the written scores calculated by the electronic system. I think this is the answer to the question" (the Public Official).

"The competence of the local self-government should be the granting of the social status, due to the fact, that the representatives of the municipality know better the capabilities of their population, and in this case the opinion of the representative of the municipality must be taken into account" (Director of the Arts, Education and Tourism Development Center).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of the study clarified, that the importance of Public Administration Reform in Vani Municipality is recognized and the local government has taken important steps for the success of this reform. Most of the population of the municipality has more or less information about Public Administration Reform. One of the most important aspects of the reform, the electronic form of service, is considered to be an important achievement in local governance. It greatly simplified and regulated the issue of governance, it made transparent all important information on local political processes and agendas. The activities carried out are visible and there is an opportunity to establish interaction between the citizens and the government.

However, although citizens recognize the effectiveness of e-services, there are still serious difficulties, because, in practice, this service is used by a very small number of citizens. This refers to business communication with the municipality, as well as obtaining information on local processes (website, Facebook page). The insufficient Internetization of the municipality, lack of awareness about the benefits of e-services, insufficient skills to receive services and lack of adequate technical resources (internet, smartphone), or less access were named as the reasons. The topic of special discussion was decentralization, separation of authorization of local and central government in different areas. A very painful issue for citizens was outlined, the minimal role of self-government in the evaluation system of socially vulnerable status seekers, which, in their opinion, reduces the degree of social justice.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO LOCAL AUTHORITIES

For the success of the public reform, it is necessary to disseminate the relevant information in the municipality as well as to popularize electronic services:

➢ It is important for the municipality to develop a communication strategy, in order to fully inform the population about the Public Administration Reform. In this regard, it is important to activate the institution of the mayor's representative, as well as to use the resources of local non-governmental organizations, active community groups.

➢ Print media should be added to the main sources of information dissemination by the municipality, which plays an important role in informing the population of the municipality. For the part of the population that lacks the access to electronic platforms, it is desirable to provide information through printed materials.

➢ Use of alternative information resources (information leaflets, banners, television, meetings with the population) in disseminating information on electronic services and its use.

➢ It is desirable to increase the awareness of the municipality's website, Facebook pages and introduce an interactive dialogue format.

For improvement of service efficiency

➢ The municipality does not conduct a population needs survey, unless required by law, to identify problems under rural support programs. It is desirable to take into account the needs of particularly vulnerable groups while choosing local priorities in the municipality and planning social programs. To develop programs in a long run outlook.

➢ It is desirable to facilitate the return of young people to the municipality, to develop a local strategy for deterrence measures in terms of the internal migration. For this reason, the local business resources shall be maximally used and encouraged.

The issue of local participation

➢ To ensure more involvement of citizens for self-government activities efficiency, in this regard it is important to encourage their initiatives, to promote continuous dialogue.

Recommendations to the central government

➢ It is important to accelerate the policy of decentralization and to separate the powers of central and local government in a number of directions, which will facilitate to improve the services and well-being of citizens at the local level.

Participation in the social partnership system of non-governmental organizations

➢ It is desirable to establish local civic groups to work with local authorities to advocate for the needs of different groups of citizens (including persons with disabilities and their families, careless children and the elderly people, single fathers).

➢ It is important that civil society organizations that operate at the local level, or have chosen Vani Municipality as their operation area, to facilitate local citizens to use the existing services smoothly, to obtain more information about it and, most importantly, to develop appropriate skills to use the services.

IMERETI REGION

THE REPORT OF NEEDS

ASSESSMENT OF POPULATION

IN THE PROCESS OF PAR IMPLEMENTATION

IN TERJOLA MUNICIPALITY

INTRODUCTION

Public Administration Reform (PAR) has been underway in Georgia since 2015. Therefore, it is essential to identify the reform`s actual results at the local level, impacting ordinary citizens' daily lives and socio-economic prosperity, the quality and volume of services provided to them, their participation in local processes and identifying local socio- economic priorities are best seen.

The accessibility and quality of e-services, successful practices, and challenges are essential in the reform implementation process. Because, for a variety of reasons, we are far from using all the benefits of e-services properly and making it an effective tool for communicating with local authorities, receiving tailor-made services. But for the e-service system, including at the local level, it would have been much more challenging to manage the Covid-19 pandemic and have proper communication between the citizens and the government, the various branches of government, official and unofficial structures.

Cultural-Humanitarian Fund "Sukhumi" with Fund of Women Entrepreneurs and the Imereti Scientists` Union "Spectri" is implementing the project "A Common forum for CSOs from Guria, Imereti and Racha-Lechkhumi for PAR Roadmap monitoring" supported by the European Union.

In Terjola Municipality, in May-June 2021, Children - Future of Georgia and Women for the Future of Georgia conducted a study of citizens' needs to evaluate local government services' effectiveness, transparency, and inclusiveness.

This document is a report of a survey conducted in Terjola Municipality, which assessed the citizens` needs in the reform implementation process and developed relevant recommendations to improve the services provided by local authorities. Findings identified on the citizens` priority needs through the research, the developed recommendations will be the basis for improved governance and services in the municipality.

1. STUDY AIM AND METHODOLOGY

The study aims to assess the effectiveness, transparency and quality of local government services in Terjola Municipality in the context of Public Administration Reform and to develop appropriate recommendations to advocate for local service improvements.

Study objectives are to identify the priority needs of citizens and obtain evidence-based information. **Study methodology** - Quantitative and qualitative research methods were used for the study. A research tool was prepared, a structured questionnaire, mainly with closed-ended questions, was used for quantitative research. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to obtain information through the qualitative research method.

Study methods: 150 respondents have been interviewed using quantitative methods, and qualitative research has been conducted with 31 respondents to obtain data (4 focus group discussions have been held, four in-depth interviews have been conducted with local experts). Audio recordings and transcripts of the meetings have been made. The interviewers have prepared transcripts and relevant reports. A research report has been prepared based on the interpretation and analysis of the obtained data.

Respondents for the survey have been selected using the quota method, considering socio-demographic indicators and specific gender groups.

2. TARGET GROUP SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC STRUCTURE

Within the frames of the study of the needs, 150 people were involved in the survey, including 56% women and 43% men. In addition, within the qualitative research, 4 in-depth interviews with local experts and 4 focus group discussions with local social groups have been conducted and included 31 respondents (26 women and five men). A total of 184 respondents (111 women and 70 men) participated in the study. The respondents` age ranged from 18 to 77, including married - 61.3%, single - 27.3%, widowed - 9.3%, divorced - 2%. Respondents with full secondary education make up 27.3%, full higher education (bachelor, master) - 48.7%, secondary special/college - 20% and incomplete secondary education - 4%.

The study respondents included socially vulnerable, internally displaced persons, single and parents with many children, persons with disabilities. The respondents included people with a special status (54%) as well (socially vulnerable - 14.7%, IDPs - 14.7%, parents with many children - 10.6%, people with disabilities - 10%). In terms of employment, 36.9% of respondents are unemployed. Those employed include public servants/state employees - 14.1%, 12.1% are pensioners, 16.7% are self-employed (entrepreneur, farmer), 14.5% are employed in a budget organization, and 4.7% are students.

Average monthly income of the family named by the respondents (including any cash income) is as follows: <100GEL - 13.3%; 101-500GEL - 27.3%, 501-900GEL - 38%, above 901GEL - 16%. 5.4% refuse to answer.

According to age, relatively young respondents are more informed. Unawareness indicator increases in the older age category (18-34 years - 6%; 35-64 years - 10%; above 65 - 15%).

3. STUDY RESULTS TRANSPARENCY

Level of Public Administration Reform awareness. The reform process assessment - Quantitative research more significant proportion of respondents consider themselves aware of Public Administration Reform ("yes" - 29.3%, "partially" - 48%). 22.7% of the respondents answered "no". Among them, the ratio of men and women is almost the same - "Yes" was answered by 32% women and 33% men, whereas "No" by 9% women and 10% men. 32.8% receive information on the reform from representatives of governmental structures and 31.2% from non-governmental organizations. In addition, some citizens state that they receive information from television (18.4%) and Facebook/ the municipality website (12%). According to age, there is also a difference: among those who use Facebook more often, young people predominate: from 18 to 34 - 56%; from 35 to 64 - 22%; 65 years and over - 22%.

Qualitative research materials have shown that citizens are much better informed about Public Administration Reform and are sure that it will bring them some benefits compared to the previous period.

Part of the respondents considers it as an achievement of the NGO sector, namely, Fund "Sukhumi" and its partner organizations:

> **"Believe me, because of your activity and inclusiveness of Fund" Sukhumi" a big part of the population has learned more about this reform. At first, people were critical of these meetings and studies, but gradually, the attitude has changed. Now the reform has become credible, and many people have got involved in it" (focus group discussion, an organization manager).**

According to 50% of quantitative research respondents, PAR is a way to get better services. Only 12.7% believe that it will not affect service improvement and 22.7% find it difficult to express a position. Interestingly, data segregation has revealed that 39% of surveyed IDPs and 57% of the socially vulnerable believe that Public Administration Reform will improve the quality of citizen services.Other respondents also emphasized the importance of local participation in the reform success. There was a positive attitude towards the activities of the Public Administration Reform Monitoring Working Group, which promoted the transparency of self-government activities and managed to initiate specific issues in the local budget:

> **"The working group set up in the municipality, whose members are representatives of self-government and civil society organizations, has contributed to the development of e-services in the municipality and the participatory budget planning process"** *(in-depth interview with an expert, City Council specialist).*

However, there was a desire for citizens to be more informed and have the opportunity to track the ongoing processes, which will affect their lives:

> **"I am interested in these issues, but I still do not have enough information. It does not reach us. I also use social networks actively, but I do not meet information about the PAR progress there" (focus group discussion, a school teacher).**

> **"If we have more information about the current state of public administration, we can more thoroughly evaluate the reform" (focus group discussion, mother of many children).**

It was emphasized that public officials should be more aware of the reform objectives, local challenges and have more communication with citizens to address them:

> **"It turned out to be a novelty for them, and they were not well aware of it. So, I think we still have a problem with understanding"** *(focus group discussion, a CSO young representative).* **"In my opinion, there should be a coordinators' service, which will disseminate information among the population" (focus group discussion, a mother of many children).**

The creation of a new executive branch in the municipality, the Children's Rights Protection Department, was admitted to be the PAR achievement:

> **"It is also part of the reform, but the public is less informed about this particular service and about Public Administration Reform itself. So we started disseminating information on our service and social workers" (focus group discussion, a City Hall social worker).**

Electronic services. Quality, volume. The practice of use. The study has revealed that only a certain number of citizens use e-services. According to some qualitative survey participants, many have seen its positive results, and the number of referrals has increased. However, a more prominent part believes that there is still no significant progress in this regard compared to the previous period:

> **"It worked out very well. A year ago, no one in the village had any idea that such a thing would happen, but now they can use the e-service on the spot in the administrative unit. Most importantly, the referral of the population has also increased" (focus group discussion, a parent of a child with disabilities, public servant).**

> **"It has made it easier for the population to receive services in this regard. When it comes to land registration, booking a visit to the Public Service Hall, or online services, many have benefited in this direction and, consequently, saved both money and time. For many, it was also a novelty that there was an e-service in the rural administrative unit that s/he could use. Of course, it is a step forward" (focus group discussion, a public servant).**

The same information is provided by the quantitative survey materials, which show that 21.5% of the respondents used electronic services regarding land registration.

According to respondents with different positions, although the pandemic period also showed the benefits and flexibility of e-services, many citizens still do not have access to them for many subjective and objective reasons. However, the main reason is the lack of Internet in the communities far from the centre, low speed, and the lack of proper technical equipment.

22% of respondents say they are informed, whereas 46.7% - more or less informed. 26% say they are not informed. 5.3% report "I do not care". In this case, the source of information for the respondents is "Website of the relevant municipality" - 34%; "Representatives of non-governmental organizations" - 26%; "Meeting with government officials" - 19.3%; "Television" - 10%. 10.5% answer "Other", "Friends", "Personal Contacts", etc. Citizens point out that those who use the Internet less have less information about e-services and do not know how to use them. Therefore, more efforts should be made in this regard:

"It would be good to create groups that would take care of citizens' awareness" *(focus group discussion, a mother of many children).* **"Village representatives and their assistants should provide information to the population"** *(focus group discussion, a socially vulnerable).* **Although e-services greatly facilitate communication with self-government, self-government representatives also admit challenges in this regard. Even if a person has difficulty to move, or does not have the proper skills, s/he can be helped to use this service.**

"Many people should know it. The mayor's representatives in the villages should be interested in making people aware of e-services. Unfortunately, we do not popularize it" (focus group discussion, Mayor's representative assistant)**.**

"There are elderly people in the village who do not have access to the Internet or the telephone. More work and activity is needed from the village representatives in this regard. They should be well aware of their rights and responsibilities" (focus group discussion, a school teacher)**.**

Some respondents were quite critical in assessing the activities of City Hall representatives:

"There is no proper connection between City Hall representatives and the population. Every village should have certain, professional staff" *(focus group discussion, an accountant).*

"There is no connection between the village representatives and the population in the villages. Often, the self- governing units have incompetent staff, and they find it difficult to explain the issues to others" (focus group discussion, an agricultural specialist).

We will use quantitative research materials, according to which 53% of the respondents are satisfied with the City Hall representative activities. 19% are dissatisfied; 11% - very satisfied and 17% - very dissatisfied.

In response to this challenge, the qualitative research participants consider it reasonable to create special mobile groups, mobilize and involve young people. They point out that a large proportion of citizens use a local newspaper that can be used to promote e-services:

"City Hall and local representatives should pay more attention to expand the newspaper distribution area in the villages and reach the population. Older people love the newspaper, and they are most familiar with the press, are accustomed to reading it and want to find out the news" (focus group discussion, a public school teacher).

It is noteworthy that a significant proportion of quantitative survey participants also stated that they had less access to e-services: "I do not have access" - 31.3%. 16.7% of respondents name lack of proper skills. Issues related to the use of e-services are distributed as follows: "Online advertisement for a vacancy" - 16%; "Finding a municipal employee contact information" - 14%; 13.3% of respondents are informed about the budget electronically.

Due to the issue of urgency, the study participants consider it necessary to incur additional costs in this regard:

"City Hall should strengthen the source of information in the villages. Appropriate resources, such as staff, transport, fuel, must be allocated for it. The awareness issue should also be important and necessary" (focus group discussion, head of the Day Care Center for Children with Disabilities).

"If we explain correctly that it is a need and not a comfort, and we take it correctly from the bottom to the top, that resources need to be added, and if the upper echelons are ready for it, then the staff will be found. The more money is invested, the more the reform will develop" (a parent of a child with disabilities, an economist).

The public officials expressed their position that local governments could not be perfect without public activism and that it should have a controlling function since this achievement needs maintenance and protection and development.

The citizens stressed the need for proper public understanding. Besides, due to the lack of Internet access in the villages, not everyone has obtained information electronically. In addition, older people do not have the skills to use the Internet, so other ways of providing information to them should be sought:

The quantitative survey respondents had the same opinion on **what should be emphasized to improve the services provided to the population during the reform process**.

Table #1

a) Timely and complete provision of the society with the information on governmental e-services (via TV, information meetings, information flyers, Facebook, website)	32%
b) Raising the public servants` competence	15%
c) Suggesting the service tailored to the needs and priorities of the vulnerable groups (e.g. mothers with many children, single mothers, female victims of violence, children, persons with disabilities,	14%
d) Increasing the public servants` salary	1%
e) Extending the service and coverage area (to provide access)	5%
f) Simplifying receiving the service	10%
g) Do not know/cannot answer	22%

As the table shows, 22% of the participants find it difficult to answer the question. Increasing the competence of public servants is also named as one of the critical issues.

Respondents indicate that they often use the following e-services: the official municipality website - 21%; citizen portal - www.my.gov.ge - 15.5%; City Hall Facebook page - 10.1%; City Council Facebook page - 6%; regional administration website - 1.4%.

An increase in website usage was also observed with qualitative research materials. It was pointed out that the website gap - the difficulty of using the mobile application - was gradually corrected, and the interaction and necessary information fields have been greatly simplified.

More than half of the respondents (53%) indicate that they do not use e-services, which calls into the effectiveness of e-services and the necessary measures to respond.

Qualitative research participants point out that in many cases, staff qualifications are raised, which implies the right messages to users, the quality of information, and relevance. They recalled the issue when misinformation damaged the municipality's image (for example, the case of the Gvankiti sports field when a misinterpretation of a beneficial initiative by young people damaging to the mus nicipality).

3.2 LOCAL SERVICE EFFICIENCY

The citizens` needs consideration. The survey conducted in Terjola Municipality assessed the effectiveness of local services in terms of how well the programs meet the needs of different groups of citizens (especially the most vulnerable groups), how relevant studies are conducted, how effective programs are and to what extent are e-service resources used to provide customized services to citizens.

According to the respondents, the most common practice is when needs are identified during the meetings of the village representatives and MPs. The issue of village meetings was also highlighted. Many respondents believe that the most visible in this regard are rural support programs - when the government meets with the population and identifies their needs:

> **"Rural support programs work well in our municipality. The funds are scarce, but I think it is still spent purposefully and in agreement with the population. And if the state increases funding for these programs, we welcome it and, of course, more will be done" (focus group discussion, a City Hall social worker).**

However, according to some respondents, rural program projects cannot withstand criticism.

> **"If you take the example of my village, the whole rural program funds were spent on a 30-meter concrete road where only one resident lives" (focus group discussion, a private sector representative).**

Respondents emphasize that the existing social programs in the municipality cover many social groups of the population and, in this regard, the municipality spends a significant financial resource. However, the needs assessment in this area is not systematic:

> **"It is necessary and, I think, the City Hall services should do it every year" (in-depth interview, a self-government expert).**

The respondents pointed out that neither the population nor the organized civil society sector is active in control or monitoring. As a result, there are only fragmentary assessments. However, as it turned out, a uniform assessment of the municipal community is impossible, and there are good examples of self-organization.

> **"I also know cases when rural administrative units survey people from needy families or families in their villages. Accordingly, at their request, an application or information is provided to the relevant services"** *(focus group discussion, a parent of a child with disabilities)*.

Quantitative research has identified issues that citizens have addressed in recent years. The priority issues named by the respondents are as follows: health care - medication assistance/operation funding - 33%; issue of land registration - 21.5%; social assistance/financial assistance - 12.5%; application - 11%. Among the problematic issues are water supply (including quality water) and maintenance of drainage canals - 10.4%.

According to the quantitative study respondents, there are many programs focused on needs in the municipality. For example, roads, lighting and infrastructure have been improved, water supply issue has been solved in several communities, but it remains the number one basic need of some villages:

> **"The problem is relevant in most villages, for example, in Akhali Terjola they suffer terribly from lack of water" (focus group discussion, a housewife).**

Village Gvankiti water supply issue is an excellent example of identifying the efficiency of services.

> **"Due to the lack of relevant specialists, the almost complete system is ruined, and there is a danger that the water supply system will soon go out of order" (focus group discussion, a psychologist).**

That is why the population plans to collect signatures and start advocating for the issue.

Other respondents also criticized small-scale needs analysis:

> **"As for the study of priorities and needs, nobody analyses whether this or that particular program was successful last year (so much money was spent)" (focus group discussion, a Mayor's representative assistant).**

The quantitative questionnaire also includes questions addressed to the self-government and their answers. For example, "All my problems /problem that I am addressing has been partially solved" - 45%, "Have been solved" - 18%, "None of the problems have been solved, and I have not been given a written explanation" -7%; "They did not even try" - 3%.

Respondents' views on the citizens` needs:

"The services provided by the self-government are tailored to the citizens` needs as much as possible. A needs survey is conducted, and I participate in it. Still, it is conducted selectively, and the survey analysis and information is less provided to remote villages". "Our municipality does not have a practice of needs assessment for citizens with special needs" (in-depth interview with a local expert).

As the research has shown, the experience gained during the Covid-19 pandemic helped to identify needs and study the programs` effects:

"To study the social program effectiveness, during the pandemic, via telephone communication with the beneficiaries, we tried to find out their opinion about the program effectiveness (what they thought and also what they needed to take into account when drafting a new budget)" (in-depth interview, a City Council specialist).

Some respondents believe that there are positive dynamics in the municipality in terms of service efficiency analysis. For example, there is an audit service in the City Hall that systematically checks the work of individual services.

The local NGO monitors the municipal services. For the assessment, the citizens can express their opinions in the social network comments.

According to the quantitative study respondents` opinion, self-government mainly considers the issue of persons with disabilities. 16% of respondents consider the local policy to be sensitive towards women. ***Diagram#1***

Needs of which groups are considered?

- 41% a) Municipality population
- b) Women
- c) Women with many children
- d) Women victims of domestic violence
- e) Children/Youth
- f) Persons with disabilities

16%, 0%, 18%, 7%, 6%, 8%, 4%
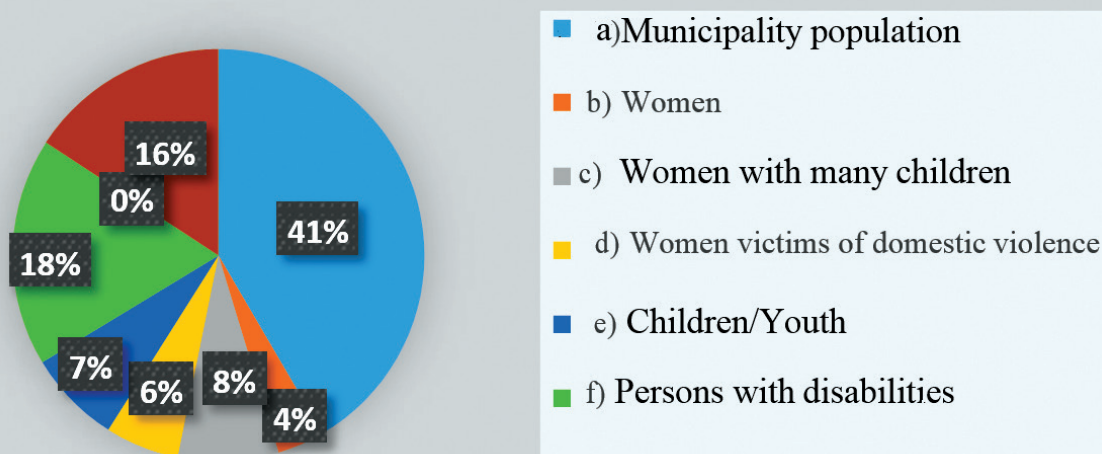
Some respondents believe that assessing the service effectiveness or examining the needs of different groups, "formal meeting", is not efficient. It should be included in a specific system:

> **"Face-to-face meetings are held with citizens, representatives of the society, but they have not targeted meeting. I believe that these meetings should not take place so chaotically. Instead, a focus group should be chosen to arrange a meeting with teachers, doctors, young people, representatives of people with disabilities, and people interested in agriculture. One meeting should join people of common interest. In my opinion, such meetings will also have results" (in-depth interview with an expert, an economist).**

The respondents expressed concern that almost every candidate includes social assistance issues in a pre-election program since it is a popular topic. The result is that citizens have appropriate expectations, systematically insist on social assistance, and are less focused on long-term development.

Qualitative survey respondents named areas to which local resources should be addressed. Here, again the issue of the pandemic is emphasized:

> **"It is important to have a rural development program, to support small entrepreneurs. The pandemic has shown that the village needs to be strengthened" (focus group discussion, a housewife).**

Respondents identified the groups whose needs should be taken into account the most:

> **"I would emphasize lonely elderly people, because various programs include socially, and lonely elderly people are not on the list of the socially vulnerable and need attention" (focus group discussion, a school teacher).**

Interviewees pointed out the need for raising society`s awareness of inclusiveness. Parents of children with disabilities have expressed their concern because they often feel alienated from society. However, they also see the benefits of involving special teachers:

> **"We are still in a society where parents are worried that a child with Down syndrome is in their child's class. But I can admit that the special teachers who work with children with disabilities have changed their consciousness. The children`s attitude towards the children with disabilities has become very positive. The new generation sees it in a completely different way, unlike the parents" (focus group discussion, parents of children with disabilities).**

Despite the serious steps taken, society, sometimes even the parent himself, is unsure how to communicate with such a child.

> **"I would separate the education of the parents of children with disabilities. For instance, I mean a certain parent who has a child with Down Syndrome and hides the child from people" (focus group discussion, a parent of a child with disabilities).**

Respondents highly appreciate the ongoing activities supporting youth in the municipality but believe that the inclusiveness of 800 children in the programs is not enough. It means that many people could not be satisfied. Moreover, many activities have been hampered by the pandemic:

> **"In short, a healthy environment and intellectual development are essential, since the adolescent development is the guarantee of the future of our municipality and the country as a whole" (focus group discussion, a teacher).**

Citizens' visions on improving service efficiency. Decentralization. According to experts, the municipality has the powers granted by law, most of which cannot be exercised due to lack of adequate financial resources:

> **"Municipalities should be granted ownership of real estate within their administrative boundaries, except for strategic properties that will contribute to their financial independence and the strengthening" (in-depth interview, an expert, council member).**

According to the citizens, there has been a long talk that the local government should have the power to be more involved in social work. They believe that the local government knows its population better and should have the prerogative to grant socially vulnerable status. Regarding the issue, the respondents unanimously agree that the

scoring system should be changed. It is evident that there are gaps in this direction, the issue needs to be revised and improved, and local self-government must be taken into account in this regard.

> **"In my village, I know several people who receive the assistance, and I am ashamed of it" (focus group discussion, a man employed in a private business).**

Regarding ensuring the efficiency of services, the issue of corruption prevention mechanisms was discussed:

> **"Corruption prevention mechanisms should be developed in all services. Relevant control and monitoring services should be trained. The legal side of this service should be regulated in such a way that as soon as the grounds for the risk of corruption arise, it automatically triggers the implementation of the relevant prevention system (measures)" (in- depth interview, an expert, City Council member).**

Some experts consider the existing system sufficient. For example, the Audit Service at the City Hall:

"The Central Audit conducts an annual study of the City Hall activities and draws conclusions that reflect both violations and positive facts. As for public servants, their opportunities for professional development are equal" (in-depth interview, an expert, City Council PR).

3.3. INCLUSIVENESS/PARTICIPATION

According to qualitative survey respondents, citizen participation in self-governance is very weak. There is relatively more activity in the settlements. However, the situation is different in communities:

"There is low activity on the part of the population. It is challenging to convene a general meeting of the settlement due to the lack of a sufficient number of the population" (in-depth interview, an expert, City Council member).

It was revealed that the gender picture of those present at the meeting was homogeneous, and women were less involved in discussing issues vital to the village. However, positive shifts are observed in attracting young people:

"Mostly men go to these meetings. Women show less initiative, and it would be good if they also get involved. As for the inclusiveness of young people, I saw information on a Mayor`s new initiative on the Facebook page, which provides for meetings with young people. Several meetings have already taken place" (focus group discussion, a City Hall social worker).

A breakdown of quantitative research data also shows that men are much more active: women - 33%, men - 43%. As for the age category, it was found that meetings are more often attended by citizens aged 65 and over - 46% (others: from 14 to 34 - 34%; from 35 to 64 - 33%). Among those who said they did not attend the meetings, citizens of special status were distributed as follows: IDPs -10%; socially vulnerable - 13%; parents of many children - 13%.

In terms of inclusiveness, the respondents highly appreciate the civil budgeting program. As a result of productive cooperation between the local CSOs and groups of active citizens in the municipality, various branches of self- government were included in the 2021 budget, and 55 000 GEL was allocated. Quantitative survey respondents also paid proper attention to this issue. To the question:

"What is your main need to ensure a constructive dialogue with the self-government and more inclusiveness?" - 21% of respondents choose the answer: "Considering citizens' initiatives by strengthening the practice of the civil budgeting". The most basic need for citizens is - "Periodic meetings of local government officials with citizens for consultation" - 56.4%.

As it turned out, the practice of using the petition is very weak in Terjola municipality. Study participants found it challenging to see practical tools for promoting civic participation in various local mechanisms (Gender Equality Council, Mayor's Advisory Council, Council of People with Disabilities). Increasing the Gender Equality Council, Civil Advisory Council and other councils formal effectiveness to ensure constructive dialogue with the self- government and greater inclusiveness was relevant for only 0.7% of citizens. Particular concern was expressed regarding the Council of Persons with Disabilities, set up but never convened.

The Mayor's Civil Advisory Council was named a weak link:

"As for the Civil Advisory Council, it has not been formed yet. However, in the past years, it could not work for the purpose for which it was created. As a result, the council activities were limited to reading the services reports" (in-depth interview, an expert, City Council member).

21% of the participants in the quantitative survey believe that the municipality is well aware, and 50% believe that they are partially aware of the importance of citizens` inclusiveness. However, 50% say they will not use any form of participation. Only 36% of respondents participated in settlement meetings.

In which issues is citizens` participation encouraged/ensure

- a) Identifying local priorities
- b) I do not know
- c) Discussing citizens` initiatives (e.g. civil budget)
- d) Identifying citizens` needs
- e) Developing municipal programs
- f) Discussing local budget
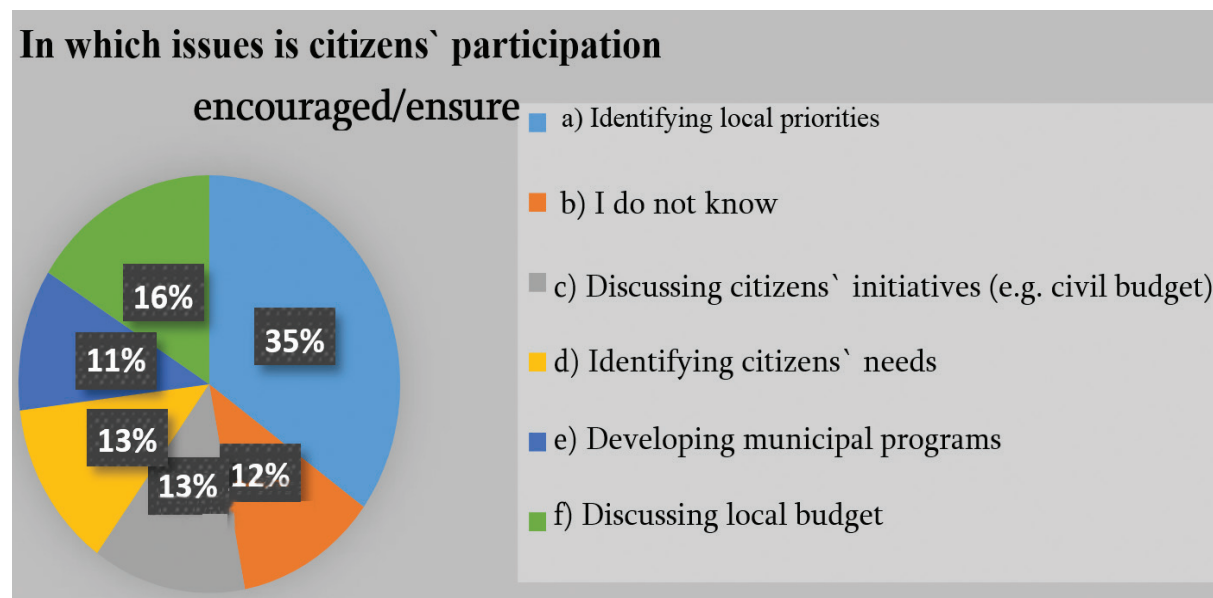
The role of civil society organizations. Respondents expressed a heterogeneous attitude towards the role of the non-governmental sector in the participation of citizens in self-governance. Some respondents believe that they do not make an impact on the municipality life. However, others believe that a lot of work is being done through their efforts and highlight areas where they find their intervention beneficial.

13% of respondents of the quantitative study believe that CSOs' cooperation with local authorities is very effective in promoting the citizens` welfare. For 38% it is "Effective", whereas for 42%"Not so effective". 7% consider it "Ineffective". Respondents see the role of the non-governmental sector in the implementation of public reform as follows:

CSO role in implementing Public Administration Reform

a) Informing/Educating

b) Reform implementation control/monitoring

c) Advocacy of the local problem solution

d) Lobbying adoption and amendment of the local legal acts

5% 13% 32% 11% 12% 4% 11% 12%
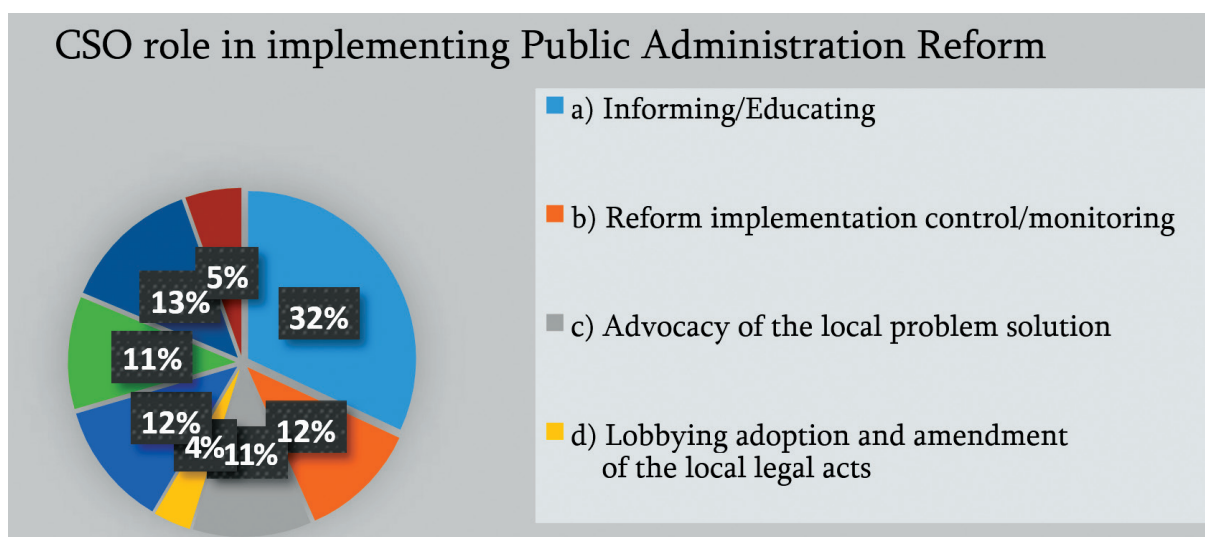
"Local non-governmental organizations have done a lot to inform the citizens. Personally, my participation in the discussions held within the framework of Fund "Sukhumi" projects taught me a lot and raised my awareness" (focus group discussion, a socially vulnerable person).

A significant proportion of respondents believe that CSOs act as a mediator between the government and various segments of society:

"It would be better for such organizations to strengthen and grow in number. Both sides, CSOs and government, should unite towards one common and good goal" (focus group discussion, a City Hall social worker).

The study addressed the role of the private sector in civic inclusiveness in the municipality. The respondents clearly stated that the cooperation between the self-government and the private sector would be helpful not only for the country but increase their dividends as well:

"The private sector in our municipality is not well developed (for example, agriculture, tourism, small business).

Therefore, there is no proper relationship between the public and private sectors either.

"The public sector is to some extent involved and helping the private sector to meet the challenges. However, there is no plan for the development of the municipality's economy. Moreover, there are no mechanisms for cooperation between these two parties" (in-depth interview with an expert, CSO).

It was revealed that the self-government periodically uses the private sector. An example of this is the traditional "Wine Festival" in Terjola, which involves representatives of the private sector. They donate some money and even award prizes in different nominations.

"I know cases when the private sector participated in educational projects. They funded the winner children. It is an example of using the private sector potential" (focus group discussion, a teacher).

The respondents pointed out that the existence of the private sector is essential for the municipality because mainly, a large part of the population is employed here, and it can provide various assistance to the municipality. Therefore, the government should motivate them to cooperate, approve and encourage innovative ideas. For example, several private entrepreneurs and businessmen should be selected to become examples of productive collaboration and be encouraged.

4. CONCLUSION

The study materials showed that citizens are much better informed about Public Administration Reform and have more trust than before. In addition, they have a relatively better understanding of the reform benefits, especially in terms of e-services.

The issue of self-government transparency and accountability has been improved, in which the municipality reorganized website plays a unique role. Moreover, thanks to its mobile version, the website has become more accessible.

Mainly, the reform is perceived as a precondition for better governance. In this regard, a positive assessment has been given to adding a childrens` rights department. Furthermore, the importance of the competence and qualification of public servants, especially the institution of the mayor's representative, was also highli-

ghted, which should become serious support in implementing Public Administration Reform (PAR).

The study materials made it clear that citizens use e-services to obtain information and interact and receive various services (land registration, submission of initiatives, application for the program). Furthermore, it was admitted that the Covid-19 pandemic has made the importance of e-services visible. However, despite the positive shifts in this regard, the quality of e-services in communities where the Internet is unavailable or at low speed is still a severe challenge. The challenge was also identified that, in some cases, even public officials do not fully understand the reform importance and consequently cannot help citizens with the necessary information.

Although the municipality focuses on programs tailored to the needs of citizens, services are less based on needs study and service effectiveness analysis is not introduced.

The challenge created by the slow pace of decentralization and inability of the self-government to fulfil its legal obligations has been identified. Therefore, special attention was given to increasing the role and authority of self- government in granting socially vulnerable status.

The research materials show that the level of citizens` participation in self-governance is not enough. The most apparent form of inclusiveness - the effectiveness of settlement meetings and the legitimacy of their decisions are questionable due to the inactive participation of women youth and people with disabilities.

In terms of other mechanisms of citizen participation - the Gender Equality Council awareness is weak. Following the governmental changes, the Mayor's Advisory Council has not been formed yet. The Council of Persons with Disabilities has been created but has not started functioning. The issue of strengthening the effectiveness of these mechanisms is on the agenda.

According to the research, the role of CSOs is essential in the success of Public Administration Reform. Particular importance is attached to local organizations. Several issues initiated by them related to local services have been identified, including civil budgeting, which is reflected in the municipality 2021 budget.

The relationship between the local private sector and the self-government was assessed. The public sector is, to some extent, focused on assisting the private sector in various challenges and periodically uses their resources (for instance, assisting vulnerable groups during a pandemic). But there is no mechanism for cooperation between the two parties, which would contribute to the total inclu-

siveness of the private sector in local processes. There is a need for more incentives for the private sector and motivation to introduce and implement innovative ideas.

Based on the study materials, recommendations have been developed for local government, central structures and civil society organizations:

To local government:

➢ It is desirable that public officials and the general public understand the importance of Public Administration Reform. Provide a clear explanation to citizens of what municipal e-services include and how to register property, receive other electronic services;

➢ Simultaneously with the introduction of services, it is essential to study their availability - the extent to which the public can use electronic services and take extraordinary measures to help the vulnerable groups of citizens in this regard;

➢ It is crucial to organize meetings of the Public Administration Reform implementation working group with local services, to get acquainted with the recommendations necessary for its successful implementation, and advocate for issues that are important to citizens in municipal policies and programs;

➢ It is desirable to accelerate the formation of the Mayor's Advisory Council and ensure its effectiveness;

➢ It is essential to promote greater inclusiveness of women, youth, and other local groups in settlement meetings;

➢ It is necessary to introduce a more caring policy towards inclusive groups of citizens, prepare working plans and projects considering the wide range of their needs;

➢ It is desirable to encourage the participation of local civil society organizations in the process of needs identification, advocacy, program development and monitoring; use their qualifications to implement targeted programs;

➢ It is vital to give proper continuation to the successfully started practice of civil budgeting, to reflect the gender aspects in it as much as possible: participation of women, youth, inclusive groups;

➢ It is vital to consider the importance of the public servants` qualifications in the successful implementation of Public Administration Reform and develop an orderly system of anti-corruption mechanisms.

To central government:

➤ It is essential to implement real decentralization, separation of self-government issues and increase powers in issues in the solution of which the participation of self-government is essential in the interests of citizens. First of all, these are issues of social policy, including the award of social points.

To CSOs:

➤ It is necessary to use the civil society organizations` experience and resources to promote Public Administration Reform, cooperation with the self-government in this regard, information-educational activities, monitoring and evaluation to make the reform results tangible for citizens.

IMERETI REGION

THE REPORT OF NEEDS
ASSESSMENT OF POPULATION
IN THE PROCESS OF PAR IMPLEMENTATION
IN BAGDATI MUNICIPALITY

CULTURAL-HUMANITARIAN FUND "SUKHUMI"
IS RESPONSIBLE FOR CONDUCTING THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT,
IN IMERETI REGION PREPARING AND EDITING THE REPORT

www.fsokhumi.ge

INTRODUCTION

Successful implementation of a Public Administration Reform (PAR), which fulfills a fundamental role on Georgia's path to European integration and represents a main precondition for development of the country and improving the welfare of the population. Participation of citizens within the process of the reform is a prerequisite for the success of this aforesaid reform. It not only ensures the democracy and transparency of the governance, but also increases the trust of the population in terms of the political systems and enhances legitimacy of taken decisions. The pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus, even more clearly outlined the need for the relevant PAR, particularly in terms of the introduction of an electronic governance, which will enable citizens to report their problems and needs remotely, easily and promptly without any additional bureaucratic procedures to local government as well as to solve them.

In order to effectively implement the PAR at the local level, the Cultural-Humanitarian Fund "Sukhumi" in a partnership with the Fund of Women Entrepreneurs and Imereti Scientists Union "Spectri", implements the EU funded project "A common forum of CSOs from Guria, Imereti and Racha-Lechkhumi for PAR roadmap monitoring". Within the frames of the project in the Baghdati Municipality, the study for citizens' needs was conducted by the Civic Spectrum of Equality and "Equality Now" to assess the efficiency, transparency and inclusiveness of services provided by the local government.

The findings of the study and generated recommendations will be the basis for reflecting the priority needs of citizens in the action plan of the municipality.

1. PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY OF THE NEEDS STUDY

The purpose of the citizens' needs study is to research and evaluate the effectiveness, transparency and inclusiveness of citizens' services provided by the local government of Baghdadi and to develop specific recommendations on the basis of evidence based information for improving the local services.

The objectives of the study are to advocate for the problems and challenges defined as a result of the citizens' needs study in relevant agencies at the local and national levels and to integrate the citizens' priority issues in the municipality's action plan.

Methodology of the study: The needs study was carried out in May-June, 2020. In order to achieve the goal, the quantitative and qualitative methods were used. In the first stage, a research tool was elaborated and the indicators of it were agreed with the project partners.

A structured questionnaire was developed for a quantitative research which mainly

consisted of closed-ended questions, although the respondents were given the opportunity to express their opinion on the issue, or to choose several options of an answer.

150 respondents were interviewed with the use of the quantitative method. Within the frames of the qualitative research, focus, group discussion techniques and in-depth, individual interviews were used based on a pre-designed structured questionnaire. 26 respondents were interviewed through the focused discussion method, while 4 experts of the local self-government with in-depth interview techniques. Based on the audio recordings of the group discussions, detailed transcripts of the discussion were prepared, excerpts of which were used for further analysis of the data and to illustrate the results of the research. Respondents were selected from the population of Baghdati Municipality, taking into account different socio-demographic characteristics. The study included 180 people, out of whom 122 were women and 58 men.

2. SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDY

The target group of the citizens' needs study was Georgian citizens living in Baghdad Municipality from the age of 18 and over 65, including: socially vulnerable people, parents with many children and single parents, parents of children with disabilities, teachers, entrepreneurs, community leaders, pensioners, youth, local experts in self-government issues, etc.

The gender rate of the respondents included in the quantitative survey was distributed as follows: 64% out of respondents involved in the research are women and 36% men. As for the age limit, the majority of participants - 37.3%, are from 35 to 64 years old, while 32.7% of interviewed respondents are over 65 years old. As for young people, they represent the 30% of respondents.

According to marital status, the majority of respondents - 46.7% are married, while 30.7% of the participants are not married, 16.7% are widowed and 6% are divorced. The data of the respondents of the study, according to the education, were distributed as follows: 43.3% have received full higher education, 26.7% have a full secondary education, 21.3% have a secondary special education and 8.7 % incomplete secondary. According to social status, the majority of participants (45.3%) of the research do not have a special status. A large share comes to the socially vulnerable, who comprise 25.3% of the research, while 11.3% of those involved in the research are internally displaced persons, 8.7% parents with many children, 6.7% people with disabilities and 2.7% single parents. According to employment status, the majority of respondents are pensioners- 33.8%, followed by the share of unemployed among the participants, which is 23%, while 20.9% are self-employed, 10.8% - civil servant, 6.8 % - employed

in a budget organization and only 4.7% are students. The average monthly income of employees for the majority of respondents, which amounts 42.7% of respondents, ranges from 100-500 GEL, only for 24% the income is more than 901 GEL, for 19.3% of respondents up to 501-900 GEL and for 1.3% less than 100 GEL

and 12.7% even refused to answer at all.

3. BASIC FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

3.1 TRANSPARENCY

3.1.1 Awareness of the population on PAR

Public awareness on PAR in Baghdati Municipality has increased compared to the previous study. 42.7% of the respondents have full information about the reform, and 42% are partially aware on it.

As for those who have no information at all about public administration reform, it does not exceed 15.3%.

(See. Diagram #1)

Do you have information on public administration/service reform?

Category	Percentage
No - 23	15,30%
Partially - 63	42%
Yes - 64	42,70%
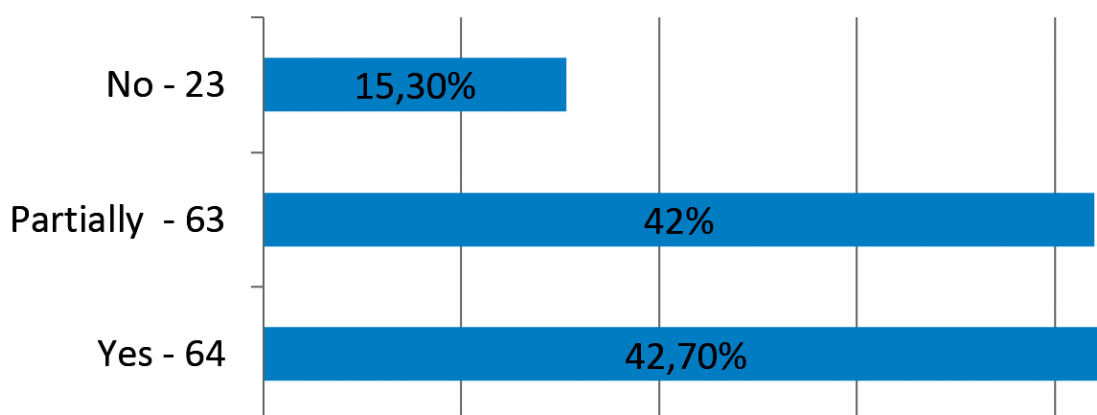
The majority of those, who are familiar with the PAR, received this information from NGO representatives - 39.1%, which is drastically different from the previous year (2%). For 29.3% of the respondents, television is citied as the best way to get information.

Compared to previous years, the awareness of has been increased through the website and Facebook page of the state structures and municipalities.

If last year this figure was defined as 3% (meetings with representatives of government

institutions) and 2% (municipal website and social network), this year 14.3% have received information on meetings with representatives of government agencies, and 13.5% gained information from Facebook and website. The remaining 4% received information from other sources.

Both quantitative and qualitative research shows that self-government has become significantly more active in disseminating information about the reform, in which the crucial role has been played by the non-government sector.

> **"The PR Service of the municipality has been systematically informing the population about this or that issue, however, after establishment of a working group in the municipality to facilitate the implementation of the PAR roadmap, with the effort of this group and local non-governmental organizations, the public informing issue has been further refined" (the chairman of the Budget Commission of the City Council).**

As a result of the survey, we were able to find out whether citizens believe that PAR will improve the quality of their services. According to the majority of participants - 67.3%, it will improve. And a very small part of the respondents - 4% think, that it cannot improve, 10.7% think, that it will improve less. For 18% it was difficult to answer this question.

According to local experts' deduction within the qualitative research, the halt in terms of the use of the reform is conditioned due to the passivity of the citizens themselves. Emphasis was also made on activating informing issue:

> **"Hindering, it is said a little differently, non-informing represents more cause for indifferent attitude of citizens', more and more work is needed to raise awareness regarding the advantage of this involvement, how they will use it and what benefits will they receive in this way" (Baghdati City Hall).**

Young people have a relatively positive attitude towards the progress of the reform, however, they consider, that it would be desirable to further improve and refine this process:

> **"It is true, that it is not completely flexible, but this reform and the changes of the last years should be really positively assessed. For example, there is a less bureaucracy and when citizens apply with a statement to the local self-government, the answers are not delayed, as well as short text messages are sent to the citizens about the stage of their application" (the student).**

3.1.2 Awareness of the population on e-services of the municipality

The study of the needs made us possible to see the real picture of the municipality, with those of difficulties, that exist in terms of the introduction of e-services at the local level.

Most of the problems are related to the absence of internet in some places, or the shortcomings in equipping of citizens with specific skills.

According to a quantitative research, only 19.3% of respondents are informed about e-services of the municipality. The majority (62%) have more or less information, 14% are not informed about the aforesaid services and 4.7% of the respondents are not interested in this issue at all.

(See Diagram #2)

How well are you informed on muncipal e-services?

Not interested in - 7	4,70%
Not informed - 21	14%
Informed - 29	19,3
More or less informed - 93	62%
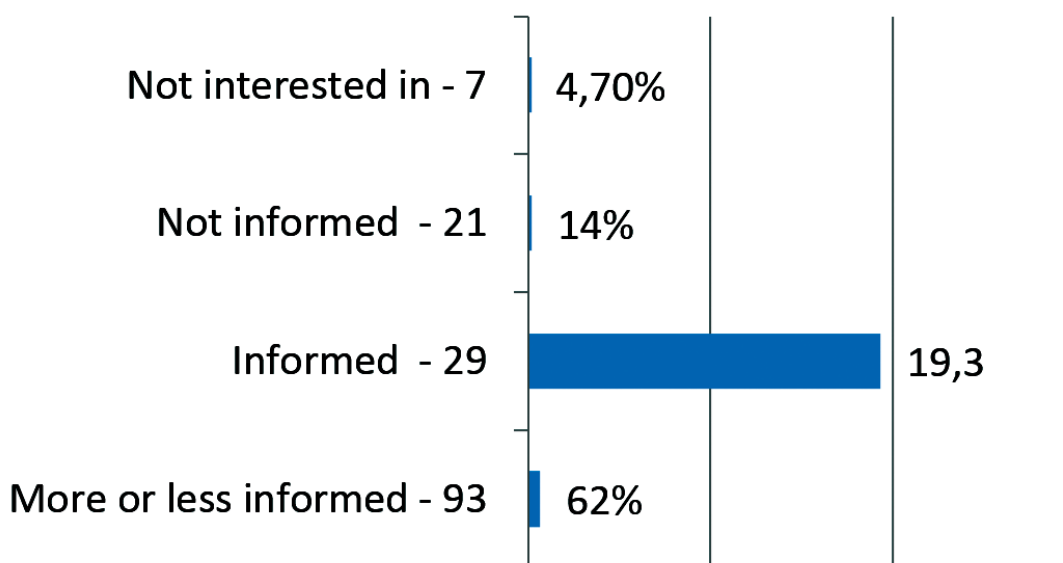
The majority of respondents named non-governmental organizations as the main source of information on e-services - 31.3%, Facebooks and websites of municipalities were named by 24.7%, meetings with government officials by 20%, and television was outlined only by 15.3%. 1.4% named family members as the main source of the information, while 7.3% did not have any information at all. Activation of the municipality as an information provider was positively assessed by the citizens themselves, but with a request for more involvement:

> **"I have subscribed pages, I mean social networks, from which I learn a lot, especially during this pandemic, when we are restricted in terms of many things, people really need to be informed by various means on the use of e-services" (a teacher).**

According to the quantitative research, we were allowed to see a radical difference regarding the use of the e-services, the level of public awareness after the basic needs survey has been considerably increased and they already have access to a number of services. If in the previous year's research, 40% of the respondents did not use e-services, at this stage the results of the research revealed, that only 3.5% of the respondents did not use this innovation. In terms of the use of the services, 13.3% name the lack of proper skills, while 21.3% - lack of Internet. Citizens most often use e-services to view online vacancies - 28.7%, to search for contact information of a municipal employee - 18.7%, to get familiar with the reports - 16% and to obtain the information on a budget 11.3%. There is also an active use for the online registration service on a meeting, which is used by 14% of respondents. Online complaints and suggestions are submitted by 4%.

According to the qualitative data, it is also shown, that the practice of using e-services has been improved. Some part of the respondents mentioned that they can find public information, decision or news interesting for them on the official website of the local self-government, which means improving of the informing level of the citizens, as well as increasing of local self-government accountability.

"I have often seen vacancies on HR.GOV.GE, as well as various public information on the website" (a young person).

"In my opinion, there is access to specific electronic services, information is posted, there is no problem with posting, but there is a problem of internetization for the population, it also often happens that a citizen reads an information and cannot understand, it is not even written in an understandable language, everyone is not aware of these terms, is not it so? And the villagers do not understand what they are talking about. It should be easily written for any citizen to understand" (a mother with many children).

Also, in the qualitative research, we see the passivity of the population in terms of the use of electronic services, which is resulted due to the lower activity of citizens. This is also confirmed by the interviews of experts:

Officials submit reports annually, which are already uploaded online as well. We have outreach sessions, which are informed in advance both through the Facebook and websites. Also, a schedule of the sessions is always published in advance. The sessions are open and consequently, in case of interest, citizens can always use the right to attend the sessions. It is natural, that the accountability level, would be increased and intensified by the involvement of the population" (Chairman of the Commission on Legal and Procedural Issues of the City Council).

Respondents named a low level of awareness as a hindering factor to use the e-services, which also includes a criticism of local self-government involvement:

> **"There are some people who are not interested, but why do not we ask a reason? People are struggling so hard financially, that they do not have a power to search for news. There is part of people who are interested and aware. But if you do not provide me with the information, I will not be able to go to City Hall and ask for it. It is the representatives of the mayor and deputies are obliged to come out in the center of the village, school and inform the citizens about the news" (the teacher).**

The improvement in access to e-services is indicated by quantitative research data, according to it, only 28% of respondents stated that they do not use any e-platform to receive services at the local level. The most common and accessible to the population is www.my.gov.ge, a citizen portal (34.7%), as well as the official website of the municipality (16.7%) and the Facebook page of the City Hall (16.7%). The Facebook page of the City Council are relatively less used in this regard (1.3%) as well as the website of the regional administration (2%).

3.1.3 Preferred strategies for improving the quality of local e-services and raising public awareness

Pursuant to the quantitative research data, the majority of the respondents, particularly 31,3% believe, that it is especially important to provide services tailored to the needs and priorities of vulnerable groups;

23.3% of the respondents think, that in order to improve the quality of existing local services, it is important to timely and fully inform the public about state e-services through television, informational meetings, flyers, Facebook, website. The focus is also made on increasing the competence of public servants (18.7%). Simplification of the service receiving process (10.7%) was considered significant, as well as an increase in the number of services and territorial coverage (5.3%). 7.3% of respondents found it difficult to answer this question.

According to the qualitative research, it was revealed, that selection of approaches is important while informing the population in order to ensure, that the information is provided to a group that has little access to the Internet. Consequently, it is necessary to hold more interactive meetings, use of print media, dissemination of information in public places. Local experts emphasize this issue as well:

"We have a newspaper -"Our Newspaper ", which is published once a month and it is necessary to increase the intensity of its publication in order to raise public awareness. Especially, for those vulnerable groups who do not have access to the Internet or do not have the relevant skills" (the head of staff the City Council).

"In order to make people interested and available to use the electronic services, Internet access should be improved and a technical base should be created. It is also necessary to raise the awareness in order to people not to imagine this issue as an insurmountable problem" (Chairman of the Commission on Legal and Procedural Issues of the City Council).

"We, the elderly people are not able to use computers for information, so we still need the information to be printed in newspapers for better understanding and clearing up" (a pensioner).

Respondents emhisized the need for better internetization of villages and raising public awareness and information for more active use of e-services:

"In my opinion, the biggest reason for this is the problem of internetization, people do not have access to the Internet and are accordingly they are uninformed. I think, all sectors should be actively involved in resolving the issue of internetization of villages" (the Chairman of the Finance Budget Commission of the City Council).

The opinion was expressed that people employed in the self-government should be more actively used in informing the population, who will be responsible for enhancing the skills and knowledge of the population in terms of the dissemination of information and the use of electronic systems:

"Citizens' indifferent attitude is a cause of uninforming, more and more work is still needed to raise awareness on what this involvement will bring them, how they will use it and what benefits they will receive in this way" (City hall of Baghdati Municipality).

"I think, special groups should be created, who will be assigned to inform the population, monitoring should be carried out as well" (Young Person).

"The government should work on people's mistrust as well as on receiving to information, should actively use its resources. I wanted to attend the budget discussion and when I decided to go, I begged my acquaintances and I could not take anyone with me" (the parent of a disabled person).

3.2 EFFICIENCY

The study allowed us to assess the effectiveness of local government activities in terms of the purpose of existing municipal programs in self-government and the provision of forms of services tailored to the needs of citizens. We also studied the intensity of the use of electronic systems by the population.

3.2.1 Study the population needs by the self-government and quality of respond

The attitude of the citizens involved in the qualitative research whether the services provided by the self-government meet the needs and priorities of the local population and whether these priorities and needs are studied were found to be almost similar. They point out that they have not heard about the needs study and the topic of priorities should be reviewed:

> **"Nobody has asked me if I like the service, but financial aids are issued, for example, one-time assistance. Many of my neighbors and acquaintances have said that they needed it vitally, but one-time assistance does not change the overall picture, so it is necessary to study the needs of vulnerable groups" (a single mother).**

> **"I think the government should know the simple methods for researching the needs of local people, which will be maximally comprehensive and effective" (a person with disabilities).**

Local experts also give examples of government interested in the needs of the population. According to the research data, the monitoring and evaluating practice in terms of the provided services is gradually being introduced in Baghdati Municipality, however, there is a huge contribution of the non-governmental sector in this dynamic as well, as most of the representatives of the municipality do not have the necessary skills and development and more support are needed in this regard:

> **"As far as I am aware, the study was conducted in the social direction and the problems were reflected in the program. Currently, the women's needs study is being conducted by a local NGO that includes a Gender Council as well. I think, there is necessity of more research and a program based on it as well as seeking for help from qualified non-governmental organizations" (the Chairman of the Finance Budget Commission of the City Council).**

Based on the quantitative research data, we were able to determine how easy it is for self-governing agencies to apply electronically for services, which is considered as a simple procedure by 35.3% and difficult by 28.7%. 36% find it difficult to answer. To the question, whether they have used or not the electronic appointment principle to meet with the representative of the desired agency in the last year, it was found that the majority of respondents (62%) did not use it and only 26.7% were able to apply the principle of electronic appointment in practice. 11.3% had no information on the electronic appointment form at all. Mostly, citizens apply to the self-government for health-related issues: provision with medicines, funding of operation (30,6%) and social assistance /financial assistance (25,2%). 23,8% addressed for getting information on various needs and infrastructure issues. Construction of a playground (11,6%), roof repairing / provision with construction materials (12,2%). There are also applications as follows: vouchers - 7,5%, reference to the status of a mountainous region -- 5,4%, improvement for public transportation - 8,8%, waste removal - 10,9%, water supply (including quality water) and arrangement of drainage canals - 6,1%.

8% apply for employment, 2% for construction permit / legalization of space - 2.7% for prevention of illegal construction, 10.2% for land clearance, 10.2% for firewood, space legalization - 6.8%, for public information - 6.8%, city urbanization issue- 0.7%. 7.5% of the respondents have never applied to self-government.

While assessing the population's satisfaction in terms of the quality of service provided by local authorities or the response to the problem, the quantitative survey revealed, that citizens are generally satisfied with the received service, which was distributed as follows: 70.66% of respondents are satisfied with the service received by the City Hall, only 12% are dissatisfied, very dissatisfied 9.33% and very satisfied 8%; Satisfaction with the City Council is emphasized by 70.66% of respondents, while 10% are dissatisfied and very dissatisfied by 7.33% and very satisfied by 12%. In the villages, 64.66% of the respondents expressed satisfaction with the mayor's representative, 14.66% were dissatisfied, 6.66% very dissatisfied and very satisfied 14%.

In terms of assessing the response of the self-government to the problem, the attitude of the population is mostly positive. 50.7% think, that their problems are partially solved, 25.3% consider, that all the problems they have addressed are tackled. 8% of respondents stated that there was an attempt to resolve it, but there were objectively

hindering factors as well, which were reported in writing. 3.3% were promised, but the process lasted indefinitely. 2.7% believe, that there was not even an attempt for problem solving. Neither the problem was solved nor the grounded reason or the final refusal was notified in writing to 2% of the respondents, and 8% refused to answer.

According to the qualitative research data, it was shown, that the issues raises by the citizens towards the government are more or less resolved:

"The municipality helped me a lot to buy a wheelchair. A large amount of money was paid and then they asked us if we could bring it. They found out my attitude about the service" (a person with disabilities).

"When I applied, I wanted to repair the roof, I wanted firewood as well, both of my problems were solved" (socially vulnerable).

3.2.1 Priorities and needs on the spot and necessary steps to ensure effective responses to them

To the question, which group needs are considered in the municipal programs by the local government, the majority of the quantitative research - 40.9% responded, that they are convinced, that the local government takes into account the needs of the entire population living in the municipality. 31.5% think, that the attention is paid on the problems of people with disabilities, 20.1% - the needs of mothers with many children, 20.1% - even the issues of children and young people. In contrast to the previous needs survey, the needs of women (14.8%) and women victims of domestic violence (14.1%) were also raised. According to the given answers, the specific needs of such groups are neglected: 0.7% of the elderly people and 0.7% of the socially vulnerable. 19.5% of the respondents indicated that the specific needs of the population are less taken into account by the municipality. 0.7% found it difficult to answer this question.

According to the respondents participating in the qualitative research, more attention should be paid to the needs and problems of specific groups, such as people with disabilities, families with many children, the elderly people, the socially vulnerable and young people, etc. Special emphasis was placed on the need for long-term and vital programs, which foresee the development of agriculture, the most important area for employment:

"Healthcare is a priority, but I would still name education and agriculture. First of all, money should be directed to agriculture and employment, when you say health, how would people have it, if they did not have elementary money?" (the teacher).

"The social situation will be improved, when there are more jobs. Employment is a priority for me" (a single mother).

The necessity of creating an environment for healthy life style of young people and the relevant infrastructure was also named as a priority:

> **"Every group needs support, teachers and parents have special claim for children's internet addiction, it should be replaced by various entertainments, stadiums, green spaces" (the teacher).**

> **"Attention should be paid to the existence and functioning of girls' sports circles. Also, there should be a day center in Baghdadi, it is needed to be" (a mother of many children).**

> **"We should no longer have Soviet-era recreational zones, we should move forward in this regard, as well as rest areas should be built and again and again infrastructure" (a student).**

Issues and vulnerable groups that need a special attention were identified by local experts as well:

> **"There are many needs due to the social situation, but I think, that people with disabilities need special attention as well as socially vulnerable people, women and those mothers with many children who dream of realizing their skills" (Chairman of the Legal and Procedural Issues Commission of the City Council).**

> **"Social problems are most in need of advocacy. Last year we had an attempt to provide a special service that would provide on-site services to people with special needs, but this was related to the funds. Consequently, we took a decision to involve the employees of the City Council and the City Hall in the process. We will visit such people once a month and we will bring products as well as will help to solve everyday problems. However, this idea is still in the process of refinement" (the head of the staff, City Council).**

> **"I think the needs of young people should be taken forward, despite the fact that recently, the municipality has conducted significantly positive changes in this direction, it is necessary to do more and allocate more funds on these mentioned topics" (said the Chairman of the Finance Budget Commission of the City Council).**

Quantitative research enabled us to understand the opinion of the population, whether citizens are fully provided with the information on the activities / provided services by the local government. The statistics of the answers are as follows: "partially" - 37.3%, "Yes" - 33.3%, "No" - 22%. Only 7.3% had no answer to the question.

(See Diagram 3)

Do you think, that the local government fully informs the population on provided activities /services

7,30%

22%

37,30%

33,30%

- Partially - 56
- Yes - 50
- No - 33
- I have no answer - 11
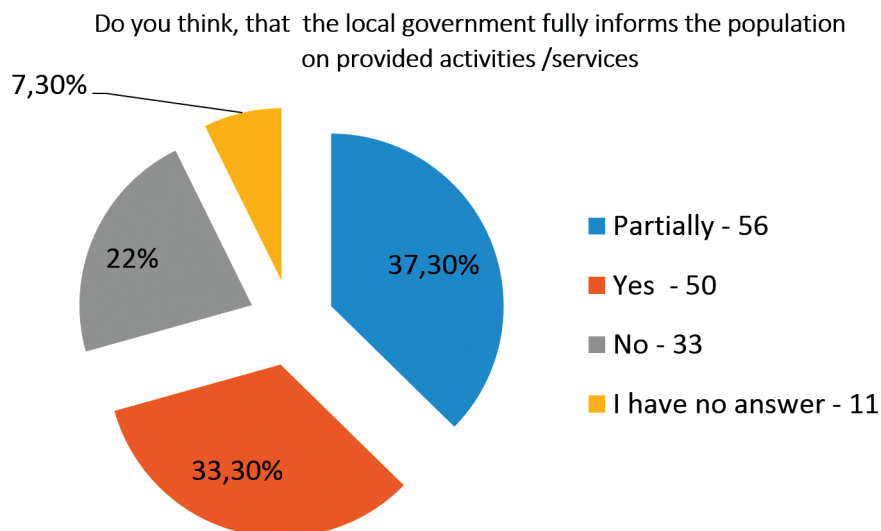
3.1 INCLUSIVENESS/INVOLVEMENT

3.3.1 Encouraging citizens' participation and involvement quality

Citizens' opinions on how the local public servants are aware of the importance of population involvement and participation are not similar. 38.7% of the respondents think, that they are aware, 36.7% believe, that they are partially aware, according to the position of 15.3% they are not aware and only 9.3% do not have an answer to the question.

28.7% of the respondents believe, that the local government encourages / ensures the involvement of citizens in the process of defining the local priorities. 21.3% believe, that the local government ensures the aforesaid involvement in the process of identifying the needs of citizens, 5,3% - in the development of municipal programs, 16% - in the local budget, and 10% - in discussing the citizens' initiatives, 1.4% - in discussing the issue of infrastructure arrangement.

4% of respondents talk about the absence of population involvement and 3.3% notes, that they do not know the answer to this question.

Quantitative research has shown, that the population has more or less information on the forms of citizen involvement. According to the quantitative data, the most common form of participation, is participation in settlement meetings, which is emphasized by 30.7% of respondents. Citizen involvement rate is high during the listening to reports (17.3%), participation in City Council sessions is relatively low (8.7%), and the involvement in the activities of the Civic Advisory Board (4.7%) Civic Budget (4.7%), Municipal Gender

Equality Council (4%), Petition Use (0.7%) and the Council of Persons with Disabilities (0.7%) is even less. 28.7% have never use any form.

(See. Diagram 4)

Which form of civic engagement have you used?

- Participation in settlement meetings- 46
- Participation in City Municipal Assembly sessions - 13
- Hearing of reports- 26
- Civil budget - 7
- Petition - 1
- Civic Advisory Board - 7
- Municipal Gender Equality Council - 6
- None - 43
- Council of Persons with Disabilities - 1

Pie chart values: 0,70% · 30,70% · 8,70% · 17,30% · 4,70% · 4,70% · 0,70% · 4% · 28,70%
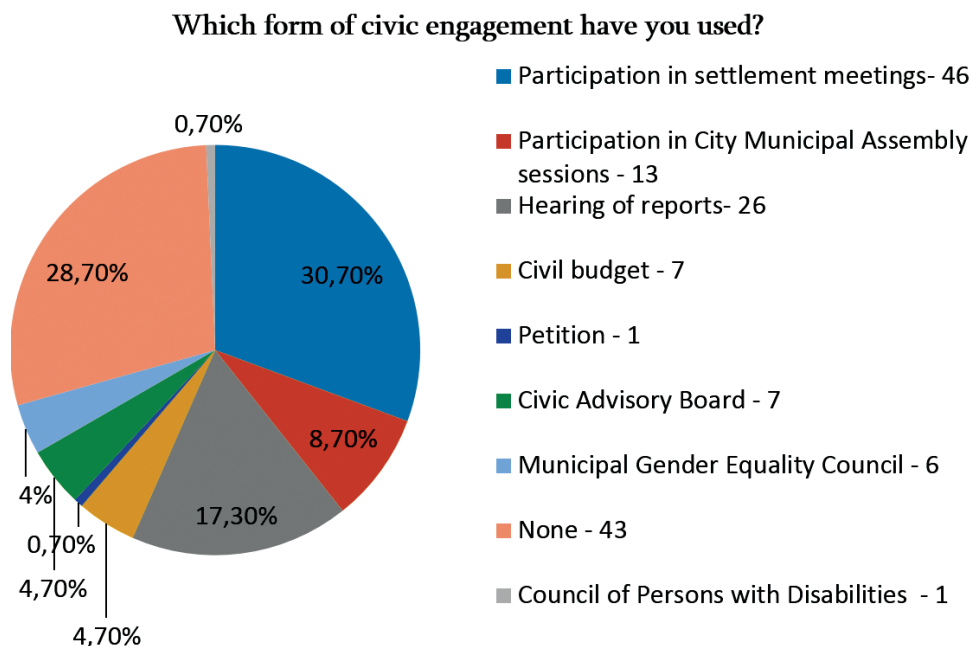
Was the self-government provided with remarks on provided services? The majority of respondents - 36.7% stated, that they had an attempt to appeal, 34% of respondents exercised this right, 29.3% did not even want to appeal. The majority - 38.8%, who shared their remarks to the self - government on the provided services, chose to express their opinion through a personal meeting with a representative of the relevant agency, 23.8% preferred to share by posting their position on the Facebook page/ website of the municipality. 13.7% decided to share in written form and through the non-governmental organizations survey - 1.2%.

Pursuant to the qualitative data, based on local experts, direct communication as a form of citizens' involvement is much justified, as the population of the municipality cannot be fully covered by electronic services due to their lack of information as well as relevant skills:

> **"In my opinion, face-to-face communication with the representatives of the municipality is quite effective, people also prefer this method of communication, because we have not been able to massively receive e-services yet. There are cases of individual electronic appeals, but the number of face-to-face meetings is more" (the Chairman of the Commission on Legal and Procedural Issues of the City Council).**

"The most effective form is always direct meetings with citizens. I think, that the meetings of the deputies and the special services with the population in the villages should be more intensive. In addition to social problems, there are problems with property re-registration and direct communication with the population is needed in this regard. The cooperation between the City Council and the City Hall is well implemented in this direction" (the head of the staff of the City Council).

Working of mechanisms such as persons with disabilities, civic advisors and gender councils, particularly are known by the citizens who represent this segment and consequently, their involvement and awareness on the activities conducted by the self-government, is relatively better than for ordinary citizens:

"I think, that at this stage the form of advisory boards is used very effectively, where citizens are able to be actively involved in self-government processes. However, other forms of involvement should be more effective, such as petitions, settlement meetings, because decisions are made directly there. However, there is less precedent for this, except for rural support programs, where priority issues are chosen by the population" (Baghdati Municipality City Hall).

"As I have already mentioned, I am a member of the Council of Civil Advisers and Persons with Disabilities. As it comes out I am cooperating well with and put forward the needs of people with disabilities in the Civil Advisory Board" (a person with disabilities).

"For instance, I have been fully cooperated with the Gender Council in many trainings as well as participated in a study with their involvement" (a mother with many children).

3.3.2 Ways of ensuring better dialogue of the population with the self-government and more involvement

Pursuant to the majority of respondents (38.5%), the periodic meetings with local government representatives and consultations with population are the main needs for ensuring constructive dialogue with the self-government and more involvement, while according to the decision of the 25.7%, this is more interaction of the population in the development of municipal programs and budget review process. 15.5% believe, that considering of the initiatives of citizens make the practice of the civil budget more effective. There was outlined a necessity to increase the effectiveness of gender equality, the format of civic advisors and other councils (9.5%), as well as a clear progression in terms of a responsible public servant staff on sectoral profile/ specific issues (8.1%) using and encouraging the cooperatives of homeowners (1.4%) and

meetings in rural areas (0.7%). 0.7% of respondents are skeptical and refuse to be engaged with self-government.

For involvement of citizens, the issue of raising their confidence was also brought up by the local experts:

"There is a legal basis for involving citizens in local self-government, but in order to increase their activity, trust and interest must be increased at first, by giving effective examples of cooperation, which will ultimately raise the motivation for the involvement of others" (Chairman of the Legal and Procedural Issues Commission of the City Council).

"It is essential to raise the awareness of the citizens themselves, that the local self-government itself implies the involvement of the citizens" (Baghdati Municipality City Hall).

"Representatives of the local self-government, including me, are actively involved for participation of as many people as possible in the implementation of self-government, but there are still many problems in this direction. I think the problem is in consciousness. Citizens do not have the sense, that they can be direct participants in the implementation of self-government, the mechanism will not be effective until we make the citizen feel that he/she can engage, plan and directly carry out, choose or decide this or that case.
When a citizen develops confidence to the local self-government, accordingly increases the degree of involvement as well.
We must work to raise awareness, the citizen must believe, that he/she can influence on decision-making" (Chairman of the Finance Budget Commission of the City Council).

Part of the respondents emphasize the role of civil society organizations in increasing citizens' involvement and participation. The use of human, intellectual and material resources of non-governmental organizations in terms of conducting research on citizens' needs and identifying problems, informing the population and raising awareness are especially important for them:

"The role of NGOs is high, they have access to more contingents and can disseminate information more. I welcome the establishment and activation of the NGO sector in Baghdadi, but it was not necessary, but crucial" (the student).

"NGOs should raise the interest of the population, they should provide more information to the citizens. Non-governmental organization should be a mediator between the population and the government" (a person with disabilities).

This attitude is enhanced by the data obtained in the quantitative research in terms of where they see the role of local civil society organizations within the implementation of public administration reform. A large number of participants (57.3%) see their role in informing and education. Also, according to the majority (48.7%), it is important to bring the needs of the population to the government. According to the other respondents, the main function of civil society organizations is as follows: Advocacy for problem solving at the local level (39.3%), control / monitoring of the reform progress (33.3%), promotion of dialogue / local involvement between the population and local government (27.3%), protection of citizens' rights (32.7%), implementation of measures to support the socio-economic development of citizens (28.7%) and lobbying for the adoption of local legal acts, alterations and amendments (20%). Only 2% of respondents do not have an answer to the question.

The majority of the population notes, that there is small number of public organizations working at the local level, that are actively involved in local political dialogue. 46.7% of the respondents know only one organization, that works in this regard, 42,7% - know more than one, only 10.7% of respondents named more than three organizations.

58% of respondents think, that cooperation of civil organizations with the local government to promote the welfare of citizens is effective, 26.7% think this cooperation is very effective, while 14.7% think that "not so". Only 0.7% remain skeptical attitude and believe that cooperation is ineffective.

It is unequivocal from the results of the research, that the population grants the great importance to the role of public organizations in the proper implementation of public reform, informing the population and advocating for their needs, and demands more activity and efficiency of activities at the local level from them. For this reason, it is necessary to support local public organizations. Experts also highlighted this issue:

> **"Local civic organizations effectively carry out the advocacy process, but I think that their role should be increased in the process of informing and activating of the population, which will create good precedents and we won't not talk about raising the level of awareness of the population with such an intensity" (Chairman of the Legal and Procedural Issues Commission of the City Council).**

> **"I think it is necessary to cooperate with local organizations. We have newly established non-governmental organizations on the spot and it would be good to strengthen them even more" (the chairman of the Finance Budget Commission of the City Council).**

As a result of the quantitative research, we were able to understand the opinion of the citizens - in which direction do they think it is necessary to use more human and financial resources of the local government. The following directions were named: healthcare - 56%, social assistance - 48%, promotion of economic development and

creation of appropriate environment at the local level - 39.3%, potable water (quality, supply) - 34.7%, infrastructure - 27.3%, support services for elderly people lack of care- 20.7%, the existence of an adapted environment for people with disabilities - 21.3%, food safety - 19.3%, the management of stray animals - 16%, culture and education issues - 16.7%, arrangement of public transportation - 14%, repair of damaged houses / yards - 13.3%, sports events - 10%, creation of support services tailored to the needs of women victims of violence - 11.3%, cleaning / waste management - 9.3%, parks and greenery issues - 9.3%, irrigation water / irrigation - 8%, preschool education - 7.3%, sewage (sewerage system) - 6%, drainage networks - 4.7%.

In order for the municipality to meet the needs of the population, it is necessary for local resources to be in compliance with the authorization of the local government. There may also be a need to separate the competencies of municipalities and sectoral ministries in terms of a number of issues. Specific emphasis was made by local experts on this issue:

"I think, that expansion of the authorization of the municipalities is necessary for compliance the powers of the municipality and the needs of the people at the local level, this may be related to the use of local resources timber, granting status to the socially vulnerable people, where we can more effectively run the existing situation on the spot. The competencies of the central government and local municipalities should be separated as well, in order to determine and tackle the needs more easily and efficiently on the spot. Local problems will be solved on the spot quickly by people who easily see these needs" (Chairman of the Commission on Legal and Procedural Issues).

"Decentralization depends on the capabilities of municipalities, this is an economic independence, etc. This is the most difficult process, that the municipality is not able to solve at this stage. Consequently, the municipality needs staff for decentralization and there is a need for their training" (the head of the staff of the City Council).

"The funds of the municipality are very small and depend on transfers. An increase in functions is necessary and this should be reflected in the financial part as well. For example, recently the preschool infrastructure projects have been delegated, however, inevitable funds followed it as well" (the Chairman of the Finance Budget Commission of the City Council).

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A study conducted in Baghdati Municipality showed, that the start taken in terms of implementation of e-services in the municipality is optimal for the initial stage, but it is necessary to continue and strengthen its positive dynamics.

It was revealed, that some part of citizens uses e-services, and some do not have enough information about its benefit, or do not acquire the appropriate skills, do not have access due to the absence of the Internet, or do not have the necessary material resources for electronic communication. People employed in self-government, who are the direct providers of these services also need training in order to make these services more flexible and efficient.

The study highlighted the need for introduction of a system for evaluating the effectiveness of local programs, which will study service satisfaction and will be the basis for the continuation of the budget program, or the initiation of a new one. On the other hand, the need for program monitoring was outlined to identify the purpose of the provided services, as well as the need for more long-term results-oriented programs.

The need for a decentralization process was reflected in terms of the citizens' better service at the local level.

The needs of those groups, that are especially waiting for self-government attention have been identified as well: children with disabilities and their families, women living in rural areas, families left behind the state care program, who have a high degree of vulnerability; Young people who are in need of appropriate environment and empowerment measures to make local presence more attractive and to stop internal migration.

The importance of local government and civil society organizations, private sector cooperation in improving the services of citizens became obvious, which may be the basis for services tailored to the needs of citizens as well as local employment programs. The majority of respondents are in sympathy with the fact that the role of civil society organizations is important in raising public awareness and activating, researching the needs of specific groups, identifying problems and advocating for local priorities. In order to ensure the efficiency of local self-government, some of the respondents consider, that it is important to accelerate the policy of decentralization, to increase the authority of the municipality in a number of issues, and to separate the authorization between the line ministries and the local government.

A number of measures are needed to respond to the existing challenges and achieve the desired results, both local and central levels.

In order to overcome the problems identified in the study, it is advisable to adhere to the following recommendations:

To the Local Authorities Improvement of citizens' awareness on e-services

➢ Informing the population about local electronic systems and widely dissemination of information through the all available resources of the self-government, both face-to-face meetings and the Internet;

➢ For the part of the population who has difficulty to access to the electronic platforms due to poor internet coverage or lack of relevant skills, the provision of relevant information should be conducted   through the printed materials. Local print media should be supported as well;

➢ Promoting the development of appropriate skills for the use of e-services in the population. For this reason, use of administrative buildings in villages, on spots, where they will be able to develop the necessary skills with the help of administration staff and be able to use online services;

➢ In order to increase the availability of e-services, it is important specific measures to be carried out to ensure Internet access in Baghdati Municipality, especially in remote villages, as well as to conduct active negotiations with internet providers by the relevant ministry and the self-government for internetization of some villages in Baghdadi municipality or to strengthen the internet signal.

Improvement the efficiency of e-services

➢ Introduction the practice of populations needs study and analysis in the self-governments during the development of local programs and service planning, which implies the maximum consideration of the priority needs of the vulnerable groups living in the municipality;

➢ It is important to strengthen the mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation of the impact and efficacy of the existing services for the population, which will enable the municipality to assess the level of satisfaction of the population in terms of the provided services, as well as the efficiency of spending the budget funds;

➢ It is desirable to conduct an information-educational campaign in the municipality to promote e-services. Involvement of mayor's representatives, local MPs, CSOs and active community groups in relevant activities.

Strengthening citizens' participation

➢ In order to increase the participation of the population, it is important to timely inform the citizens about the existing forms of participation. For this reason, it is necessary to use the resources of the mayor's representatives and deputies;

- The municipality should introduce additional forms of citizen involvement, including "Civil Budget" programs.

To the Central Government

- Enhancement of the municipal authority and proactive enforcement of decentralization policies by empowering local governments, transferring financial resources, and segregating responsibilities between central and local governments in order to increase the opportunities of targeted, rapid, flexible assistance to citizens on the spot and to respond effectively to the problem;

- Increasing of the authority of the municipality in terms of resolving issues such as naming of municipal facilities, management of natural resources and municipal roads.

To the Civil Society Organizations

- Unification of public organizations operating in Baghdati Municipality and active use of their human and technical resources in terms of the mobilization, interests and needs advocacy issues for groups with special needs of citizens;

- Active dissemination of information on PAR by public organizations operating in Baghdati Municipality, through existing technical and human resources, carrying out of appropriate actions (instruction, strengthening of skills, providing of information, etc.) to promote the use of e-services by the population;

- In order to promote the strengthening and development of civil society at the local level, advocating for the attention of both national and international actors.

IMERETI REGION

THE REPORT OF NEEDS

ASSESSMENT OF POPULATION

IN THE PROCESS OF PAR IMPLEMENTATION

IN KHONI MUNICIPALITY

www.fsokhumi.ge

INTRODUCTION

Under the leadership of the Government of Georgia, Public Administration Reform (PAR) was launched in 2015 to establish a transparent, accountable and efficient public administration system. The ongoing reform in Georgia responds to the EU model of public governance and envisages all six of its main areas.

According to the Public Administration Reform Roadmap (PAR), working in the local self-government direction is essential. According to the latest action plans, the two main tasks set regarding the self-government - strengthening self-government through increasing their power and gradual development and improvement of electronic services in municipalities for improving their accessibility in local self-governments - have not lost their relevance. Therefore, 2021 is considered to be the year of the introduction of new electronic modules.

What are the critical issues in terms of better local governance? What are the needs of different groups of citizens living in the municipality? What do they need to get better services, especially during the pandemic, when the electronic system has made it much easier to communicate and receive services and how involved they are in local processes? What successful practices and challenges need to be addressed in cooperation with local and central government structures or public institutions?

This report is based on a survey conducted by the NGO "Edelweiss" and the IDP`s Initiative Group in Khoni Municipality in May-June 2021 to study the citizens' needs regarding services provided by local authorities. Based on the study findings, appropriate recommendations were developed on the citizens` priority needs, existing positive practices, and challenges to improve the municipality's administration and services.

1. STUDY AIM AND METHODOLOGY

Cultural-Humanitarian Fund "Sukhumi" with Fund of Women Entrepreneurs and the Imereti Scientists` Union "Spectri" is implementing the project "A Common forum for CSOs from Guria, Imereti and Racha-Lechkhumi for PAR Roadmap monitoring" supported by the European Union. The study was conducted within the framework of this project.

The study aims at assessing the transparency, efficiency and level of citizens` inclusiveness regarding the services provided by local authorities in the context of Public Administration Reform in Khoni Municipality, to develop appropriate recommendations to advocate for local service improvement.

Study objectives are identifying the citizens` priority needs and obtaining evidence-based information.

Study methodology - Quantitative and qualitative research methods were used for the study. A research tool was prepared, a structured questionnaire, mainly with closed-ended questions, was used for quantitative research. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to obtain information through the qualitative research method.

Study methods - 154 respondents have been interviewed using quantitative methods and qualitative research has been conducted with 32 respondents to obtain data (4 focus group discussions have been held, 4 in-depth interviews have been conducted with local experts). Audio recordings and transcripts of the meetings have been made. Transcripts and relevant reports have been prepared by the interviewers. A research report has been prepared based on the interpretation and analysis of the obtained data.

Respondents for the survey have been selected using the quota method, considering socio-demographic indicators and specific gender groups.

2. TARGET GROUP SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC STRUCTURE

Within the frames of the study of the needs conducted in Khoni Municipality, 154 people were involved in the survey, including 66% women and 34 % men. Within the qualitative research, 4 in-depth interviews with local experts and 4 focus group discussions with local social groups have been conducted and included 32 respondents (30 women and 2 men). A total of 186 respondents (133 women and 53 men) participated in the study. The respondents` age ranged from 18 to 74, including married - 47%, single - 35%, widowed - 13%, divorced - 5%. Respondents with full secondary education make up 31%, full higher education (bachelor, master) - 36%, secondary special/college - 25% and incomplete secondary education - 8%.

The respondents of the quantitative research included:

• Socially vulnerable and internally displaced persons.

• Single and parents with many children.

• Persons with disabilities.

The respondents included people with a special status (socially vulnerable - 16%, IDPs - 34%, parents with many children - 9%, people with disabilities - 21%). **In terms of employment**, 34% of respondents are unemployed. Those employed include public servants/state employees - 19%, 10% are pensioners, 32% are self-employed (entrepreneur, farmer), 2% are employed in a budget organization, and 2% are students.

The average monthly income of the family named by the respondents (including any cash income) is as follows: <100GEL - 7%; 101-500GEL - 56%, 501-900GEL - 23%, above 901GEL - 11%. 2% refuse to answer.

3. STUDY RESULTS TRANSPARENCY

Level of Public Administration Reform awareness. The reform process assessment - In a survey conducted in Khoni Municipality, 33.8% of respondents think they are aware of Public Administration Reform. 57.8% believe that they are partially informed. The answer "no" was chosen by 8.4%. The ratio of men to women is almost the same. 35% of women and 32% of men are informed.

Based on the age category, relatively young respondents are more informed. Unawareness indicator increases in the older age category (18-34 years - 6%; 35-64 years -7%; 65 years and above - 18%).

While assessing the reform progress, experts highlight the higher level of transparency and the active exchange of information between citizens and the municipality.

> **"I think awareness improves relationships. Public information should not be hidden. The more information you give, the fewer questions arise, and there is more openness"** *(In-depth interview with a self-government expert).*

> **"I will assess the reform positively. I like the relationship between self-government and people. Everything is public, and relationships with people are better and more open. The more criticism and remarks they hear from young people, the better steps will take forward. These can be new ideas, new views, and I want them to be taken into account" (focus group discussion, community activist girl).**

Other participants of the qualitative survey also positively assess the steps taken by the municipality to implement the reform. First of all, it refers to the topic of inclusiveness:

> **"I would emphasize and talk about a specific issue - the achievement of local self-governance in preschool institutions and the improved upbringing process. I welcome the arrangement of ramps, which was essential in the current situation, because this service for inclusive children did not function in any of the kindergartens" (in-depth interview with an expert, N (N) LE 9 Khoni Kindergartens` Union Lawyer).**

The survey results have revealed the importance of timely and correct information about the reform. Quantitative survey participants named NGOs (37%) as the means of obtaining information on the reform. **Diagram #1**

Where did you get the information about the reform?
- a) From TV — 28%
- b) From NGO representatives — 37%
- c) At the meeting with governmental bodies — 22%
- d) From the relevant municipality Facebook page — 12%
- e) Other — 1%
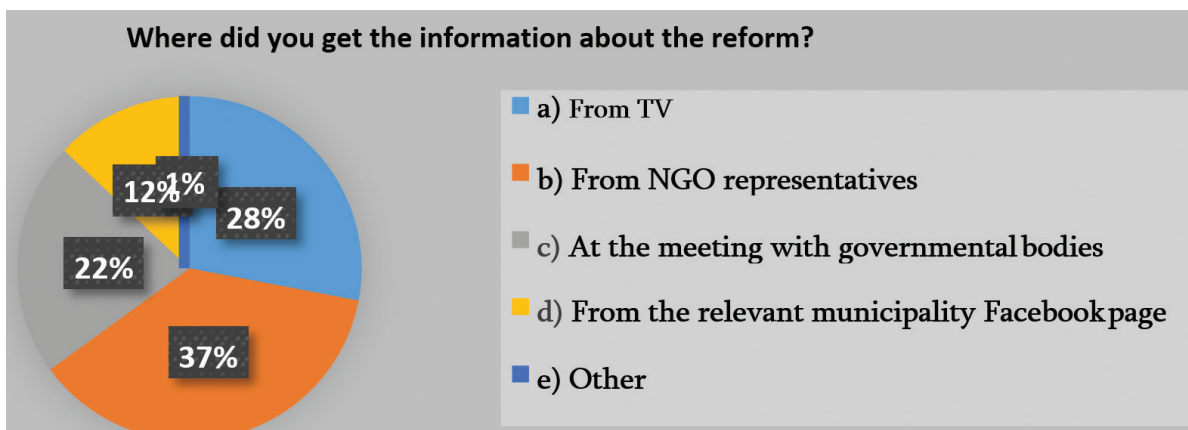
The qualitative study materials have shown why CSOs have moved to the forefront. Finally, assessing the reform progress, the respondents named the positive steps related to the activities of civil society organizations in the municipality:

• Existing website reorganization;

• Hotline activation;

• Introduction of a system of petitions and other things that can be considered a step towards the successful implementation of Public Administration Reform.

E-service importance is increasingly understood, as it is directly linked to the increasing access to services.

"I think these changes will significantly improve the delivery of services to citizens, promote effective communication, open and transparent governance since a lot of information can be found on the municipality website" *(in-depth interview with a self-government expert).*

According to citizens, access to e-services has improved, and this has become possible with updating the website and a new functional load. Transparency has also increased. Raising the staff`s qualification was positively assessed. Many necessary trainings have been conducted, web admins have been trained, and meetings with the population have been held.

However, in this case, according to the respondents, there is another critical challenge, and one of them is the population`s motivation to use it.

"Informing and activating the population is an important challenge. It will improve service delivery and communication for citizens" (in-depth interview with self-government expert).

According to the data obtained through quantitative research, most citizens (56%) believe that the reform improves citizen services. *Diagram #2.*

Do you think that PAR will improve citizens` service quality?

8%
13%
56%
23%

a) Will improve

b) Will less improve

c) Will not improve
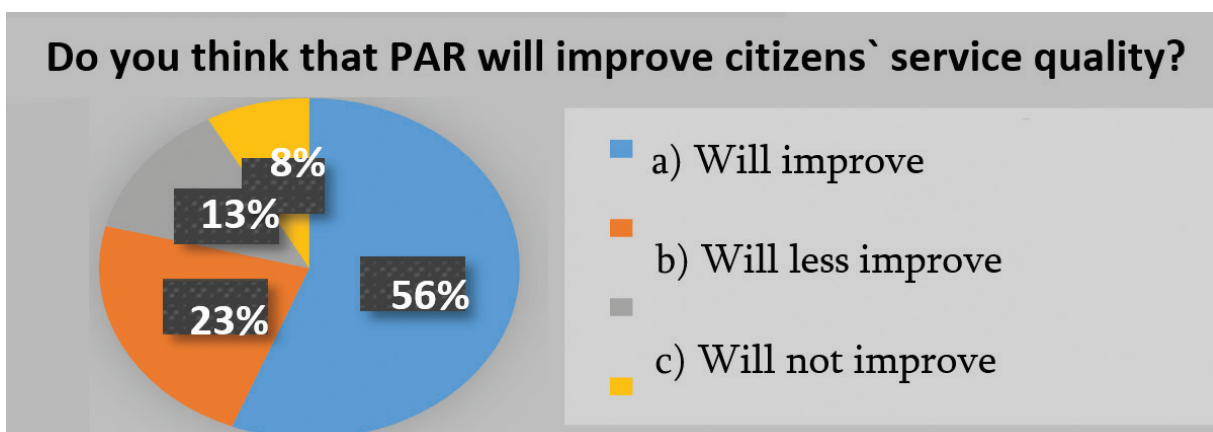
The data breakdown shows that citizens with different social statuses have partially different attitudes: the answer "will improve" is chosen by 54% of the socially vulnerable, 38% of IDPs, and 43% of parents with many children. In this regard, various groups of citizens note the beneficial effects of e-services: "There are various groups on the Internet, where there is information, and if you are interested, you can find it and even get answers".

They also name the obstacles:

> **"Young people have better access to the Internet and social networks. However, in the case of middle-aged people who do not have access to such communication, I think meetings are better to better disseminate information" (focus group discussion, a female IDP activist).**

The qualitative survey respondents note the positive effects of e-administration introduced in the self-government, especially during the pandemic:

> **"Against the background of the Covid pandemic, it gained even more importance, simplified and made flexible communication with the local population. Citizens did not have to go through many bureaucratic procedures to get the information they needed, travel far or wait" (in-depth interview with a self- government expert).**

> **"Based on our example, I can say that the bodies of our municipality are committed to maximum openness. The website (khoni.gov.ge) is being improved, and transparency is provided in Khoni Municipality. The information about the current events in the municipality is shared through the website and social network (which is a more effective way of disseminating information)" (in-depth interview with a self-government expert).**

Many of those involved in the study of increased interaction between citizens and the municipality state:

> **"We actively use social networks to spread information. They have replaced magazines and newspapers, and even television. People may not watch TV, but without social networking, our daily lives are almost unimaginable" (in- depth interview with a self-government expert).**

However, the participants cannot avoid the issue that e-services are not yet available to everyone. The system is working, but access is less, especially in remote communities:

> **"There are many people around me in the neighbourhood who do not have Internet, and I have to provide them with information on this or that issue" (a focus group participant).**

Quantitative survey participants name the source from which they received the information on e-services: "From the relevant municipality website/Facebook" - 32%; "Representatives of NGOs" - 40%; "Meeting with government officials" - 13%; from "Television" - 12%. The answer "I have no information" was chosen by 3%.

The benefit of e-services was shown by an e-petition example, which was successfully launched in Khoni:

> **"Let's take the issue of the petition, which requires the signature of 120 citizens. It will take you a long time to walk and collect votes from citizens. I was glad that Kutiri's petition had received about two hundred votes in just two days" (focus group discussion, a school teacher).**

They tried to give another example on the same topic. It was noted that the more information the citizens had about the issue, the more votes they would have to file a petition.

> **"The better service the state offers us, the better it will be for us. The pandemic has closed us down, and everything happens electronically. Otherwise, if you have face-to-face communication with a person, you receive better information. I'm more in favour of live meetings and relationships than electronic ones, but at this point, it is preferable" (focus group discussion, a housewife).**

Quantitative study materials show the level of citizens` awareness of municipal e-services: "I am not informed" - 18%; "I am more or less informed" - 56%; "I am informed" - 23%; "I do not care" - 3%.

Respondents also mentioned alternative sources of informing.

> **"Let's take the press in Khoni - the newspapers "Khoni" and "Khoneli". They have good periodicals and, there is not even a small event left that is not reflected in the press" (in-depth interview with a self-government expert).**

According to the parents of children with disabilities, the population learns about the ways and forms of using electronic services and the news in the region only from non-governmental organizations.

Mainly, citizens use e-services to get information on: "A municipal employee contact information" - 40%; "Electronic petition" - 26%; "Online vacancy announcement" - 25%; "Submission of complaint, proposal" - 12%; "Get acquainted with reports" - 17%.

The answers to the question: "What aspects need to be focused on during the reform to improve service provided to citizens?", show that the most pressing topic is the provision of services tailored to the needs and priorities of vulnerable groups (e.g., mothers with many children, single mothers, women victims of violence, children, persons with disabilities, etc.). *Table #1.*

What aspects need to be focused on during the reform to improve service provided to citizens?		
a) Timely and complete provision of the society with the information on governmental e-services (via TV, information meetings, information flyers, Facebook, website)	36	23%
b) Raising the public servants` competence	33	21%
c) Suggesting the service tailored to the needs and priorities of the vulnerable groups	54	35%
d) Increasing the public servants` salary	4	3%
e) Extending the service and coverage area (to provide access)	12	8%
f) Simplifying receiving the service	9	6%
g) Do not know/cannot answer	6	4%

Citizens also indicate which e-services they use to get local services: " Municipality official website" - 36%; "The City Hall Facebook page" - 24%; "City Council Facebook page" - 10%; "Citizen Portal - www.my.gov.ge" - 7%; "Regional administration website" - 3%. The number of citizens who chose the answer "none" is quite high (19%).

Among the qualitative study respondents, there was also one insufficiently informed about the existing e-services.

"I also have Facebook, and I read the news, but I have not met it. I have not searched it. I did not know if there are any Khoni websites. I only thought that Khoni news was spread via the newspaper" (focus group discussion, parent of a child with disabilities).

"I track the site of vacancies. However, I did not know if Khoni had a similar site" (focus group discussion, teacher of the Center for Children with Disabilities).

It is noteworthy that the use of e-services is "linked" to the beneficiaries` age. The younger beneficiaries chose the answer "none" - 17% and 36% of those over 65.

Diagram #3 shows the citizens` opinion about how easy it is to use electronic forms of services:

Is it easy to get e-services from self-government bodies?

21%

32%

47%

- a) It is difficult
- b) It is easy
- c) Cannot answer
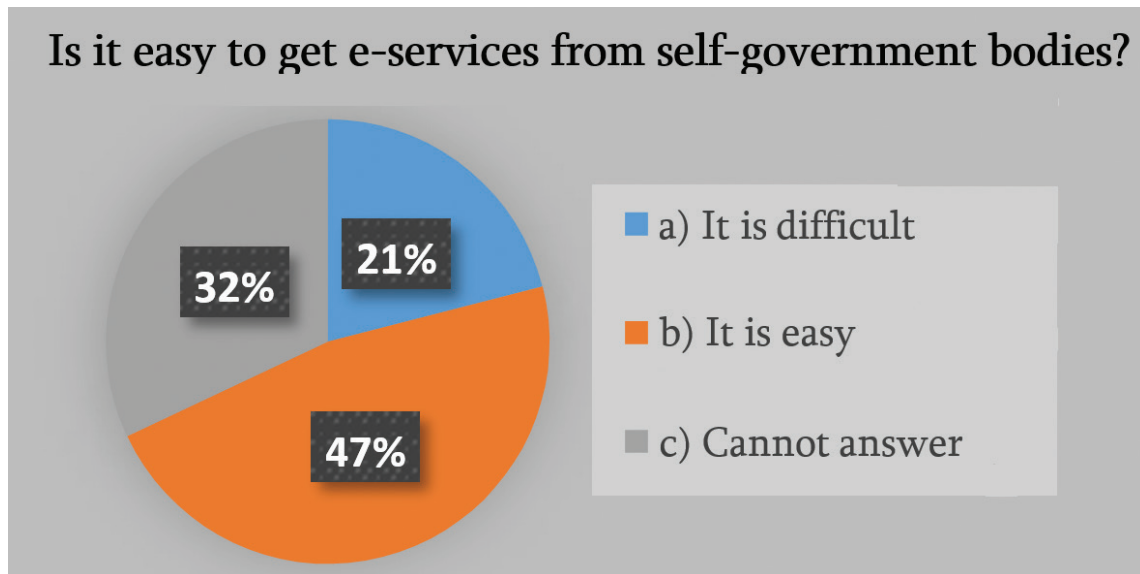
To the question, whether they used the e-registration to meet with the representative of the desired agency (City Hall, City Council, Mayor's representative) during the last year, the answers were as follows: "no" - 61%; "Yes" - 31%, "had no information about it" - 8%.

Upon the question on how e-services can be improved, the survey participants see and prove the benefits of e- services. They point out how easily a citizen can get the desired information, communicate without time, financial costs, engage in various programs, or solve essential issues for the municipality. But, at the same time, they admit the objective or subjective obstacles hindering the adequate provision of electronic services. Therefore, they expressed their vision of how these issues could be better addressed. In their opinion, one representative should be trained in 12 administrative units because the village representative has the closest connection with the population. Therefore, S/he can help and provide information to citizens living in the local community on how to use e- services, where to find information, etc.

> **"I think it will increase and improve the level of awareness and inclusiveness of citizens living in the community. They will be able to answer the desired questions on the   spot" (in-depth interview, a public servant).**

In addition, there is a large municipality staff:

> "Every public servant is a source of additional information to those around them who are well informed about municipal projects and activities. We are the ones who are employed in public institutions. We are the recipients, owners and disseminators of information" (in-depth interview, a City Council member).

> "The region is still in a difficult situation. It is horrible when in the 21st century, people do not have a TV or Internet. I know such families that do not have even a phone. It bothers me to realize that a necessary item is a luxury item for some. I think in this case, the local authorities need a different and closer relationship with these people" (in-depth interview, Kindergartens` Union Lawyer).

The study participants did not have a homogenous attitude towards **the issue of local government accountability**. Some of them are relatively sceptical and perceive it as a formality. However, some respondents demonstrated a more positive attitude:

> "The best thing is that the self-government is interested in providing information to the population about their work. They tell us to send them our remarks. Nobody knows if they take it into account, but it is a good step" (focus group discussion, a community activist woman).

The research materials show that citizens positively perceive the aspiration of self-government to make their activities more open and transparent. It is evidenced by positive changes in e-governance in Khoni municipality (e.g. even the introduction of an e-petition when the mayor himself was involved in the information campaign). Although the self-government must promote various forms of citizen inclusiveness, this gesture was perceived as encouraging citizens` participation in local governance, followed by their unusual activity.

LOCAL SERVICE EFFICIENCY

Assessment of services tailored to Citizens' Needs - A survey conducted in Khoni Municipality assessed the extent to which local services meet the needs of different groups of citizens. First of all, we focused on the most vulnerable groups.

Based on the study participants information, it can be said that the Khoni budget is socially oriented and, despite scarce resources, they try to reach the most vulnerable groups of the population. The previous years` experience is considered in the municipality:

"Considering the experience gained in recent years, it is constantly being improved and adjusted to the needs". (in-depth interview with an expert, City Council deputy)

Nevertheless, according to the respondents, there is no qualified system of needs assessment and implementation of data analysis-based programs. Everyone agrees that for effective governance, it is vital to consider the needs of all groups. There is also political readiness to allocate resources based on social justice, but serious changes in this regard are delayed.

"There is no research practice to identify whether these services are sufficient for the population and what are their needs. Therefore, it will be important to conduct a needs study, which will improve the delivery of services to the population" (in-depth interview with an expert, City Council PR).

"I see the need for better management of social and healthcare services, and I would like them to be more developed" (in-depth interview, Head of the Kindergartens` Union).

The respondents pointed out that the existing program for young people with disabilities targets only beneficiaries under 18, which is not fair to those who do not belong to this category.

"I think we need to be more involved in this regard. Such people are most in need of an environment that helps them adapt" (in-depth interview, City Council member).

Qualitative research has identified several other pressing issues that require more attention from the municipality. The issue of remuneration of pre-school institutions` staff was among them:

"It is an excellent service that the children in the kindergarten have everything for free. However, the staff has such low salaries, and it would be good if the government paid attention to it. For example, only in the Khoni district wages are so low in the kindergartens. Could you imagine how to live on 135 GEL? The mayor is also aware that we have applied to other levels of the government, but we do not see any results" (focus group discussion, a single mother).

The leaders of the Day Care Center for Children with Disabilities expressed their concern. They believe that their beneficiaries deserve more attention from the local government to improve living conditions in the "centre".

"In general, inclusiveness is a priority for all regions. Having children of such an age is a priority since we have young children and not adults. Therefore, I think that any activity that the municipality will do regarding infrastructure, funding or any kind of support, even informal activities, will be acceptable to us. Our children need everything. They are already in social isolation" (focus group discussion, Manager of the Day Care Center for Children with Disabilities).

Quantitative research has revealed the views of citizens on the extent to which the activities of the municipality were tailored to their needs, and whether they received the services for which they had applied to the municipality: "All my problem/problems that I have applied for, have been solved" - 16%; "Partially solved" - 55%; "They did not solve any of the problems and did not provide me with a written reasoned refusal" - 5%; "They did not even try" - 6%; "We were promised, but the solution process was extremely long" - 9%; "They tried to solve it, but they gave an argument why they could not solve the problem. We were informed in written" - 5%; "I do not know/refuse to answer" - 3%. 21% of respondents believe that "local government fully informs the population about their services" - 21%. Other respondents choose the answer "No" - 22%; "Partially" - 52% and "I have no answer" - 5%. According to a qualitative study, a prerequisite for effective governance in the municipality is that government officials are aware of the citizens` needs and have communication with them.

"Khoni Mayor and the City Council Chairman, as well as the deputies, hold meetings with the population both online and offline. There are no barriers. However, it is better to have a closer connection with the population, even to discuss a specific issue and project, to listen to and share their needs and opinions" (in-depth interview, City Council PR).

Other respondents also highlighted the issue of beneficiaries with disabilities. They expressed a desire to create an environment tailored to them:

"I consider it important to strengthen/protect people with disabilities. They cannot use the services in the municipality without a support person. There are no ramps, as well as transport that would allow them to move. Neither the City Council has ramps. Information is not available to the blind. There is no favourable environment for them in the municipality. It is important to have a separate platform or a website adapted for the visually impaired to get the information they need independently. It would be good to create a navigation map made in Braille so that they can move around unaccompanied and enjoy the services that are available in the municipality. Voice signals, or modern services, to enable them to integrate into society independently are vital. If anything is done in this regard, it will be good" (in-depth interview, public servant).

IDPs, young people, small entrepreneurs were named among the groups that need support and strengthening. The respondents wish the self-government to have the resources to encourage and support the citizens' economic activity, as it can most manage these needs.

Citizens' visions on improving the efficiency of services. The issue of decentralization - The research materials show that the implementation of effective local policies requires the increase of self-government powers and the implementation of real decentralization. Respondents believe that self-government rights should not be only written on paper, and they should have more freedom. The central government should give the local government some freedom so that it [local government] can act according to the situation and be less dependent on the directives.

According to experts, local governments are in a complicated situation today because, in reality, there are more needs than resources. In addition, some authority issues are only formally in the municipality's hands (for example, the issue of water supply).

> **"Citizens' nihilism and frustration are sometimes reasoned by the fact that they do not see real leverage in the hands of the self-government. It will be even more difficult to see the role of their participation. Self-government should have real power. The authority of the country, the region and the municipality will win a lot. It is challenging to work in conditions when you want to do something, but you are unable. It may not be visible from a distance, but there are many problems on the ground. It is a right, to work like that, in other words, is like masochism" (in-depth interview with a self-government expert).**

Among the most critical issues in which the role of self-government should be increased, most of the survey participants name the issues of promoting the economic activity of citizens.

> **"In terms of agriculture, it would be good if the local self-government could issue grants. They know better how to distribute the grants. An environment must be created in which the local population has a perspective and chance to develop. I think the more authority is given to the local self-government, the better the quality of governance and service will be" (in- depth interview with a self-government expert).**

In all qualitative research groups, the issue of self-government participation in state social assistance programs was raised. Citizens are concerned that the scoring system is unfair and even complained about why self- government cannot actively cooperate with the social agency.

According to some respondents, the self-government should be more involved in these issues because it knows better the situation of families - who is in trouble and how much they need help.

> **"I believe that community members know better what challenges their people face and their recommendations would be more effective" (focus group discussion, mother of many children).**

However, some respondents expressed distrust that it could lead to nepotism.

> **"Yes, it is good for the village governors [mayoral representatives] to intervene, but it can lead to nepotism as well" (focus group discussion, a housewife).**

In general, respondents expressed an opinion that the greater authority of local authorities in these matters should be well understood.

> **"There are issues where self-government competencies are limited and require more independence. The central government should not resolve these issues. For example, granting social status to needy citizens is the most acute and painful in our municipality. It is solved at the level of the central government. It is one of the issues better known to the local self-government representatives (majoritarian MPs, the mayor`s representative). Consequently, it will be much more effective to allow them to participate in the decision-making process" (in-depth interview, City Council member).**

> **"There was talk that the local government was given the right to set 5% (it was almost decided but could not be implemented). If 25% of the Khoni population has social status, 20% are granted by a social agency, and five by a municipality. In such case, no one could arrange it, because it would be decided who deserved it and who did not" (focus group discussion, an IDP community activist).**

CITIZENS` PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE

The study has revealed that guarantees of citizens` inclusiveness are regulated at the legislative level. There are many levers to ensure openness and publicity, and everyone has the right to participate. But, mostly, citizens are less willing to get involved in the process of self-governance and participate in decision-making. They pointed out that more efforts are needed on the part of the municipality to ensure the citizens` inclusiveness and raise awareness, as it is also its area of authority.

In general, it was admitted that there is a willingness in the municipality to cooperate with the civil sector. It refers to qualified CSOs, as well as start-up organizations or individual civil activists.

There were some instances of interaction with local officials through social networks, after which a constructive dialogue took place on some issues.

> **"I have seen an example of cooperation and openness with citizens, and it has significantly increased their authority" (focus group discussion, a school teacher).**

The survey has revealed the respondents ` attitude of how they see civil society organization role in self- government. Many believe that the inclusiveness of civil society organizations in the process should be encouraged and promoted, as a strong civic sector leads to greater trust in government and legitimacy among the population.

> **"Active and strong civil society means more trust. The municipality actively cooperates with all the organizations interested in change and comes up with some initiatives. Then we implement projects together. There are many of such examples in our reality" (in-depth interview with a self-government expert).**

Other respondents also believe that organisations make a significant contribution to the municipality citizens` development, the implementation of self-governance, even in the protection of women's rights and prevention of violence. In addition, these are organizations working to provide information to the population.

We have identified obstacles hindering their work and what needs to be done to strengthen their role through the study. Citizens stressed the need for an in-depth, focused study and analysis of the citizens' needs by the CSO, very close, intensive communication with them, and generally high civic responsibility.

> **"Their civic activism is important, but no non-governmental organizations can do anything if they do not know our opinion and do not hope for our support. In general, the level of CSO involvement, their influence is powerful, and nothing can hinder these relations except their desire" (focus group discussion, an IDP activist woman).**

According to the respondents, the municipality should encourage CSO initiatives and increase their support within available resources.

When analysing the issue of citizens` inclusiveness, they also emphasized the settlement meetings importance. However, they noted that it is difficult to interact with the citizens during the pandemics fully.

Respondents again addressed the topic of the e-petition, recognizing it as the best form of affecting local decisions, which, due to its format, provides an example of the best interaction even during a pandemic.

> **"Introducing an electronic petition is one of the newest, most enjoyable, modern and acceptable forms for me because you can be involved in resolving your region`s problems" (in-depth interview with an expert, City Council MP).**

The attitude of ordinary citizens towards the issue was also unequivocally positive. It was admitted that after the activation of the petition topic, they saw the readiness of the authorities to cooperate. Their final results will reveal how the self-government considers the people`s concerns and recognizes the importance of citizens' contribution to local decisions.

It was revealed that according to the respondents, the e-petition campaign connected to Fund "Sukhumi" is the best example that if properly informed, the citizens may become interested, and a sense of civic responsibility may arise in them.

In terms of local participation, the importance of its various mechanisms, the Gender Equality Council, the Mayor's Civil Advisory Council, and the initiatives identified by them was raised. Recently, the Gender Equality Council has been actively working to initiate programs focused on local social groups. At this stage, work on an action plan is underway. However, the study has revealed that the local civic groups` awareness (including women) is low.

It was emphasized that the Mayor's Advisory Council should not formally function but have specific accountability.

> **"The Council is composed of compassionate people of their region and have different, vital experiences. I want to ask more questions to this council, have more inclusiveness on its part and make it more accountable" (in-depth interview with an expert, member of the Mayor's Advisory Council).**

The respondents also noted that the dynamics of the councils' activities slowed down during the pandemic induced restrictions.

Observing good practice regarding maintaining institutional memory in Khoni was very interesting. For example, a former mayor is a Mayor`s Civil Advisory Council member and is willing to share his own experience, of course, in the light of similar readiness from existing decision-makers. It was pointed out that maintaining this experience is essential because, unfortunately, it is not common in our political culture.

According to the study materials, civil budgeting is less relevant in the municipality, which is the best form of local inclusiveness.

Research participants expressed attitudes towards the role of the private sector in self-government. Respondents unequivocally emphasized that the current government is taking significant steps to strengthen the private sector and have intensive communication. However, the issue of communication and participation in self-governance is less relevant for the private sector. Besides, they are less active regarding civil responsibility. Unfortunately, when it comes to working on projects. There are many delays as the private sector is less motivated in social partnership and still needs serious work on their corporate responsibility.

4. CONCLUSION

The analysis of the Citizens' Needs study results conducted in Khoni Municipality has revealed that the PAR implementation increasing pace is observed in the given period. It is reflected in the tendency of local public servants to increase competencies in certain areas to improve e-services. Through the survey, we could find out that citizens often do not have the necessary information to get local services (What do e-services include? What services they can get? Whom they can apply for help?).

Besides, they do not always have the necessary resources regarding Internet, special centres or staff. Moreover, in communities far from the centre, there is either no Internet or low speed.

The citizens` positive attitude towards local participation and more trust, affected by the openness and willingness of cooperation from the municipality leaders, was evident.

The challenge in this regard is that despite the need for thorough staff training on e-services, in some cases, the shifts are slow: the information posted on the website is not complete.

The study has revealed a motivation in the municipality to ensure the fair provision of services; distribute existing resources and individual programs as efficiently as possible. Issues are adjusted based on the population`s needs. The experience gained through the implementation of previous years` programs is actively used in practice. But it is evident that without a thorough study of the effectiveness of systematic needs studies and programs, it is challenging to change the social packages. Sometimes their correction is perceived too painfully. Therefore, there are programs in the budget which need to be changed a long time ago. However, without proper research and disseminating the results of the present study, it is perceived as politically incorrect. Or, less

is being done to introduce new, innovative services that also require evidence-based information and sufficient arguments to initiate.

Research has shown that the issue of decentralization remains a serious challenge. According to the existing views, the local government effectiveness is primarily determined by the extent to which the municipality can make independent decisions. However, it is impossible to exercise some powers since it exceeds resources, or powers are not properly demarcated. Often, the needs exceed the available resources, and municipalities constantly have to deal with this challenge.

The introduction of economic empowerment programs and the decentralization of social work were highlighted as a top priority. In addition, the mandate granted by the community was emphasized. According to the respondents, the local government should have the power to impact the social assessment of families. And together with the social agency, it should identify the status of the socially vulnerable.

Analysis of the research materials shows an increase in civic engagement and readiness to participate in the municipality self-governance. The list of issues of the civil dialogue with the authorities has been significantly expanded. An essential positive practice was identified, which created a dialogue format for sharing local management experiences.

The study has highlighted the importance of civil society organizations in the success of Public Administration Reform implementation in the municipality. According to the expressed opinion, a strong civic sector raises the trust and legitimacy of the population in government.

The issue of establishing private sector social responsibility and making it a civic actor remains a challenge. Respondents also identified the need for intensive communication between the sector and the self-government. Along with sectoral issues, it may be reflected in the expansion of the social content of corporate responsibility. Based on the findings, the need for separate recommendations was identified:

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

To local government:

➢ *It is essential to realize the essence of Public Administration Reform and its importance, primarily by local public officials. So, the local agenda should include reporting on the reform implementation results, reviewing recommendations and reflecting them in local activities;*

- ➢ *It is essential for the local government to ensure the popularization of electronic services, to make maximum benefit of the mayor's representative institution and create appropriate groups (on a volunteer basis, or allocate exceptional staff);*

- ➢ *To get better local services, citizens need to have the appropriate information (what e-services include, which services can be obtained) and resources like the Internet and special centres. It is also necessary for the municipality to be actively involved in communication with Internet providers to facilitate the provision of quality Internet to citizens;*

- ➢ *It is desirable to complete the website reorganization process in time; outline the responsibilities of the services responsible for providing sectoral information and, to avoid delays, it is desirable to establish appropriate guidelines and identify areas for disciplinary action;*

- ➢ *It is desirable to maintain the positive dynamics regarding the electronic petition introduction, for which a flexible system of reviewing petitions, making political decisions, disseminating information about supported petitions should be introduced to the public;*

- ➢ *It is vital to maintain the dynamics of the civil participation mechanisms in the municipality - the Gender Equality Council, the Mayor's Advisory Council and other deliberative bodies, especially in the face of pandemic restrictions, and, if necessary, provide online technical support to implement systematic self- consultation with them. To overcome the consequences, provide the necessary platform for dialogue on the citizens` interests and needs;*

- ➢ *It is essential to launch a campaign in the municipality regarding the civil budget, which will create a new space for the citizens` active participation in self-governance;*

- ➢ *It is vital to pursue a more caring policy towards people with disabilities, study their needs, initiate appropriate programs in the local budget, and strengthen and promote cooperation with local providers;*

- ➢ *It is essential that local governments provide grants to create the opportunity and environment for local people to have the prospect of economic empowerment.*

To central government:

- ➢ *It is essential to increase new e-governance modules` introduction pace in municipalities and strengthen the necessary methodological assistance;*

➤ *It is vital to accelerate the policy of decentralization and the actual separation of powers of central and local government to ensure the improvement of citizen services at the local level;*

➤ *It is essential to review the existing centralized system of social assessment to make the existing criteria more transparent and fair. The local self-government`s role in the evaluation system should be identified, as it will often provide the most accurate information regarding the municipality social situation;*

In the presence of self-government recommendations, it is desirable to speed up studying the condition of the Pandemic-affected families to provide timely assistance to highly vulnerable families.

To CSOs:

➤ *It is essential to use the appropriate resources to successfully implement Public Administration Reform to assist the municipality (expertise, research, advocacy for necessary measures at the local level). Also, find additional resources in the form of external ones.*

RACHA-LECHKHUMI AND KVEMO SVANETI REGION

THE REPORT ON NEEDS

ASSESSMENT OF POPULATION

IN THE PROCESS OF PAR IMPLEMENTATION

IN AMBROLAURI MUNICIPALITY

FUND OF WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IS RESPONSIBLE
FOR CONDUCTING THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT,
IN RACHA-LECHKHUMI AND KVEMO SVANETI REGION
PREPARING AND EDITING THE REPORT

www.fwe.ge

INTRODUCTION

The successful implementation of the Public Administration Reform (PAR) plays a fundamental role in Georgia's path towards EU integration and is a key prerequisite for Georgia's successful development and the well-being of its people. Citizens' participation in decision-making in the reform process is a prerequisite for the success of this reform, which not only ensures the introduction of democratic, open, and good governance in the country, but also increases public confidence in political systems and strengthens the legitimacy of the decisions taken.

The COVID-19 pandemic has once again emphasized the need for proper public administration reform, especially in the area of e-government implementation, which would allow citizens to remotely, easily and quickly, without any additional bureaucratic procedures, inform local authorities about their problems and needs and address them.

In order to promote the effective implementation of PAR at the local level, the Cultural-Humanitarian Fund "Sukhumi" is implementing a project called **"A common forum for CSOs from Guria, Imereti and Racha-Lechkhumi for PAR Roadmap monitoring"** in partnership with the Fund of Women Entrepreneurs and the Imereti Scientists Union "Spectri", which is supported by the European Union.

The present study was conducted within the framework of the project, commissioned by and under the leadership of the Fund of Women Entrepreneurs, organizations, Self-Government Resource Center of Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti, Fund "Abkhazinterkont" – Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti regional HUB. It includes a local needs survey in Ambrolauri Municipality in terms of service delivery to citizens in the context of PAR objectives. As a result of the study, the current results and recommendations will be presented to local authorities and other relevant bodies, and their reflection in local policies will be advocated.

1. THE PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY OF THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The goal of the Study is to assess the efficiency, transparency, and quality of services provided by local authorities to citizens in the context of public administration reform in Ambrolauri municipality, and to develop appropriate recommendations to advocate for the improvement of local services.

Objectives of the Study - To identify the priority needs of citizens in accordance with the goal, to obtain evidence-based information.

Methodology - Triangulation approach was used for the study - simultaneous use of quantitative and qualitative research methods. A research tool was prepared: a

structured questionnaire for quantitative research, a semi-structured questionnaire, and a focus group guide for obtaining information using the qualitative research method.

Research Methods - 152 respondents were interviewed using the quantitative method and 25 respondents using the qualitative method (focus group discussion, in-depth interviews with local experts). Audio recordings and stenograms of the meetings were made, transcripts and relevant reports were prepared by the interviewers. Based on the interpretation and analysis of the data obtained, a study report was drawn up.

The study respondents were selected using the quota sampling method, taking into account socio-demographic indicators, and specific gender groups.

2. SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC STRUCTURE OF THE TARGET GROUP OF THE STUDY:

In total, 177 respondents took part in the study. Of these, 103 were women, 74 men.

As part of the quantitative survey, 152 respondents were interviewed, of which 82 were women and 60 were men. Their ages ranged from 18 to 65+ years and were divided into 3 age groups: 18-34 years old - 31%, 35-64 years old - 55% and 65+ years old - 14%. According to marital status, the majority of respondents (52%) are married, 34% are not married, 11% are widowed, and 3% are divorced.

The major part of respondents (63%) have complete higher education, 22% have complete secondary education, 1% has incomplete secondary education and 14% have secondary special/college education. 65% of the respondents do not have a special status, and those who have this status are distributed as follows: 24% - socially vulnerable, 3% - IDPs, 9% - parents with many children.

The majority of respondents are self-employed (41%). 9% are public servants/persons hired by the state; 18% - representatives of the budgetary organizations; 11% - pensioners, 6% - university/school students, and 15% - unemployed. The average monthly income of the respondents (including any cash income) ranges from 101-500 GEL - 41%, 3% of the respondents have income less than 100 GEL, 301-900 GEL income - 30%, and income over 901 GEL - 22%.

As for the qualitative study, local experts (municipal officials, representatives of the non-governmental sector, local intelligentsia) and civic groups (teachers, retirees, small entrepreneurs, educators of the Day Care Center for Children with Disabilities, housewives, medical staff) took part in it. Total of 25 participants, 21 women and 4 men (focus group - 21, interviews - 4).

3. KEY FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

3.1. TRANSPARENCY

Awareness issue: Quantitative research materials show that a part of the surveyed citizens consider themselves informed on the public administration reform. Interestingly, women are more informed: 29% of women think they are aware of the issue, while only 20% of men take a similar position. Depending on the age group, 18-34 and 35-64 age groups can be considered equally informed and the percentage varies from 28% to 29%. Low levels of awareness were found in the 65+ age group and it comprised only 5%.

Some qualitative survey respondents also believe that they are informed about public administration reform, but find it difficult to assess the results achieved in the municipality. Most of the respondents have only heard about the reform from various sources, but do not have more specific information about it. The participants could not explain the purpose of this reform and the consequences that its implementation should bring, however, they believe that real changes in the improvement of services are noticeable.

Participants in the quantitative survey also generally have a positive attitude towards public administration reform and believe that it will improve the quality of service to citizens (59%).

A specific position was expressed by the teachers participating in the focus group:

> **"I am informed from various trainings - on the topic of self-government decentralization, which is part of the reform. Such information is available to a very small segment of the population. For more information, more efficient, unified activities of municipal services and the non-governmental sector are needed".**

> **"The reform in the municipality is progressing positively. For the most part, the reform process was successful and improved the delivery of services to citizens by more than average" (focus group, teachers).**

The main sources of informing citizens are: television (24%), representatives of non-governmental organizations (25%), representatives of government agencies (26%) and Facebook or the website of the respective municipality (25%). The rate of use of the latter is much higher among respondents aged 35-64 (24%) than in the age group over 65 (14%).

It is easier for citizens to talk about a more specific topic - the pros and cons of

e-services, which is a boon brought by the reform. 67% of respondents have full or partial information about e-services, and like the public administration/service reform, the main sources of information are similar: television (18%), NGOs (26%), public servants (14%) and Facebook pages or a website of the respective municipality (21%).

According to the experts who participated in the study, the reform and, in particular, the e-government system has simplified the relationship between citizens and administrative units. Public information posted on the website of the municipality is available to everyone, and an interested citizen can receive the desired information in electronic form. The population is informed about the rules for using electronic services in various ways; however, in order to reach the masses, it is necessary to inform the population in their own settlements:

> **"Meetings are held with the population, information is posted on the website and in the social network. An e-manager recently added to the website by the nongovernmental organization will make it easier to get information in a timely manner. But more communication with the population is needed, especially about the activities of the majority deputies of the City Council" (Interview, Chairman of the City Council).**

Citizens participating in the qualitative survey also believe that it is possible to receive information and services electronically:

> **"The municipal website provides access to any public information and all interested parties can acquaint themselves with it" (interview, teacher).**

The problem is that most of the residents of the municipality are elderly people and can only use a simple mobile phone; they do not have the skills for using more complex devices. The main problem is the lack of Internet access.

> **"The problem is access to the Internet, especially in some rural communities, the Internet is poor or nonexistent. Also, not everyone has a computer or Android and those who have cannot use them. To improve the situation, the state needs to arrange frequent meetings with the urban and rural population" (focus group, sole proprietor).**

It is interesting to know what e-services do the respondents of the quantitative survey use? Their answers are presented in Chart (**N1**):

Which municipal e-services have you used?

- Online announcement about vacant positions
- Searching for contact info on the municipal employee
- Grievance, suggestion submitting
- E-petition
- Reading reports
- Information about budget
- Purchase plan, report
- Normative acts, resolutions of the City Hall
- Getting acquainted with the agenda / minutes of City Council sittings
- Signing up for a meeting
- Not interested
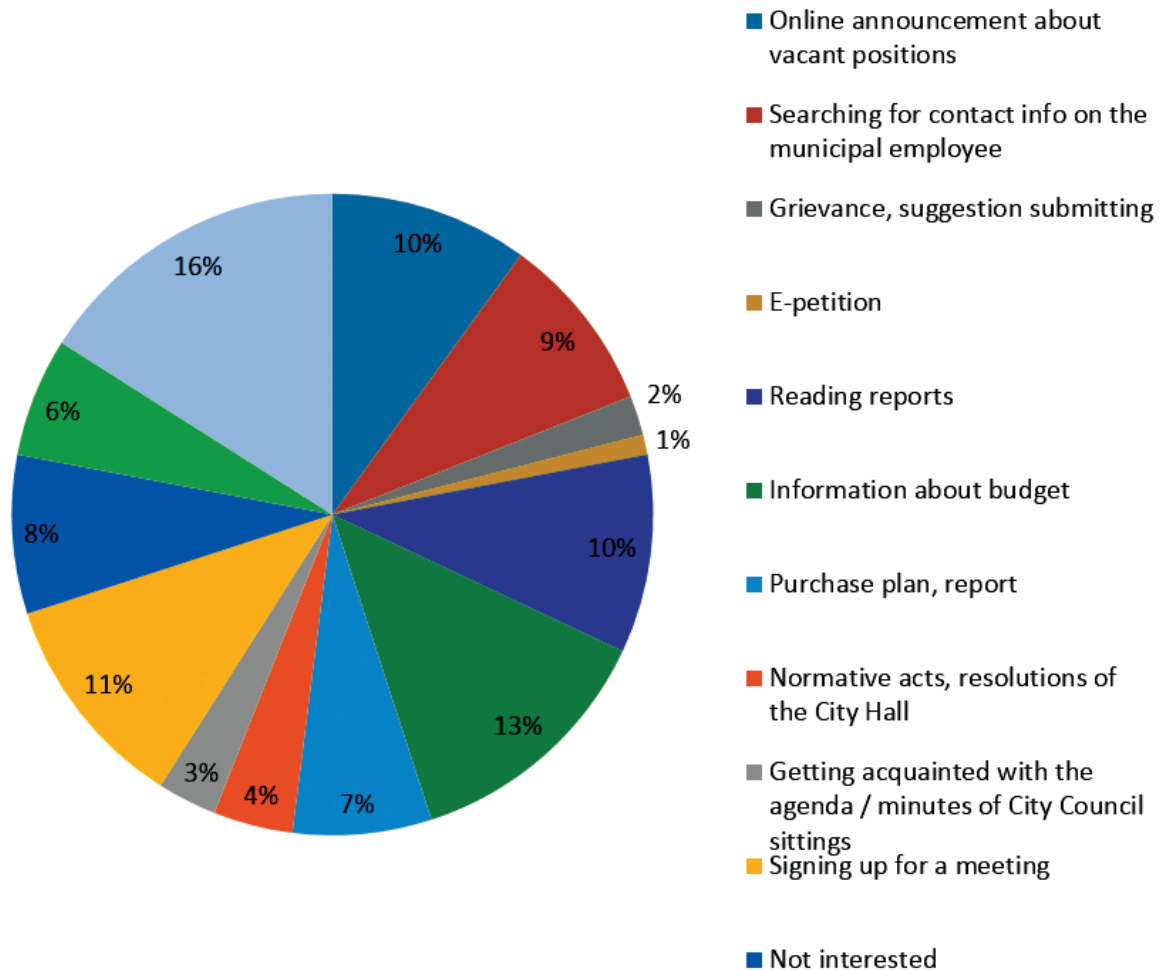
Qualitative survey participants also describe how they used electronic platforms: These include searching for contact information, electronic communication.

"I searched information on public procurement, vacancies on the local government website" (focus group, speech therapist of the Daycare Center for Persons with Disabilities).

The respondents expressed their opinion on what should be paid attention to in order to improve the services provided to the population in the reform process. The main attention was paid to the following issues: increasing the competence of public servants - 21%; timely and complete informing of the population about public electronic services (television, information meetings, information leaflets, Facebook page, website) - 20%; In particular, the provision of services, taking into account the needs and priorities of vulnerable groups (for example, mothers of

many children, single mothers; women victims of violence; children; people with disabilities, etc.) - 16%; Increase in the number of services and territorial coverage to ensure access -15%; Simplification of the process of obtaining services -11%.

The main electronic service for the respondents is the Facebook page of the mayor's office (26%), but they also use the official website of the municipality (18%), the City Council page on Facebook (15%), the website of the regional administration (7%), the civic portal www.my.gov.ge (4%). An interesting correlation was found between age and the use of e-services - the older the respondent, the more difficult it is considered for the respondent to use the electronic form to obtain services from the local government.

Focus group discussions showed how open and transparent, according to citizens, the current processes in the municipality are, what accountability is and what needs to be done to improve it. Citizens also praised the launch of an "electronic messenger" on a website initiated by local civil society organizations that provides links to various services:

> **"The electronic messenger is very effective because we can communicate directly electronically with any city hall and city council office or city councilor" (special trainer at a Day care center for persons with disabilities).**

The participants of the survey expressed their heartache that the inertia of the citizens in terms of communication and participation with the self-government is noticeable. However, different approaches were identified:

> **"Raising awareness is necessary by all means, so that people from all walks of life feel like an important member of society, a participant in the implementation of this reform" (focus group, mother of many children).**

Speaking about the transparency and accountability of self-government, some respondents noted that sometimes the population is not sufficiently informed about municipal projects. The reason for this is that the local civil sector is passive in the decision-making process and the formation of the local budget.

> **"There is a certain level of transparency, but the population is late for municipal projects when their implementation begins or ends. Frequent meetings with the population, their participation in the problem-solving process and budget discussions are important. It would also be good if the government cooperated more with NGOs, which would increase awareness and accountability" (Interview, Sole Proprietor).**

3.2. SERVICE EFFICIENCY

Electronic services, based on the study materials increase the efficiency of service delivery, save citizens' time, finance, and avoid various bureaucratic service procedures.

Quantitative survey shows that 24% of respondents did not use the principle of electronic booking to meet with the representative of the desired agency in the past year, although it is noteworthy that 26% were not informed on such opportunity. The majority are satisfied with the service received (60%), but the results differ depending on which agency the citizen applied to.

For more visual images, we can see on the chart the satisfaction / dissatisfaction in the case of the mayor's office, City Council, and mayor. As you can see in the chart, in the case of the City Council, most of the respondents were satisfied. However, in general, the data are not very different from each other. **Chart N2:**

It is interesting how effective the services received by the citizens were and to what extent they solved the specific problem/problems due to which they applied to the self-government: in most cases (47%) the problem was partially or completely solved, although it did not solve the problem for a small part (6%) nor did they receive a reasoned written refusal.

For the majority of respondents, the information provided to the population by local authorities about the implemented activities or services is either complete or partial (58%). Only 13% believe that information is not being disseminated properly.

The materials of the survey revealed different positions on the effectiveness of local services: the respondents of the in-depth interviews stressed on the effectiveness of the services provided by the municipality. Some respondents state that they are maximally adapted to the needs and priorities of citizens. At the same time, the quality of the services provided is checked by the social service through monitoring, in which any interested citizen can participate.

"The effectiveness of the services provided by the municipality is studied through monitoring by the social service. Citizens are also involved" (focus group, teacher).

From a different position, self-government services are less adapted to the needs of citizens and do not have information on the practice of researching/analyzing the needs of specific groups of citizens. In their opinion, the monitoring carried out is also formal in nature and is not characterized by special results.

Difficulties in identifying needs are also highlighted by focus group discussion participants:

"I think it only partially meets the needs. This is due to the fact that a preliminary study of needs is not carried out. This is evidenced by the fact that for the operation of the day center we requested the necessary disinfectant solutions and financial support from the municipality for the purchase of the necessary equipment in the conditions of "Covid", to which we did not receive a positive answer. The Fund of Women Entrepreneurs helped us in it and provided all the necessary materials and equipment" (focus group, physiotherapist of the Daycare Center for Persons with Disabilities).

In terms of needs identification, the most obvious was the study of important questions for young people:

"In our municipality, a study of the needs of youth is being carried out. I have no information about other studies" (Interview, President of the Racha Youth Assembly).

The study identified problems in which young people living in the municipality need development, providing a more attractive socio-economic environment to reduce migration.

"I believe the needs of youth should be better considered. The wave of migration from our region is quite large, and most young people leave the municipality for various reasons: work, education, better living conditions ... I think it is especially important to focus on this segment" (focus group, teacher).

The study found that the Covid-19 pandemic had had a social impact on the municipality. Pensioners and lonely elderly people were especially vulnerable, and the respondents believed that the municipality should be able to take care of them.

It should be noted that, as noted by the respondents, in connection with the Covid-19 pandemic, students switched to online learning mode and the vast majority of them returned to the municipality. It is important that they use their free time effectively and that the municipality uses their potential. According to the respondents, it would be

good if the municipality hired them, even on an hourly basis, for ongoing infrastructure activities; encouraging them for various social, cultural, educational and volunteer activities.

In addition, respondents believe that people with disabilities, children deprived of care, and socially vulnerable large families need special attention.

Speaking of the needs, the emphasis was made on the importance of supporting small businesses and enhancing the role of the municipality in this regard.

"Infrastructure projects alone cannot economically strengthen the population of the municipality. It is necessary to increase costs and stimulate entrepreneurship - with due transparency" (focus group, teacher).

The citizens paid special attention to the quality of drinking water; putting in order of storm-water channels; disaster mitigation measures.

The same questions were raised by a senior local government official. According to him, the priority issues in the municipality are

"Social protection, health care, drinking water quality, disaster mitigation". First of all, local resources should be directed here" (Interview, Chairman of the City Council).

Citizens in all focus groups indicated the urgency of environmental protection problems: "Putting in order of drainage systems, strengthening of dykes on the banks of the Rioni River." In their place, the work had to be performed by professionals so as not to endanger the life and health of people, even economic security, which is associated with the economic damage caused by floods. Some groups named the need for improvement of internal transportation.

To assess the effectiveness of the services, the comments of individual citizens were interesting:

"For me, the services provided are satisfactory - granting the status of a permanent resident, prompt response of the trustee in the legalization of land" (focus group, sole proprietor).

Citizens interviewed in the quantitative survey also identified the main areas that require more use of the municipality's human or financial resources: Healthcare - 70%; Social assistance - 55%; Culture-education - 53%; Infrastructure (roads, bridges, etc.) - 45%; Promoting economic development and creating an appropriate environment locally - 48%; Drinking water (quality, supply) - 33%; Management of stray animals - 26%; Food safety - 26%; Sports events - 23%; Adapted environment

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for people with disabilities - 22%; Public transport - 19%; Support services for homeless people (food, accommodation) - 15%; Parks and landscaping - 11%; Sewerage - 9%; Preschool education - 9%; Sewer networks - 8%; Repair of damaged houses / yards - 6%; Development of support services taking into account the needs of women victims of violence - 5%; cleaning/waste management - 3% and irrigation water/irrigation - 2%.

The study revealed one of the main gaps that hinder the reform of public administration - the successful implementation of decentralization. This applies to the general situation and is identical in Ambrolauri municipality.

The respondents unanimously note that the powers of local self-government are not commensurate with the available resources, and self-government does not have the necessary autonomy to resolve many issues. Including issues within its competence. In this regard, an obstacle is the ambiguity on the issue of sectoral segregation. Both local public servants and ordinary citizens are unanimous on this issue:

> **"Self-government should be able to make decisions independently at the local level, which should be provided for by the central government, but these decisions should be transparent to avoid bias or misdemeanor" (focus group, sole proprietor).**

> **"There is a need for separation of powers, because in municipal centers and rural communities, such benefits need to be considered, which are not allowed by the policy of the sectoral ministry" (focus group, teacher).**

The most important topic on which the respondents give preference to more powers of self-government is the issue of granting social status.

> **"Granting the status of socially vulnerable should be decided first of all, I believe that this is the biggest chaos. The participation of self-government is necessary here" (focus group, teacher).**

The survey revealed the attitude of citizens towards anti-corruption mechanisms and the qualifications of officials, and there were often critical opinions:

> **"There should be a system of control over the activities of public servants and a mechanism for their disciplinary responsibility. Often, one or another official is dismissed and another is appointed, but the reason for this is not announced, which becomes the basis for thousands of rumors that negatively affect society."**

> **"In some bodies of the municipality, there are facts of nepotism and there are signs of uneven professional development" (focus group, sole proprietor).**
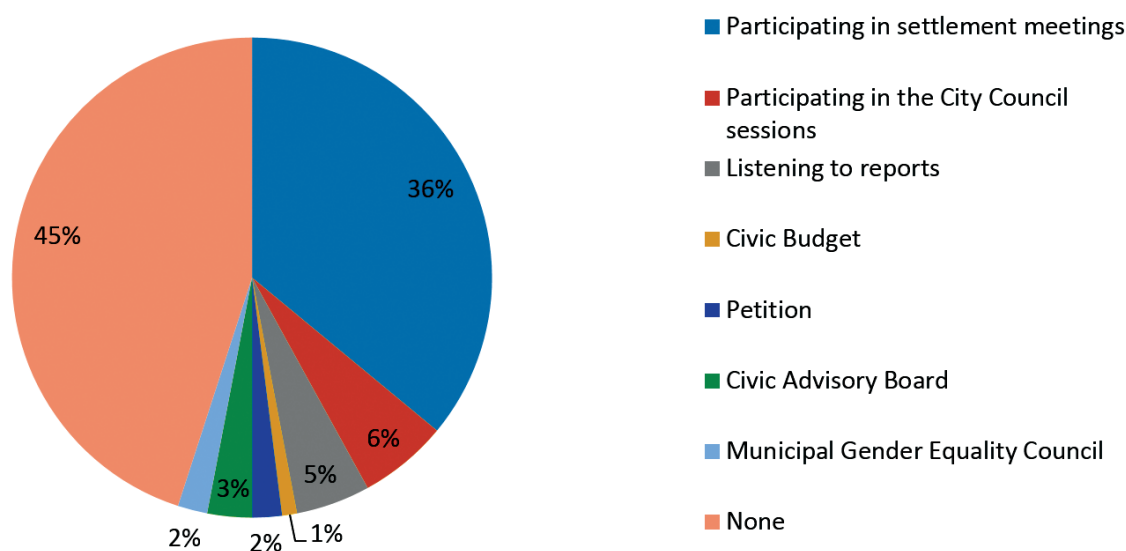
3.3. INCLUSIVENESS

In terms of the results of public administration reform, citizen engagement is by far a very important issue. 19% of respondents believe that local public officials are aware of the importance of this issue, 51% believe that they are partially aware of it, and 13% believe that local public officials do not understand / do not understand the necessity and importance of this issue.

"This is ineffective, because citizens are mainly information receivers, not decision-makers. Citizens play the role of listeners rather than participants in budgeting. The involvement of citizens critical of the authorities in local processes is limited" (focus group, sole proprietor).

Where citizen participation is encouraged, this mainly applies to: Local priority setting process - 20%; Local budget review - 12%; Identifying the needs of citizens - 11%; Development of municipal programs - 7% and taking into account citizens' initiatives (for example, the civil budget) - 5%. From time to time, the respondents themselves were involved in various social activities, the results of which were distributed as follows: (**Chart** N3)

Which form of civic engagement have you used?

- Participating in settlement meetings
- Participating in the City Council sessions
- Listening to reports
- Civic Budget
- Petition
- Civic Advisory Board
- Municipal Gender Equality Council
- None

36% / 6% / 5% / 1% / 2% / 2% / 3% / 45%

According to the study, the most frequently mentioned activity was participation in settlement meetings, and women are more actively involved in it than men and women aged 35 to 64 are more active in this regard.

The material provided by the participants in the qualitative research confirms the information that citizens do not use the norms established by law in the issue of civic engagement.

> **"None of them are actively used. The population has little information about the tools of civic engagement. We have a weak civil society. Raising awareness of the forms of participation, involvement, I think, is one of the first steps in the process of the formation of a civil society"** (Interview, President of the Racha Youth Assembly).

According to the respondents, in 39% of the cases they were not willing to provide service-related comments to the relevant agencies. In the event of such a will, 36% did not have the opportunity to give feedback, and 25% had and used this opportunity in various ways: a personal meeting with a representative of the relevant agency (65% of those who used it), posting. position on the municipality's Facebook page - 23%, Letter -12%.

The respondents indicated different needs for constructive dialogue and more active participation in self-government. Most frequent answers were: Taking into account citizens' initiatives by strengthening the practice of the civil budget - 26%; Periodic meetings with local government representatives for consultation - 24%; Involvement of citizens in the development of municipal programs and budget analysis - 20%; Availability of a public servant staff responsible for more industry profile / specific issues - 20%; Improving the effectiveness of gender equality, the format of public advisers and other councils - 5%.
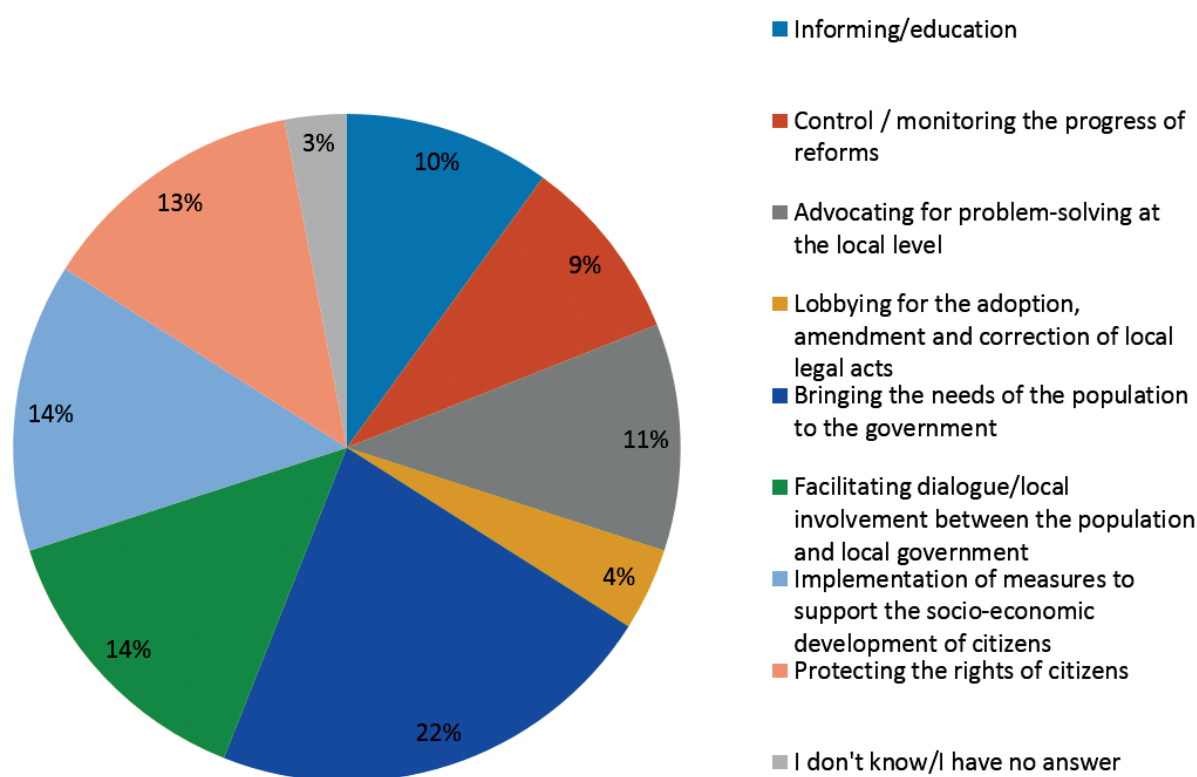
Against this background, it turned out that the self-government is ready to cooperate with different strata of citizens, but there are no appropriate measures to push them to being more active.

> **"Today this trend is gaining momentum. Personally, I am also actively involved in order to maintain a high level of engagement. Today, both the mayor's office and the city council are ready to collaborate with young people and share their needs"** (interview, local CSO representative).

Speaking about the role of non-governmental organizations in local civil processes, some respondents indicated that they are mainly dependent on funding, and therefore there is a risk of fragmentation of their activities. Nevertheless, positions were identified according to which they are more or less able to convey to the government the needs of citizens, their ailments and perform the role of a mediator. They highlighted their resource in terms of the skills required for awareness and educational activities.

The respondents are mostly familiar with more than one civil society organization involved in local political dialogue (41%), while 28% of the respondents recall more than three similar civil society organizations. Their cooperation with local authorities in order to improve the well-being of citizens is highly valued (62%). In general, the role of civil society organizations was presented to the respondents in different ways, and the graph clearly shows the most frequently observed responses: (**Chart** N4):

Where do you see the role of local civil society organizations in public administration reform?

- Informing/education
- Control / monitoring the progress of reforms
- Advocating for problem-solving at the local level
- Lobbying for the adoption, amendment and correction of local legal acts
- Bringing the needs of the population to the government
- Facilitating dialogue/local involvement between the population and local government
- Implementation of measures to support the socio-economic development of citizens
- Protecting the rights of citizens
- I don't know/I have no answer

Pie chart values: 10%, 9%, 11%, 4%, 22%, 14%, 14%, 13%, 3%

Mechanisms for civic participation, such as the Gender Council, the Mayor's Civic Advisory Council, and others, are hardly perceived by participants as an accountable social partner.

The survey participants have a very vague idea about the need for cooperation between the public and private sectors in the process of implementing public administration reform and do not see the importance of this cooperation. Those who have seen it, while describing effective mechanisms in this regard, have expressed their heartache that such cooperation is observed only with representatives of the private sector loyal to the government, close to them, while the capabilities of others are neglected.

4. KEY FINDINGS/CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Transparency: A survey conducted in Ambrolauri revealed that at this stage of the public administration reform initiated in the municipality, positive dynamics are maintained and there are certain steps forward, especially in terms of the introduction of e-services. Public information is posted properly and in a timely manner, social networks are functioning properly, the website has become more interactive with the addition of an "electronic messenger", enabling uninterrupted and direct communication with local services.

The challenge still remains: the availability and quality of the Internet is still an unresolved issue in terms of service efficiency: the Internet is either not available in the villages at all, or it is at this low speed. There are other impediments as well. In the municipality, for example, the majority of the population is elderly. Most of them either do not have proper technical equipment, or do not have the skills to use it. This negatively affects the scale of e-service delivery and citizens are deprived of the benefit of this bounty.

There is a clear political readiness to mobilize the entire staff of the municipality, especially the representatives of the mayor's office, local deputies, so that the citizens can receive the necessary services on the spot; to ensure the proper material base in the community itself (computer, properly qualified staff).

Local government accountability, openness, transparency of activities were mostly positively assessed, but they also expressed their heartbreak that citizens learn about a project only after it is has been launched or during the presentation of results.

In terms of service efficiency, it hs been identified that the delivery of public services has improved, but there is still a need to implement more efficient and innovative systems, public control, evaluation and accountability, and effective mechanisms to prevent corruption; The need to upgrade the qualifications of self-governing officials, improve the management systems and administrative structures of self-governing units, so that citizens are not left with questions during staff changes, or local criteria for the selection of officials.

The study showed that both official structures and citizens are aware of the importance of the proper youth policy, which requires innovative approaches and the active participation of the youth community itself. Problems with the quality of the Internet in the online learning in the municipality during the pandemic were also identified.

The issue of adequate support for vulnerable groups of citizens in the the face of the Covid-19 pandemic - persons with disabilities, the elderly living alone, socially vulnerable large families - were named as challenges.

The need for local economic development programs and the importance of municipal involvement, including in the use of tourism potential, were highlighted.

An alarming level on environmental issues was observed. The need for embankment fortification works on the Enguri River, which, in parallel with the efforts made by the municipality, requires intersectoral cooperation in providing adequate resources, expertise, and qualified personnel.

An irreversible trend of "aging" of the municipality population has been identified. The self-government is trying to take steps to implement a benevolent policy towards the youth, which is very difficult in the conditions of local scarce resources. It is therefore important to introduce new innovative approaches, to find additional resources to attract young staff to the municipality.

Participation/Inclusiveness - The study revealed that the civil society of the municipality is less involved in self-government, out of the proven forms of participation, only meetings in the settlements are used. Citizens budgeting is out of the question, citizens cooperate less with the Council for Gender Equality and the Citizens Advisory Council. The only civil actors are local civil society organizations, which have relatively limited resources and do not have a significant impact on the current processes in the municipality. Nevertheless, their activities were assessed positively. According to the results of the study, the need for the following recommendations have been identified:

Recommendations:

To the local government:

➤ It is necessary to maintain positive dynamics in terms of introducing proper awareness of the implementation of public administration reform at the local level, primarily among the self-government personnel: And also in communities where access to the Internet is limited, the provision of mobile teams equipped with appropriate technical and methodological resources to facilitate citizens' access to services;

➢ It is important to analyze the results of monitoring the reform and take into account recommendations for improving local governance; Initiation of services and programs tailored to the needs of citizens; To familiarize with the needs for practical research, develop a mechanism for the system of program effectiveness and train staff;

➢ It is important to encourage citizens, especially young people, to participate in self-government; Facilitating settlement meetings, petitions, civic budgeting, advisory councils and other forms of civic participation in collaboration with the nongovernmental sector;

➢ Addressing priority environmental issues is vital: identifying the resources required for the construction of the Rioni embankment, using intersectoral collaboration to attract additional resources;

➢ It is desirable to develop an appropriate strategy for using the tourism potential of the municipality; Solving the issue of budget support for small business development programs;

➢ It is important to develop and implement an anti-corruption strategy and action plan. Active cooperation in this regard with the local civil sector, media.

To the Central Government:

➢ It is very important to respond in a timely manner to environmental threats: the fortifications of the embankments of the Rioni River requires serious large-scale work that must be carried out by qualified personnel, and the local authorities do not have the necessary resources for this. It is important to attract qualified personnel, experts, communicate with international donors to mobilize additional resources;

➢ For the successful implementation of public administration reform, it is important to have an irreversible implementation of the decentralization strategy, full delegation of real powers on issues within the competence of self-government. These include the decentralization of social work, an increase in the role of self-government in assessing the social status of families, and the reorganization of the "point system".

To Civil Society Organizations

➢ It is important that local civil society organizations actively participate in monitoring the implementation of public administration reform, identify existing violations in a timely manner and provide recommendations; Collaborate with government to introduce innovative services, especially for young people.

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RACHA-LECHKHUMI AND KVEMO SVANETI REGION

THE REPORT ON NEEDS

ASSESSMENT OF POPULATION

IN THE PROCESS OF PAR IMPLEMENTATION

IN TSAGERI MUNICIPALITY

FUND OF WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IS RESPONSIBLE
FOR CONDUCTING THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT,
IN RACHA-LECHKHUMI AND KVEMO SVANETI REGION
PREPARING AND EDITING THE REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

The successful implementation of the Public Administration Reform (PAR) plays a fundamental role in Georgia's path towards EU integration and is a key prerequisite for Georgia's successful development and the well-being of its people. Citizens' participation in decision-making in the reform process is a prerequisite for the success of this reform, which not only ensures the introduction of democratic, open and good governance in the country, but also increases public confidence in political systems and strengthens the legitimacy of the decisions taken.

The COVID-19 virus pandemic has once again emphasized the need for proper Public Administration Reform, especially in the area of e-government implementation, which would allow citizens to remotely, easily and quickly, without any additional bureaucratic procedures, inform local authorities about their problems and needs and address them.

In order to promote the effective implementation of PAR at the local level, the Cultural-Humanitarian Fund "Sukhumi" is implementing a project "A common forum for CSOs from Guria, Imereti and Racha-Lechkhumi for PAR Roadmap monitoring" in partnership with the Fund of Women Entrepreneurs and the Imereti Scientists Union "Spectri", which is supported by the European Union.

The present study was conducted within the framework of the project, commissioned by and under the leadership of the Fund of Women Entrepreneurs, organizations, "Active Citizen – Accountable Government" and Women's Rights and Gender Equality Centre. It includes a local needs survey in Tsageri Municipality in terms of service delivery to citizens in the context of PAR objectives. As a result of the study, the current results and recommendations will be presented to local authorities and other relevant bodies, and their reflection in local policies will be advocated.

1. THE PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY OF THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The goal of the study of the citizens' needs assessment and evaluate the efficiency, transparency and inclusiveness of services provided to citizens by Tsageri municipality; Develop concrete recommendations based on evidence-based information to improve local services.

Objectives of the study - to advocate the problems and challenges identified as a result of studying the needs of citizens in the relevant departments at the local and national levels; Include priority citizens' issues in the municipality's action plan.

Methodology - The study was conducted using a triangulation approach, which involves the unification and sharing of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Research Manual and Questionnaires developed just before fieldwork: Self-Completed Questionnaire for quantitative research, for qualitative research - an unstructured in-depth interview questionnaire, as well as a focus group guide.

The study assessed local needs in Tsageri municipality in terms of service delivery to citizens in the context of PAR objectives. The assessment was carried out in the following areas: transparency, efficiency, inclusiveness.

Sampling frame - the sampling of the study were the inhabitants of the municipality of Tsageri. This study is representative, as the most common result is quantitative and qualitative research and generalization is allowed.

Sampling - The principle of both cluster and quota sampling was used for the research. It covered citizens of different demographic profiles. In total, 150 respondents were interviewed as part of the quantitative survey, while the qualitative survey included 3 focus groups (5-6 respondents in each) and 4 in-depth interviews. A total of 27 respondents, 19 women and 8 men.

The study as a whole covered 177 respondents, including 101 women, 76 men. Survey data analysis was performed using SPSS program.

Study period - May-June 2021.

Limitations - The study was conducted in the context of the limitations associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, which resulted in some respondents being contacted by telephone and online.

2. SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC BLOCK OF THE STUDY:

As part of the quantitative survey 150 respondents - 82 women and 68 men - were interviewed. The majority of respondents (56%) were 35-64 years old. In the age group, however, respondents aged 18-34 and 65+ were also included in the study. The representativeness of the study also determined by the fact that the respondents have different status, education, social status, etc.

29% of the respondents had secondary education, 53% had complete higher education and 18% had special education, 53% of them are married, 28% are not married, 13% are widowed and 6% are divorced. A special status was revealed (for visuals - **Chart** N1):

Presence of a Special Status

■ Socially Vulnerable   ■ Parent of Many Children   ■ IDP   ■ Other/No Such Status
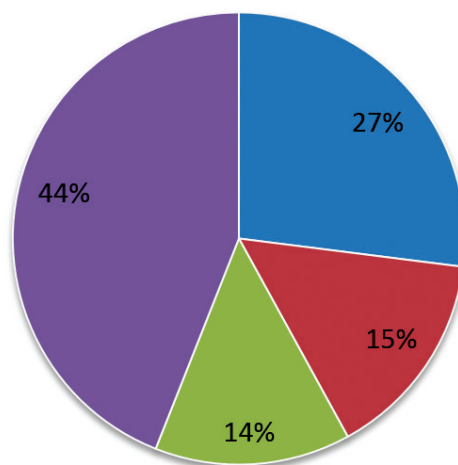
The employment statuses of the respondents are as follows: a) Unemployed - 24%; B) Public servant / person hired by the state - 25%; C) pensioner -11%; D) self-employed (entrepreneur, farmer) - 21%; D) budgetary organization - 15%; E) Student - 3%. 12% of respondents refused to answer how much their income was. The most common answer is that the average monthly income of the respondents' families (including any cash income) does not exceed five hundred (500) GEL (40%). 27% have an income of up to 900 GEL and only 16% - more than that. The income of 5% of the respondents is less than 100 GEL.

3. KEY FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

3.1. TRANSPARENCY

How informed are they about the Public Administration Reform: According to quantitative data, 71% of respondents are informed (sum of the answers "yes" and "partially"). Answer "No" - 26%. Data filtering shows that women are more informed (74%) than men (66%). There is a difference between respondents of different age categories: 80% of respondents under 43 are informed. 34-64 - 76% and over 65 - 50%. The source of information is non-governmental organizations - 37%, television - 27%, government officials - 22%. The quality of obtaining information about the reform on the Internet (social networks) is relatively low, and here the age category is of decisive importance (the youngest age group - 20%, the highest - 8%).

Qualitative data explains the apparent lack of internet and, in particular, quality internet in the municipality. Information is provided mainly through public meetings, telephone communications.

The respondents often indicated that the first problem for them was the problem of Internet access due to geographic location -

> **"For example, I live in a village where, if a special reception tower is not erected at the top of another village, the population will not be able to access the Internet, so the village of Agvi, for example, is completely cut off from receiving such benefits" (interview, a specialist from the mayor's office).**

Basically, respondents to a qualitative survey believe that they have some information about the Public Administration Reform and give a mostly positive assessment, because they see how even the issue of electronic services can change the conditions of service, relieve a citizen of bureaucratic procedures.
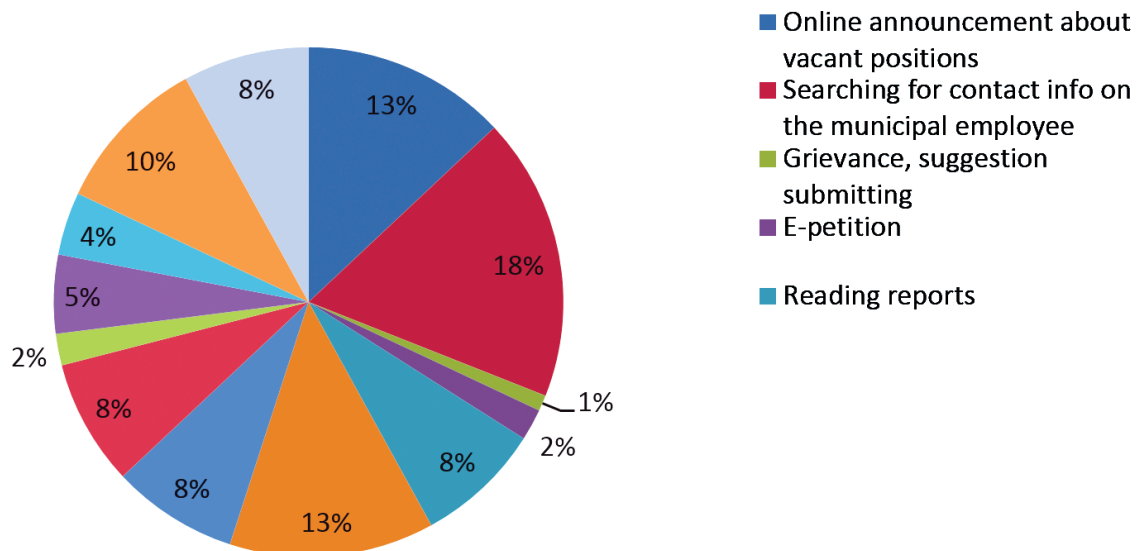
> **"The introduction of the e-government system is one of the important details of this reform. I used the site, and I had the opportunity to understand the nuances of budgeting, helping people with disabilities and programs "- (focus group, parent of a child with disabilities). "Electronic services have replaced bureaucratic barriers, and I personally needed it several times, and I was able to use this system in the city hall" (focus group - private sector).**

Citizens note that there is much more communication and exchange of information with citizens, in addition to local structures, the civil sector is also actively involved in it. Many people had information that by 2020 Tsageri municipality will be included in the top ten municipalities in the transparency accountability index. A category of citizens interested in the issue and looking for information has been identified: "The civic education teacher of our school is a working group [Tsageri Municipality Public Administration Reform Monitoring Working Group] member and I have talked to him/her many times about the pros and cons of reform "(focus group, school teacher). However, less interest from citizens was often highlighted during the discussions. Some of them do not have information about what the reform includes, how much change it brings, even in terms of raising the qualifications of public servants, improving services, which also gives them an indefinite opportunity - to be involved in local processes, to present their initiative, to make critical remarks. Qualitative research also revealed another hindering factor: the lack of proper skills on the part of citizens, which also hinders their unimpeded access to services and communication with local bodies. Respondents discussed ways to address these issues:

Practice of using e-services: A quantitative study showed which e-services are used most often in the municipality. See details. **Chart N2:**

Which municipal e-services have you used?

Legend:
- Online announcement about vacant positions
- Searching for contact info on the municipal employee
- Grievance, suggestion submitting
- E-petition
- Reading reports

Values shown: 13%, 18%, 2%, 1%, 8%, 13%, 8%, 2%, 5%, 4%, 10%, 8%

Quantitative study materials showed that citizens are more aware of e-services than of Public Administration Reform in general. (Number of informed people - 82%. Including "informed" - 36%, "more or less informed" - 46%). "Not informed" - 16%. And 2% are not interested in this information at all. The majority of respondents used: search for contact information of a municipal employee - 18%; online announcements for vacancies - 13%.

The study experts, speaking about e-services, unanimously note that the transition to e-government is very timely and necessary. The global pandemic has highlighted the need and importance of electronic communications. At first there was more mistrust and nihilism, but gradually skepticism disappeared as all its advantages became apparent:

"The e-services in our municipality have not been perfect from the start. However, in the process of reforming, the online site has gradually improved, and today we can say that the e-government system is easily accessible to the population. This was also facilitated by the activation of local non-governmental organizations and the step-by-step work that they are doing in this direction" (interview, public servant).

Along with positive aspects, difficulties were also noted:

"The biggest problem of Public Administration Reform is to simplify the provision of services to citizens, provide them with information, introduce certain mechanisms" (focus group, CSO).

"It is accessible in the sense that it is open and transparent, but given the speed and quality of the Internet, as well as the lack of knowledge about the relevant skills, there are serious accessibility problems" (Interview with the head of the Mayor's Office).

"No matter how much information is provided to the population, until this problem is resolved, the receipt of electronic services will not be ideal" (teacher, focus group).

Respondents of the quantitative survey identified issues that need to be addressed in order to improve the services provided to the population during the reform process. Most frequently named were: offering services tailored to the needs and priorities of particularly vulnerable groups (e.g. mothers with many children, single mothers, women victims of violence, children, persons with disabilities, etc.) (26%); Timely and complete informing on public e-services (TV, information meetings, information flyers, Facebook, website) - 21%; Simplification of the process of receiving services - 13%; Increase the number of services and territorial coverage (to ensure access) - 11%; Increase the competence of public servants - 10% and increase the remuneration of public servants - 3%.

The issue of whose needs should be addressed in the allocation of local resources has been identified as one of the most vulnerable groups of persons with disabilities, IDPs. According to the respondents, the elderly, despite the status of a single elderly person, should not be left out of the spotlight if they are currently deprived of decent old age conditions. Particular focus was placed on the need for a caring policy towards young people so that they do not eventually become alien to the region, have the desire and motivation to establish themselves here. Women were also named as a group in need of economic empowerment.

"Given this scale of migration, more attention needs to be paid to youth issues and the economic empowerment of women. It would be nice if the local non-governmental sector advocated these issues in the self-government" (focus group, sole proprietor).

As the interviewees note,

"There are still citizens living in rural areas who do not know about the existence of such services at all. The information and awareness campaign should be continued by both our local government and the non-governmental sector. We need at least a year to achieve some result" (head of the youth affairs department of the mayor's office).

To ensure this issue, according to other respondents, it is necessary to have special centers in the villages (Internet, technical equipment). The creation of proper technical conditions in the offices of the representatives of the mayor's office will change the situation.

"Currently, we are waiting for the implementation of a project in which the offices of representatives of the mayor's office in the communities will be equipped with computers, the Internet, and this will help the population to receive information" (interview, public servant).

The question was also emphasized at the focus group discussions:

"Even small banners and informational videos on municipal government websites would help raise awareness in this regard" (focus group, housewife).

"I am a pensioner, I live far from the district, and it is very nice to know that I can receive municipal services without coming here. Lack of information is the reason for dissatisfaction in our society" - (Focus group, pensioner woman).

It was identified that of the various electronic services used by the respondents to receive local services, the official Facebook page of the City Hall and the municipality are equally popular (29%), the citizen portal www.my.gov.ge (14%) is also actively used, and the City Council and the regional administration Only 1% of respondents visit websites.

3.2. SERVICE EFFICIENCY

The evaluation of the effectiveness of the municipal services was based on the opinions of the respondents and the participants of the qualitative survey on the volume, purpose, quality, benefits received by the citizens, existing needs and challenges.

For the majority of respondents (53%) applying for services to self-governing agencies electronically is a simple procedure. 19% of them use the principle of electronic booking to meet with a representative of the desired agency. Interestingly, 14% of respondents did not have information about such a service, while 67% did not receive it.

Of those who used the electronic booking principle, 52% were generally satisfied with the data they received.

According to the survey participants, the online page contains information on budget, procurement, and various administrative costs. There is a hotline, there are people responsible for providing public information, from whom interested parties can obtain information provided by law.

> **"All publicly available information is constantly updated and available. The site has a window "Request information", from where it is very easy to place an ad" (interview, public servant).**

According to the quantitative survey data, the respondents' assessments of the services received from the self-government are mixed: 63% said that the problem presented by them was fully or partially solved, 6% said that the self-government representatives did not even try to solve the problem, problems for 11% have not been solved, and 4% has not received a written, reasoned response to this.

The answers/results given by the respondents differ depending on which agency (mayor's office, city council, mayor's office representative) the respondent contacted. The difference is clearly seen in the Chart N3 below:

Legend: ■ Very satisfied ■ satisfied ■ dissatisfied ■ Very dissatisfied
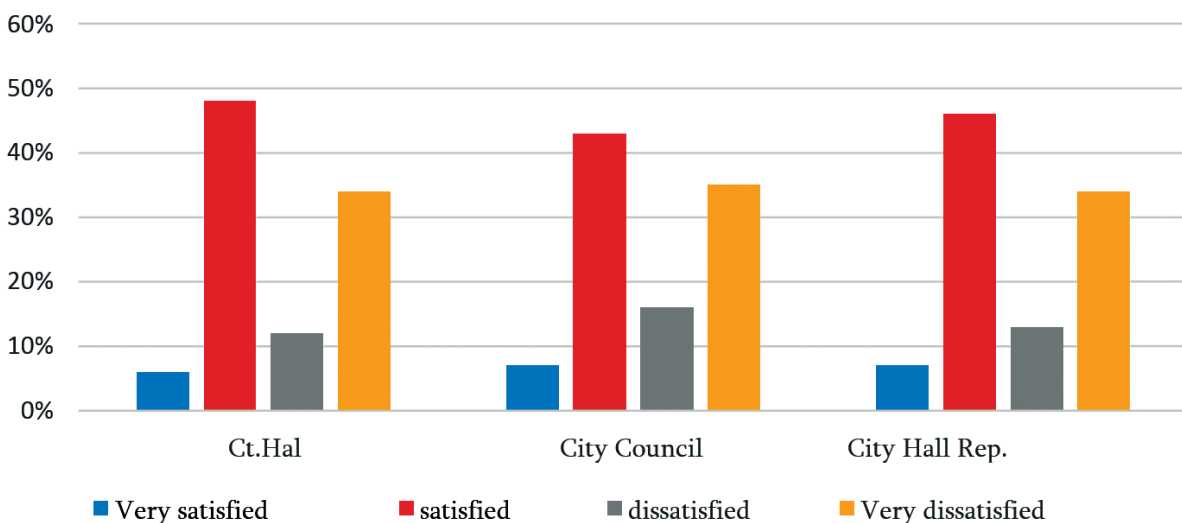
Services and Citizens' Needs: From the perspective of the qualitative research participants, the citizens' needs and identified problems are more or less reflected in the program budget when planning infrastructure facilities. The study of priorities takes place mainly in the research of non-governmental organizations and at their open meetings with representatives of self-government.

The respondents believe that the services provided by the municipality are adapted to the needs of citizens, although these services can become even more effective. In this regard, the municipality does not have the practice of researching/analyzing the needs of specific groups of citizens, and they consider important research and relevant analysis in various areas in order to make the work of self-government more effective and maximally adapted for especially vulnerable groups.

> **"Perhaps, in the local budget, to expose the interests of people older than" not reached "retirement age, to strengthen them, this is very important, because they are hanging in the air - they are not employed, they are not old enough to receive a pension, so they are "left out of consideration" (interview, CSO representative).**

> **"The quality of services provided by municipal services is being studied, but not in depth. It would be good to involve the population and civil society in these processes. The role of the City Council should also be strengthened in this direction" (interview, public servant).**

The women who participated in the focus group discussions consider it very important to study the needs of women, their economic support programs, for example, social enterprises, which, in addition to the economic empowerment of their families, will also bring social benefits.

School male teachers express the position that the support of young families is necessary. Programs should be developed to facilitate the return of young people who have left the municipality to study. A proposal was made to introduce student exchange programs:

> **"The development of student exchange programs will help fill the municipality with qualified personnel."**

The investment environment was assessed positively in terms of service provision:

> **"Improvement of infrastructure has been decided practically in the entire municipality, we are actively working with international organizations and foundations" (focus group, school teacher (man).**

Particular attention was paid to the resort potential of the municipality, which can make a significant economic contribution to the life of the municipality, bringing additional income to the local population.

"There are wonderful, unique resorts in Tsageri, where there are no good access roads. It is necessary to improve these resorts and attract tourists, which will lead to a strengthening of the economy" (Small Entrepreneur).

High-quality research materials also revealed other problems, the solution of which is a priority for citizens. Including the issue of assistance to the population in the sale of agricultural products; Small business support programs and increasing the role of self-government in supporting the expansion of economic opportunities for the population.

The effectiveness of self-government is hampered by the fact that at the local level, according to the respondents, there is a need to divide competences - in many areas (education, agriculture, environment, infrastructure and other issues).

Both in-depth interview experts and citizens participating in focus group discussions unequivocally emphasize the issue of increasing the authority of self-government in various fields.

According to experts, the principles of the decentralization strategy are not properly implemented, and in many cases self-government is formal. In their opinion, local self-government should be involved as much as possible in the discussion and solution of issues of concern to the local population. For example, issuing permits and licenses for the use of natural resources, broader participation in identifying and granting status to socially vulnerable families, should have more competencies in education, agriculture, health care and other areas.

"They should have more authority in environmental issues, because our population is very worried about issues of logging and high vine stakes cutting, they are discriminated against" (focus group, lawyer).

With strong positions expressed, the self-government must dispose of the property located in its territory, must determine and assign a function to this or that building or land plot. It is also important for citizens to know that their needs will be met by the local government and not the central or any ministry:

"The buildings have been on the verge of demolition for years. While the municipality gives them a function and uses them. Why would a property management agency dispose of municipal property? Why should the municipality beg it to transfer this or that property?" (Focus group, local entrepreneur).

There is also a position that the solution of some important issues should be delegated to the municipality through the transfer of appropriate financial resources. It is very important for the population to be sure that any issue is resolved on the spot.

"When a citizen participates in an election and then you have to tell the same citizen that" this is not my competence, "it no longer works. The solution of such issues as firewood, building materials, social assistance and many other issues, centrally causes distrust among citizens, and their participation in other issues loses its meaning" (interview, public servant).

The attitude of the study participants to the issue of the purpose of social assistance is fundamental. It is unacceptable for them to ignore the will of themselves and have minimal influence. The position on this issue is voiced not only by ordinary citizens who express confidence in the self-government, but also by experts and interviewed public officials:

"We know better about the strengths and weaknesses here than there, somewhere in the center. For example, the topic of awarding "social points", I know many examples that the really needy people do not have allowance, while those relatively better off have it" (Interview, public servant).

It was said that equal opportunities for professional development and qualification improvement of public servants are important. A more general assessment was heard when talking about the issue of the performance evaluation system, however, the position was voiced that periodically some questions arise that need to be answered objectively and the internal audit of the City Hall is used in this regard.

"We are a small municipality and we all know well where the risk is, I can not say that we are in the ideal option, on the contrary, there are questions in some cases, in budgetary organizations that are structurally subordinated to the City Hall, internal audit works on these issues" (Head of the Mayor's Office) .
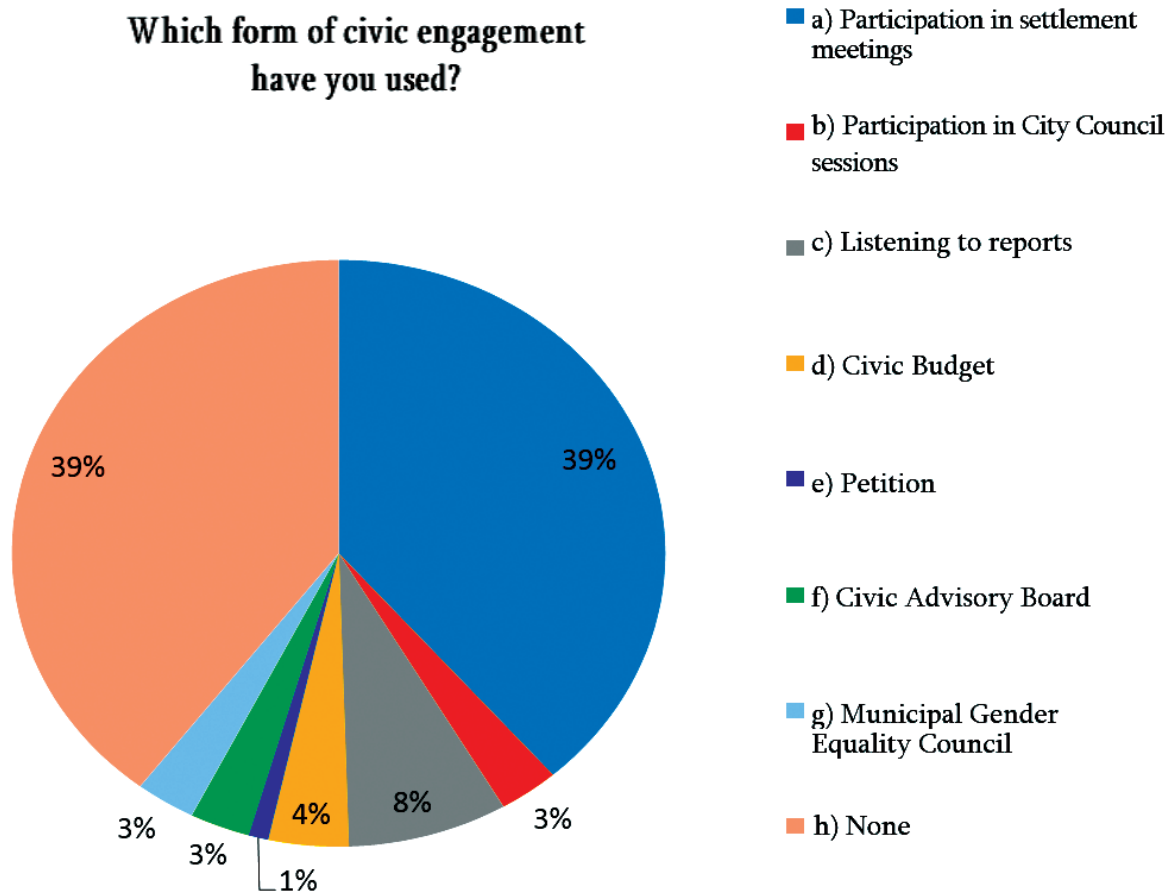
3.3. INCLUSIVENESS

The topics of the study included the issue of citizen participation, existing practices, and challenges. It turned out that, according to the survey participants, the involvement of citizens is certainly important, however, according to 15% of respondents, local public servants do not realize this. 47% believe that this need is only partially realized, and 21% clearly see the understanding of the importance of this fact by public servants.

Respondents' views on specific issues of citizen engagement are mixed. The most frequently mentioned topics were: local priority setting process 26%; identification of the needs of citizens 19%; development of municipal programs 18%; Local budget review 17%.

Interestingly, often (39%) respondents did not even want to provide information on deficiencies related to services to the relevant agency. 25% of respondents had such an opportunity, and 36% did not. 25% of those who had such experience used the following methods of obtaining feedback: personal meeting with a representative of the relevant agency 65%; posting his/her position on the page/website of the municipality on Facebook - 23%, by letter - 12%.

Respondents' experiences also differ in terms of awareness and use of forms of civic engagement: Chart N4:

Which form of civic engagement have you used?

- a) Participation in settlement meetings
- b) Participation in City Council sessions
- c) Listening to reports
- d) Civic Budget
- e) Petition
- f) Civic Advisory Board
- g) Municipal Gender Equality Council
- h) None

In a qualitative survey, citizens gave an example when their individual or group initiative was supported by the municipality. For example, the priorities of the village support program, the cleaning of storm-water canals, etc. They stressed that the municipality did not hinder them in the case of relevant activities. However, they recognize that the population is largely inert to civic participation. The same assessment of the problem was given by respondents in an in-depth interview:

> **"The law allows the population to hold meetings, elect village elders, submit applications and ask us for appropriate answers, but, unfortunately, this does not happen" (public servant).**

Respondents identified different needs for constructive dialogue with the self-government and greater engagement: periodic meetings of local government representatives with citizens for consultation - 41%; involvement of citizens in the process of developing municipal programs and budget review - 21%; consideration of citizens' initiatives by strengthening the practice of civil budgeting - 21%; existence of a position of public servant responsible for more sectoral profile/specific issues 9%.

Qualitative survey participants also recognize the importance of civic budgeting and welcome the dialogue initiated by local NGOs on the issue.

As shown in the quantitative survey, the population is familiar with civil society organizations involved in local political dialogue. 40% of respondents know at least one such organization, 49% know more than one, and more than three organizations are known to 11%. 58% of them evaluate their activities as being effective.

According to the respondents, the role of civil society organizations in the implementation of Public Administration Reform is different. Basically, these views were distributed as follows:

Delivering the needs of the population to the government - 54%; informing/educating - 42%; protecting citizens' rights - 34.7%; implementation of measures to support the socio-economic development of citizens - 31%; facilitating dialogue/local involvement between the population and local government - 30%; advocating for problem solving at the local level - 27%; controlling/monitoring of the reform process - 22%.

Respondents also mentioned the main areas where they believe it necessary to apply more human and financial resources from the local government. These areas are: healthcare - 56%, social assistance - 52%, promotion of economic development and creation of appropriate environment in places - 43%, infrastructure - 37%, adapted environment for people with disabilities - 29%, management of stray animals - 27%, culture - education - 27%, drinking water - 23%, parks and landscaping - 15%, care services for the homeless 13%, food safety 12%, storm-water network 11%, public transport - 10%, sporting events - 10%, establishment of support services tailored to the needs of women victims of violence - 8%, sewerage - 7%, irrigation water/irrigation - 6%.

Qualitative research identified the same needs, for example, gaps in the environment adapted for people with disabilities and targeted programs; As well as the interests of some vulnerable groups left behind, such as the helpless elderly. It was said that gender balance programs have not been considered yet and there is a need for more targeted programs to help victims of violence, in which they see the role of the non-governmental sector and especially in the areas of information, education, and monitoring.

Local public officials express the position that mechanisms should be introduced in local government, which will lead to the activation of citizen involvement.

"They had to make the decision themselves and we, the local government, should support them in implementing their ideas" (interview, public servant).

Speaking about the role of civil society organizations, the positions were expressed that the function of the civil society sector is very important in the implementation of local self-government:

"For the second year in a row, local civil society organizations have been monitoring the implementation of Public Administration Reform. This is a very timely and good thing, because based on their recommendations, the situation in terms of publicity and accountability has improved" (interview, public servant).

Other participants in the study also welcome the activation of the non-governmental sector and the formation of new organizations. The self-government representatives said that there are 4 non-governmental organizations in Tsageri and the expectations towards them are high:

"We need to trust such organizations a lot, a lot depends on their activity. We know all the organizations and their representatives are involved in the commissions" (public servant).

Despite the few nihilistic attitudes, ordinary members of the public have a similar position:

"All research shows that the involvement of civil society leads to a strengthening of the population and an increase in trust in government. We have learned a lot through them about Public Administration Reform" (Focus group, school teacher).

Forms of citizen involvement have more often been mentioned as participation in rural assemblies. Attitudes towards the effectiveness of mechanisms such as the Advisory Board and the Gender Council are diverse in content. Only a few citizens indicated that they were cooperating with the Gender Council.

Heartache was expressed because the civil budget has not been put in place. There is no activism in petitioning and citizens are unable to effectively use this important mechanism of civic influence.

Positions could not be formulated regarding the role of the private sector in the life of the municipality. The representative of the sector had an interesting opinion, believing that "Using the potential of the private sector, introducing mechanisms for cooperation with it, their involvement in innovative projects - would be an ideal municipal service" but admits that this issue is not popular.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

The following findings were made from the study materials - on the implementation of Public Administration Reform and transparency, efficiency, inclusiveness of local services in the process:

The Public Administration Reform in Tsageri Municipality is being implemented with moderate dynamics, but smoothly. Its importance is properly understood by the local government and the active part of the citizens.

Transparency: The main benchmark of the reform, the improvement of services, in a certain direction, in particular - in the form of electronic services - has already been introduced. This applies to the issue of communication with citizens, openness, accountability, as well as the provision of other specific services. Public information, vacancies, budget, its changes, ordinances, various social programs, declarations of public servants and other public information will be displayed in due time on the website of Tsageri Municipality, on the special vacancy sites and on the Facebook page - "Tsageri Municipality".

Both the representatives of the official structures and the citizens are satisfied with the fact that Tsageri Municipality is one of the top ten most transparent and accountable municipalities in Georgia.

Service efficiency: Despite the effectiveness of the services offered, it is not properly efficient and accessible to citizens - due to problems with Internet access - and this poses a serious challenge.

The need for measures to facilitate the provision of services and the need to introduce specially equipped centers in the communities was observed by citizens. Budget programs, based on the analysis of the obtained materials, are not based on serious studies and systematic evaluation of effectiveness, impact. The practice of needs assessment exists but is not properly implemented. The desire was expressed for the municipal council to be more actively involved in the monitoring process.

The challenge was identified in terms of the introduction of programs for people with disabilities, as well as the lack of incentives for young people to settle in the municipality. Everyone recognizes the disturbing trend of outflow of young people from the municipality.

The tourism potential of the municipality and the needs in terms of its use were identified. Challenges that make the resorts and tourist areas with the greatest potential unattractive to tourists (primarily - internal roads).

According to the study findings, it is desirable for citizens that the competences of

municipalities and ministries in the process of self-government are separated. For example, the management of natural resources such as water, building materials, timber, and so on.

Special attention is paid to the role of local self-government in the process of determining the status of the socially unprotected.

Civic participation: A positive attitude towards civic budgeting is formed, and it is perceived as a form of civic participation and democratic governance. Local NGOs have become important civic actors and are expected to have greater influence on local processes.

BASED ON THE FINDINGS MADE, RECOMMENDATIONS WERE MADE:

To the Local Government:

It is necessary to raise awareness on the issue of Public Administration Reform, to introduce the dividends brought by it to the citizens, to highlight the issues that need to be addressed by the unity of local civic groups and the government. For example - the issue of civic budgeting, identifying local needs and setting social, economic and other priorities, monitoring.

In order to introduce civic budgeting as the most effective form of citizen participation in the municipality, it is important to study the existing practices in other municipalities, start a broad public dialogue and promote proper awareness to prepare the ground for the introduction in the budgets of the coming years. Close cooperation with the local non-governmental sector in this direction.

✓ It is vital for citizens to have equal access to e-services, for which well-equipped "centers" should be set up in communities away from the municipal center in a timely manner to enable citizens to use municipal services without hindrance. This becomes especially important in a pandemic situation when citizens are periodically restricted from moving.

✓ The correct use of the tourism potential takes a special place in the development of the municipality. It is important to timely repair the infrastructure of the resorts, to attract investments so that the population of the municipality can receive economic benefits from various activities aimed at providing tourist services.

✓ The specificity of the municipality determines the need for an effective youth policy. Special attention needs to be paid to supporting young families, implementing economic empowerment programs and other supportive measures to make local life more attractive and reduce the outflow of young people.

✓ More sensitive policies are needed to support communities of persons with disabilities. First of all, this concerns the proper infrastructure, their social and medical institutions.

To Local NGOs:

✓ It is important to work closely with the municipality to identify citizens' concerns and needs in terms of monitoring the quality of services provided by local services.

✓ Close dialogue with local government and active civic groups to facilitate the preparation of the civic budgeting.

✓ There is a need to raise awareness of corporate responsibility (CSR) in the private sector in general. It is important to involve the population and civil society in these processes. The role of the City Council in this direction should be strengthened.

To the Central Government:

✓ It is important that all the benefits of the decentralization strategy are reflected smoothly at the local level; Review the role of local government in identifying beneficiaries of state programs and increase powers to better protect the principle of social justice.

✓ It is desirable to accelerate the introduction of civic budgeting in municipalities where its implementation has not started due to non-mandatory nature. Provide appropriate methodological and consulting support; Promoting large-scale campaigns for sharing experiences, exchanging specialists, and civic dialogue.

GURIA REGION

THE REPORT ON NEEDS

ASSESSMENT OF POPULATION

IN THE PROCESS OF PAR IMPLEMENTATION

IN LANCHKHUTI MUNICIPALITY
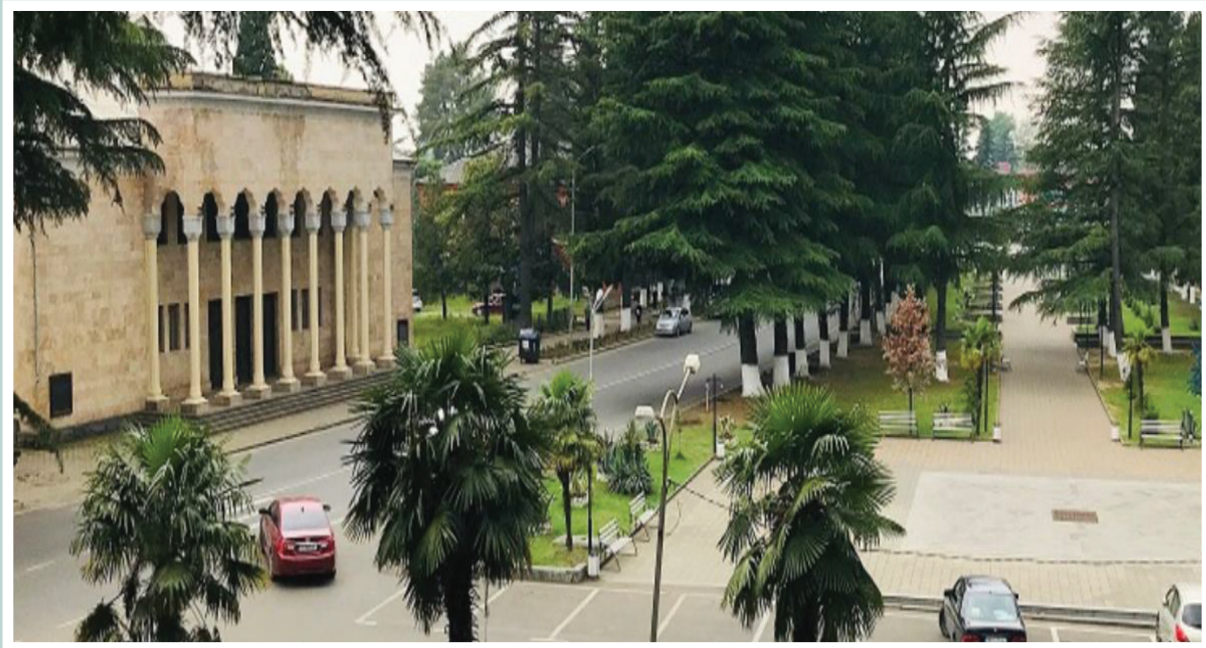
IMERETI SCIENTISTS UNION "SPECTRI"

IS RESPONSIBLE FOR CONDUCTING

THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT, IN GURIA REGION

PREPARING AND EDITING THE REPORT

www.spectri.org.ge

INTRODUCTION

Successful implementation of the Public Administration Reform (PAR) plays a fundamental role in integrating Georgia into the EU. It serves as the main precondition of progressive development and raising the population`s welfare. Citizens` participation in the decision-making process is a prerequisite of the reform success, which ensures the introduction of democratic, open and good governance in the country and increases the population`s trust in political systems and strengthens the legitimacy of decisions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for the Public Administration Reform proper implementation, especially in e-governance, which will enable citizens remotely, efficiently and promptly report their problems and needs to the local government without any additional bureaucratic procedures and solve them.

Cultural-Humanitarian Fund "Sukhumi" with Fund of Women Entrepreneurs and the Imereti Scientists` Union "Spectri" is implementing the project "A Common forum for CSOs from Guria, Imereti and Racha-Lechkhumi for PAR Roadmap monitoring" supported by the European Union, to promote the effective implementation of Public Administration Reform.

Within the framework of the project, in Lanchkhuti Municipality, the Lanchkhuti Information Center and the Georgian Rural Council conducted a joint study of the local population`s needs, which included a quantitative component as well as in-depth intera views with local experts and focus groups with the participation of the community and self-government representatives. The study assessed the effectiveness, transparency and inclusiveness of the services provided by local authorities to citizens and studied their needs to receive better services.

1. NEEDS STUDY AIM AND METHODOLOGY

In May-June 2021, within the framework of the project "A Common forum of CSOs from Guria, Imereti and Racha- Lechkhumi for PAR roadmap monitoring", Georgian Rural Council and Lanchkhuti Information Centre conducted the Lanchkhuti Municipality population survey.

The study aims to identify the citizens` needs, evaluate the local government services provided to citizens in terms of efficiency, transparency and inclusiveness and develop specific recommendations based on the obtained data.

Study methodology: A combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods were used for the study. A questionnaire had been developed to collect quantitative data. The qualitative data were collected through focus groups and in-depth interviews.

The selection unit included the city zone of Lanchkhuti municipality and 53 villages. 160

respondents were surveyed to collect quantitative data. According to segregation data, 58.75% of respondents are women, 41.25%. Men.

In collecting qualitative data, 19 people participated in the focus group format, while four experts in different areas were interviewed using face-to-face interview techniques.

Consolidation of quantitative and qualitative materials was used in the final data analysis process. A total of 183 respondents were involved in the quantitative and qualitative surveys.

2. SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

According to socio-demographic characteristics, the study target group includes citizens from 18 to 65 and above. Based on quantitative data, the respondents' age was distributed as follows: 23.75% of respondents fell into the category of 18-34. More than half, or 54.38%, were included in the category of 34-65, while the category above 65 comprised 21.88%.

The study respondents included socially vulnerable, internally displaced persons, single parents and parents with many children, parents of children with disabilities, teachers, entrepreneurs, community leaders, pensioners, youth, local experts in self-government issues, etc., increasing the opportunity that the needs and assessments of these target groups are included in the study analysis.

The majority of respondents, i.e. 75%, do not have a special social status, 13.13% are socially vulnerable, 7.5% have many children, and 4.38% are internally displaced persons.

As for the **respondents` marital status**, 56.25% are married, 25% - single, 10.63% - widowed and 8.13% - divorced. **According to education,** 35.63% of respondents have higher education, 37.5% have vocational/college education, and 21.25% have secondary education. The number of respondents with incomplete secondary education participating in the study comprised 5.63%.

According to the respondents` **employment status**, 31.88% of the total respondents are self-employed, 21.13% are on a pension, and the number of public servants was 14.38%. Thus, the number of unemployed is 13.75%, while 10% work in a budget organization. 3.28% have other jobs, and 2.25% are students or pupils.

For 37.5% of respondents, the **monthly household income** ranges from 101 to 500 GEL, which is unequivocally low income in the current market conditions. For 22.5%, the income ranges from 501-900 GEL. 13.13% have more than 901 GEL, whereas 3.75% say they earn less than 100 GEL, while 23.13% refrained from disclosing the information.

3. THE MAIN CONTENT OF THE STUDY

TRANSPARENCY

To assess the transparency of self-government activities, it is interesting to identify the level of public awareness on PAR. Quantitative data obtained from the survey show that most respondents (58.75%) have no information about Public Administration Reform. Unaware respondents include 57.45% women and 42.55% men. 28.13% confirmed that they partially own the information, only 13.13% believe they are fully informed about the Public Administration Reform. The data obtained by analyzing the data clarifies that 24.5% of the uninformed citizens have secondary education and 21.3% have higher education. It is noteworthy that many pensioners (33%) are unaware of the reform, reporting a lack of skills required to use the Internet. It is even more remarkable that a significant part of the youth (29.2%) also fell into the uninformed category. This opinion is confirmed by qualitative data as well.

> **"For some reason, young people are not interested in this issue. For instance, I do not know anything about it. Perhaps we should be interested in young people" (a young woman living in the village (focus group).**

Respondents consider self-government as the entity responsible for the lack of information and point to the need for a well-designed strategy to improve this shortcoming.

> **"If a person does not show interest, you should make him/her interested. Local government is people! You are its representative. If you do something for people, you have to reach out to your citizens and get them interested" (a self-employed woman (focus group).**

Speaking about the source of information on Public Administration Reform, 55.3% of respondents reported receiving information from a relative, through a social network, or a newspaper. 18.1% stated that they received the information via television. 9.4% indicate that they got this information from non-governmental organizations or at a meeting with the officials. For 6.3%, the source of information is the municipality website. From the obtained data, it is noteworthy that the role of non-governmental organizations in raising awareness is weak. Besides, the work of the municipality website should be activated.

To what extent will the reform change the situation, and whether it will improve the service quality? 60.6% still do not have an answer to this question. On the other hand, 30.6% maintain a more influential position and unequivocally confirm that the reform can improve services. Nihilistic attitude is observed on the part of 6.3%.

2.5% has a radical position and believes that no public reform can change the quality of the services.

"First of all, a qualified team should be formed, which will provide the citizens with a professional service. If this reform is implemented properly, of course, it will improve the provision of services to citizens" (a mother of many children (focus group).

"Public Administration Reform is aimed at the professional development of public servants. At the same time, it must provide citizens with the right information. Informing the population should accompany this process. But, in my opinion, this reform is being carried out slowly today, and there is no necessary result" (a representative of the ethnic minority (focus group).

Those who believe in the positive results of the reform unequivocally indicate that the municipality should focus on complete and timely informing on services (21.3%). 14.4% consider increasing the services for vulnerable groups and gaining knowledge and skills of public servants to be significant. **It is noteworthy that according to the received answers, 33.1% do not know at all what to focus on, which may be related to their lack of information or nihilistic attitude towards such issues. Therefore, the obtained indicator shows the need to strengthen the work with such people regarding informing.**

The population`s awareness of the municipality electronic services: The quantiative research results show that the information about e-services has not yet reached a significant part of the citizens. It is reasoned by low internet access in the peripheral part of the municipality and lack of internet skills. Consequently, the received data do not raise additional questions, according to which only 11.3% of the respondents are informed about the municipality e-services. However, 33.8% are partially informed, whereas 13.8% "do not care" about the issue, and 41.9% are not informed at all.

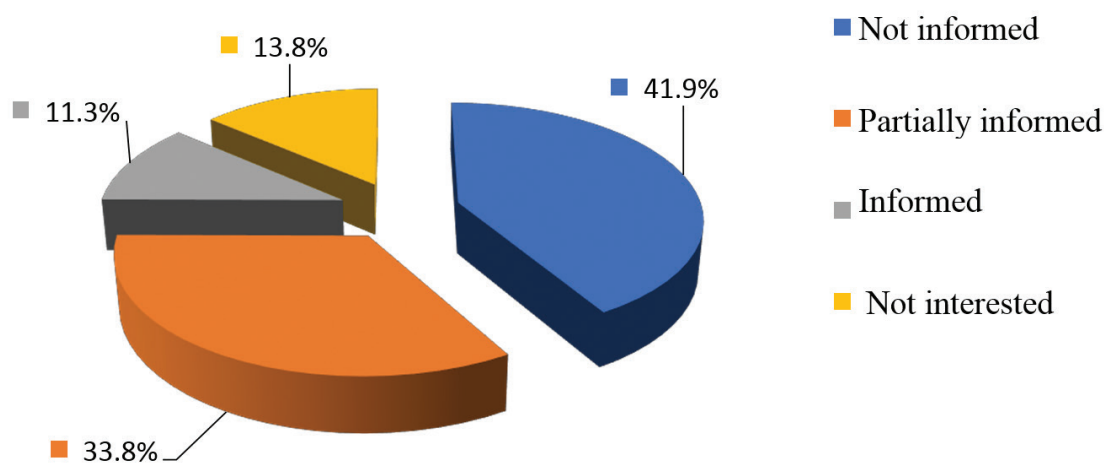**Are you informed about the municipal e-services?**

Figure #1. Awareness of municipal e-services

Interestingly, age segregation shows that a large proportion of the uninformed (55.2%) are middle-aged, 32.8% are pensioners, and 11.9% are young people. Therefore, the obtained data make it clear that working with almost all age groups is necessary to increase awareness.

Qualitative data further confirms the obtained index. Respondents believe that informing should be done in an understandable and simplified way, considering the level of vulnerability of all categories.

> **"Many retirees do not know how to find programs at all, and many have internet only for using Facebook. It turns out that this category should be left uninformed. Before you teach, you need direct contact" (a single mother (focus group).**

> **"In my opinion, information is not provided to the population at all. Only those in the public service are informed" (a female entrepreneur (focus group).**

The materials obtained from the focused survey confirm that the participants in the discussions are also active users of the e-service system and emphasize the benefits of the mentioned service. However, it should also be noted that this category is either a public servant or employed in a field for which e-services are part of the job.

> **"I can write to my village MP or the trustee whatever I want. They are obliged to answer. This system is well implemented. In case of no answer, the field becomes red" (a representative of the NGO (focus group).**

> **"In general, it is good when everything is done electronically. You do not have to come; go and wait. In some cases, you even save energy. Moreover, you can do everything from home. The problem is that there is no Internet in the villages, and the elderly do not have the skills to write a letter electronically" (the founder of the social cafe (focus group).**

The majority of respondents (55.3%) named "relatives", "newspaper", "Facebook" **as the source of information about e-services in the municipality**. 22.6% say their source of information is the municipality website.

Interesting details are provided by the data obtained from the following questions regarding **the services used mainly by the population.** 8.9% of users report that they do not use electronic services regarding vacancies. Only a tiny portion benefits from budget programs. 3.7% benefit from e-petition. Only some citizens used the electronic space to get information about the City Council decisions or procurement reports.

21.3% of respondents answered **what should be done to facilitate the reform,** saying that it is essential for the municipality to inform the population about the services promptly. 14.4% consider the extension of services of vulnerable groups to be significant. The same indicator (14.4%) confirms that the knowledge and skills of public servants need to be improved.

According to the survey, 9.4% of the respondents mostly use the City Hall Facebook page. 8.1% use the official website of the municipality. However, it appeared that the vast majority of respondents (71.9%) do not use these services, which lowers the level of awareness and indicates the need to improve existing services in this regard.

EFFICIENCY

The number of users of e-services and the evaluation of the services received by them significantly determine the level of public administration efficiency. The survey data show that 67.5% of respondents did not use the electronic application form. Therefore, they can not assess how easy it is to use. 26.25% think it is easy to use. However, 4.25% think it is not easy. Middle-aged respondents (60%) consider using them challenging. It is also difficult to get services for the majority of pensioners (30%). (Figure #2).

Is it easy to apply for self-government services electronically?
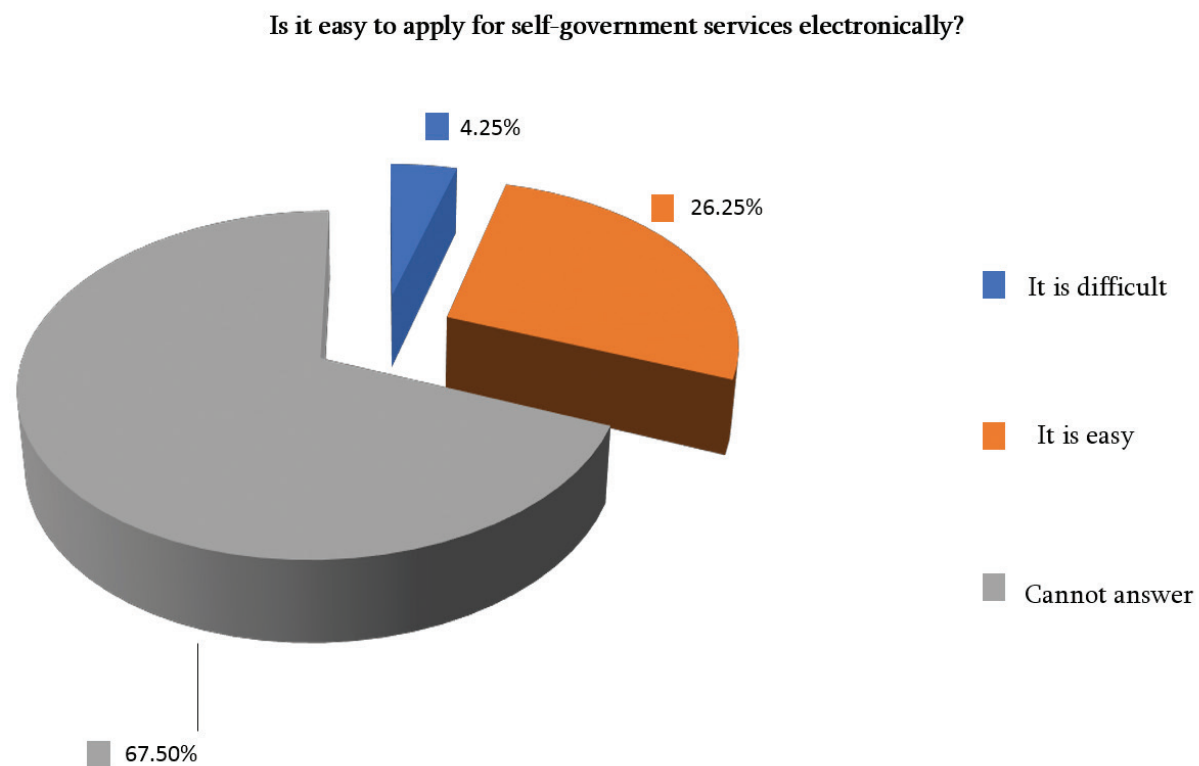
Figure #2. Applying for self-government services in electronic form

In terms of effectiveness, the work of self-government should be based on a study of the population's needs. However, according to the research materials, there are only a few examples of needs surveys conducted by civil society organizations in the municipality.

> **"There is a practice of research/analysis, mainly carried out by non-governmental/civil society organizations" (interview with a self-government expert).**

According to other opinions,

> **"Service effectiveness is identified by a satisfaction quality survey conducted by municipalities that relies solely on the information they receive in the process of reporting by the Mayor`s representatives in the community or specific administrative units".**

> **"This is not a practice of research and analysis, in terms of a full understanding of these concepts" (a local expert, interview).**

According to the study experts` position, research and analysis are complex academic issues and "it would be good if the self-government hires relevant professionals on these issues, or works to find appropriate grants to study and analyze social groups with its human resources".

The participants of the focus group discussions also believe that the practice in the municipality is weak in this regard:

> **"I doubt if the citizens' needs are studied at all. Then the population should be polled" (an individual entrepreneur, focus group).**

Respondents focus on active communication with the population and its positive outcome. For example, public discussions on rural programs:

> **"Different groups raise their needs and address self-government. Then, they discuss which program may be funded, and the final decision is made based on the majority of votes" (City Hall municipal employee (interview).**

Respondents made different assessments as well. According to them, rural meetings are not representative. Therefore, even when many people attended, and a common priority was named, a completely different project was implemented in practice.

The study shows how often citizens apply to the local government electronically. For example, 73.13% of the respondents did not apply to the municipal service head electronically during the last year, 20% had no information at all, and only 6.88% applied.

The population addresses the municipality mainly on personal issues. However, it is noteworthy that citizens most often apply to the municipality for healthcare and medicine issues - 23.5%, social/financial assistance - 16.7%, certificate - 11.1%, and land registration - 9.3%.

The survey shows that 59.38% of respondents are satisfied with the City Hall services quality. Of those with social status, the socially vulnerable (30%) are the most dissatisfied with the City Hall services.

The situation is about the same when evaluating the City Council services quality.

It should be noted that 60.63% of the respondents are satisfied with the quality of services provided by the mayor's representatives in the administrative units. Furthermore, 10% are very satisfied. On the other hand, 21.88% are dissatisfied, and 7.5% are very dissatisfied.

Quantitative data make it clear which target group needs are primarily considered in the municipality. 27.5% of respondents estimate that the municipality fully meets the needs of the population. 18.7% believe that the needs of children and young people are best taken into account. 11.4% notice a particular attitude towards people with disabilities. 10.4% name protection for women with many children, and 9.3% think that particular needs are less taken into account.

In terms of meeting needs, young people express their concern and believe that the lack of job opportunities, fewer prospects for professional employment exacerbates the needs of this target group. According to pensioners, it is necessary to introduce even one-time assistance programs for the disabled over 80. The list of specific groups includes single mothers, women victims of violence. Therefore, the municipality should demonstrate its responsibility by implementing programs addressing their needs.

> **"Many things need to be considered. But, unfortunately, no research is conducted, and consequently, we do not know the needs" (a mother of many children (focus group).**

Serious challenges have been identified on the road to the success of the reform. First, it refers to the issue of decentralisation. The research experts criticise the current situation regarding property management:

"The property of the municipality is unprotected, it is being destroyed and, consequently, its condition is even worse. It must be immediately handed over to the municipalities, i.e. everything in the territory of a particular municipality either must belong to the local population or the municipality. The ministry does not need or manage any pasture or building from Tbilisi" (a local expert, interview).

In-depth interview experts express their concern that self-government is not a full-fledged self-governing institution in the current context.

"If decentralisation of rights and property is not achieved, such type of self-government will lose its essential function over time and go beyond the values recognised by the European Charter in matters of self-government" (a self- government expert, interview).

Both ordinary citizens and experts are unanimous on the issue that ignoring self-government in granting socially vulnerable status undermines the principle of fairness:

"Granting socially vulnerable status is based on a specific formula that does not consider the human condition". "Special attention should be paid here". "Who knows better a condition of people in a particular village, the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs or the village council majority deputy?" (a self-government expert).

INCLUSIVENESS

The citizens` inclusiveness is municipality activities` inclusiveness indicator. It implies introducing an appropriate reporting process and systematic cooperation with the population. To what extent do local public officials realize **the importance of citizens` inclusiveness**? 43.13% of respondents do not have an answer to this question. It is noteworthy that according to these data, a large part of the population does not think about the importance of participation in self-government activities. 28.13% believe that the municipality only partially realizes the importance of programs created in collaboration with citizens. According to 15.63%, it [municipality] does not realize its importance. Only 13.13% think that the municipality has grasped the importance of self-government created on the principle of citizens` participation. These data are so small that there is a need for more initiatives on the part of the municipality to change the citizens` general attitude. It is also essential to increase the public servants` relevant knowledge and competence to increase their responsibility for citizens` inclusiveness.

According to the experts involved in the study, the citizens` interest and level of inclusiveness should be based on the various incentive formats offered by the self-government to give the population a choice.

In a quantitative survey, 47% of respondents unequivocally indicate that reviewing the local budget, where the population enjoys the full right to participate, creates a critical environment to encourage citizens` inclusiveness in the municipality. Furthermore, according to 20.5%, consideration of citizens' initiatives also significantly increases their inclusiveness. For 15.9%, it is participation in the selection of priorities; for 9.1%, participation in the development of municipal programs; whereas for 6.8%, it is participation in the needs` identification process.

The survey confirms that the tendency of citizen activism is less observed. 67.9% of respondents directly state that they have not participated in any event. Only 13.2% used the report listening form. The number of respondents who participated in the settlement meeting is even more minimal (3.2%). 2.5% attended a meeting of the Gender Equality Council.

The in-depth interviews materials confirm the obtained data:

> **"The citizens` activity and inclusiveness show the effectiveness level. Unfortunately, at the moment, there is a disorganization of the population`s nihilism - still, nothing will change. All this prevents their inclusiveness, and the result is obvious" (a local expert).**

Nihilism and the attitude of "nothing will change" in society can be seen in the information obtained from the focused survey.

Respondents' answers (question - "In which direction do you think it is necessary to apply local authorities` more human and financial resources?"), show that most respondents (18.4%) emphasize healthcare issues. 13.8% wants to apply resources for social assistance and local economic development, 12.5% for road infrastructure, 9.5% for sewerage, and 6.8% for stray animals.

The study highlighted the role of local NGOs in the success of the reform. However, it seems that the attitude towards CSOs in society is very different. There is scepticism and mistrust and, at the same time, recognition that they can facilitate the implementation of measures prescribed by law, strengthen this or that direction:

> **"These organizations can come and tell the population that they have the opportunity to use this or that electronic service, attend meetings, organize the settlement meetings, participate in the formation of the petition, as well as in the civil budget. They need to raise the issues from the legislation, but they do not exist because the government does not think it is necessary. The population does not know it" (a self-government expert, interview).**

Cooperation with the NGO sector is effective by 45% of respondents, whereas 42.5% think it is ineffective. 8.1% think it is very effective, and only 4.4% think it is ineffective.

Interesting visions were observed on the issue of cooperation with the private sector. The respondents mentioned that people engaged in commerce and private business in the municipality do not participate in its [municipality] governance. Their share of taxes in the local budget is much higher than that of other social strata.

"It damages and makes the political and socio-economic situation of the municipality inadequate" (a local expert, interview).

"The private sector is unorganized and has no other interests than business. Therefore, it does not show public activities. However, their words will often be decisive in making decisions at the local level" (a self-government expert, interview).

144 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The survey results` analysis revealed that Public Administration Reform in Lanchkhuti Municipality is being implemented relatively slowly. It was revealed that several activities are still to be carried out regarding the reform. Proper efforts are needed to raise the interest of citizens. Various incentive activities should be implemented.

Analyzing the survey data, it became clear that more people prefer using the social network as the source of information than the website. Consequently, the website load and viability should be increased.

It is noteworthy that a significant part of society does not have the necessary skills to receive e-services. Using municipal e-services aims to search for online vacancies, get contact information on local government political officials and public servants, and see the distribution of budget funds.

The study has revealed positive findings: the majority of the population is satisfied with the services of the mayor's representatives, the city council and the administrative units in the municipality. Furthermore, this position is equally expressed by all age segments.

In terms of service efficiency, the respondents expressed a principled attitude towards the issue of decentralization. Challenges in terms of actual decentralization harm PAR

tangible results, including effective citizen care policies. The challenge is the weak practice of needs study, which is why municipal programs sometimes fail to meet current needs.

The survey has shown that several local public officials do not consider citizens` participation to be significant. Citizens in the municipality are primarily involved in the civil budget discussion. It mainly refers to participatory budgeting introduced in 2019, and the population is well informed about it. Citizens are more or less involved in reviewing priorities and identifying needs (rural support programs).

Civil society organizations work in Lanchkhuti, the population knows about it, and it is believed that their dialogue with the government has some effect. In addition, the private sector potential as an accountable civil actor has been identified.

Recommendations

To local government:

➢ It is essential to develop a proper communication strategy and action plan in the municipality to inform the public about PAR, which should be implemented by public officials, mayor`s representatives, local NGOs, media and other actors;

➢ It is crucial to increase the public servants` knowledge and skills regarding the communication and participation with the population in organizing needs` research;

➢ The local government must provide the population (mainly middle and older age groups) with the necessary knowledge and skills to use e-services. Also, lobby for the coverage of the municipality entire territory with the Internet with the relevant governmental and private structures;

➢ NGOs should be more involved in raising public awareness campaigns to promote the use of e-services. It will save time and money for the population and increase inclusiveness;

➢ The municipality should pay more attention to the needs of social groups such as women, victims of domestic violence and other groups with special needs and reflect them in programs;

> The government needs to promote the diversity of civic budgeting practices to increase   the inclusiveness of all population segments.

To central government:

> It is essential to explore all the existing challenges in implementing Public Administration Reform at the local level, especially regarding implementing a decentralization strategy. There is a need for permanent dialogue with local structures to implement real and not formal decentralization. The actual separation of powers with neighbouring agencies increases the self-government role in implementing social policy in the interests of citizens.

To NGOs:

> In cooperating with the self-government, civil society organizations should focus more on non-formal education, lobbying and advocacy to facilitate PAR.

GURIA REGION

THE REPORT ON NEEDS

ASSESSMENT OF POPULATION

IN THE PROCESS OF PAR IMPLEMENTATIO

IN OZURGETI MUNICIPALITY

IMERETI SCIENTISTS UNION "SPECTRI"

IS RESPONSIBLE FOR CONDUCTING

THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT, IN GURIA REGION

PREPARING AND EDITING THE REPORT

www.spectri.org.ge

INTRODUCTION

Successful implementation of the Public Administration Reform (PAR) plays a fundamental role in integrating Georgia into the EU. It serves as the main precondition of the population`s progressive development and raising welfare. Citizens` participation in the decision-making process is a prerequisite of the reform success, which ensures the introduction of democratic, open and good governance in the country and increases the population`s trust in political systems and strengthens the legitimacy of decisions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for the Public Administration Reform proper implementation, especially in e-governance, which will enable citizens remotely, efficiently and promptly report their problems and needs to the local government without any additional bureaucratic procedures and solve them.

Cultural-Humanitarian Fund "Sukhumi" with Fund of Women Entrepreneurs and the Imereti Scientists` Union "Spectri" is implementing the project "A Common forum for CSOs from Guria, Imereti and Racha-Lechkhumi for PAR Roadmap monitoring" supported by the European Union, to promote the effective implementation of Public Administration Reform.

Within the project framework, in Ozurgeti Municipality, two organizations - "Young Teachers` Association" and "Center for Education and Equality" assessed the effectiveness, transparency, and inclusiveness of the services provided by local authorities to citizens and studied their needs to receive better services.

1. NEEDS STUDY AIM AND METHODOLOGY

The Citizens' Needs Study aims to evaluate the services provided to the citizens by the Ozurgeti local government (with indicators of efficiency, transparency and inclusiveness) and develop specific recommendations for improving local services according to evidence-based information.

Study methodology - The needs study was conducted in May and June 2021. A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was used to achieve the goal. A research tool had been developed, and its indicators were agreed upon with the project partners. In addition, a structured questionnaire had been developed for quantitative research. It mainly consisted of closed-ended questions.

160 people were interviewed through the quantitative method. The qualitative component included focus group discussion techniques and in-depth individual interviews. In addition, 24 people were interviewed using the focused discussion method, and four local self-government experts were interviewed using the in-depth interview technique.

Based on the group discussions` audio recordings, discussion detailed transcripts have been prepared for further analysis of the data and study results illustration.

Respondents were selected from the Ozurgeti Municipality population, considering various socio-demographic characteristics. In total, the study included 188 people, 113 of which were women and 75 were men.

Focus group/discussion respondents conducted within the study included women (housewives, mothers with many children, single mothers, etc.); mixed professional groups (entrepreneurs/businessmen, teachers, medical workers, etc.); the elderly/ pensioners; parents of children with disabilities; a total of 28 people, including 21 - women and 7- men.

2. RESPONDENTS` SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

160 people were interviewed within quantitative study, including 92 women (57%) and 68 men (43%). Respondents` age is as follows: from 18 to 34 - 48%; from 35 to 64 - 38%; 65 and above - 14%. As for the marital status, the situation is as follows: married - 44%; not married - 37%; widowed - 12%; divorced - 7%. Respondents qualification is as follows: secondary education - 42%; higher education - 33%; specialized secondary education - 20%, incomplete secondary education - 5%.

Respondents` special status is as follows: socially vulnerable - 18%; a person with disabilities -15%; ethnic minority -15%; internally displaced person - 15%; parent with many children - 4%.

Respondents have the following work experience: unemployed - 35%; public servant - 8%; pensioner -11%; self-employed - 38%; student - 8%.

The average monthly income of the surveyed respondents families is: 101-500 GEL - 31%; 501-900 - 39%; more than 901 -18%; refused to answer - 12%.

3. BASIC INFORMATION

3.1. TRANSPARENCY

Quantitative and qualitative research materials have revealed that the level of awareness of the ongoing Public Administration Reform in the municipality is heterogeneous.

Qualitative survey participants are less familiar with the reform and its progress, but there are those who more or less have the information:

Most quantitative survey respondents have no information on Public Administration Reform. Diagram # 1

19% of respondents received information from television; 26% of them from non-governmental organizations; 10% at the meetings with government agencies representatives; 4% from the municipality Facebook; 38% has no information, and 3% choose the answer - "other".

According to 37% of the respondents, PAR will improve the quality of citizen services. However, 4% think it will improve less, whereas 7% think it cannot improve them and 55% find it hard to answer.

Only 7% of respondents consider themselves sufficiently informed about electronic resources. 41% of the participants are more or less informed and, consequently, can use the service. 42% of participants are not informed. If we consider that there are 10% of those who "are not interested in this service", it becomes clear that at this stage, 48% use the services, and 52% do not use them, which is not a good indicator.
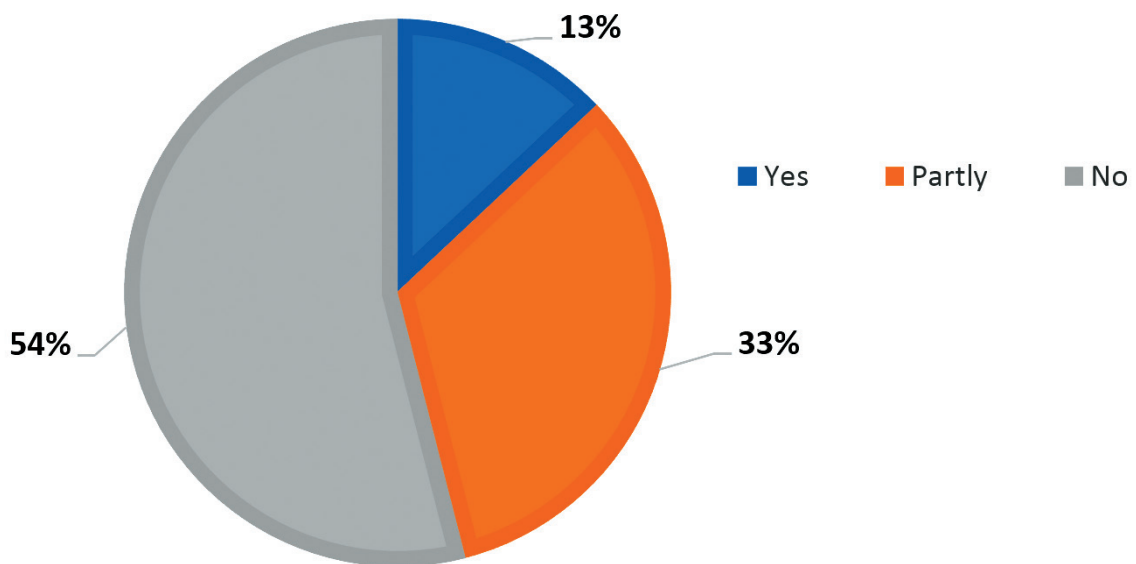
Are you aware of Public Administration Reform?

13%

■ Yes   ■ Partly   ■ No

54%

33%

Diagram #1

Focus group participants mostly believe that e-governance systems introduced in self-governing units work well. However, there is a category of people who do not use these services due to the lack of necessary skills, access to the Internet or are not aware of them. Therefore, according to them, the mayor's representatives should be more active better to coordinate the relations between the municipalities and the citizens.

Focus group participants believe public structures should be made even more open to the public, which competent public officials should facilitate. Sometimes they see this shortcoming.
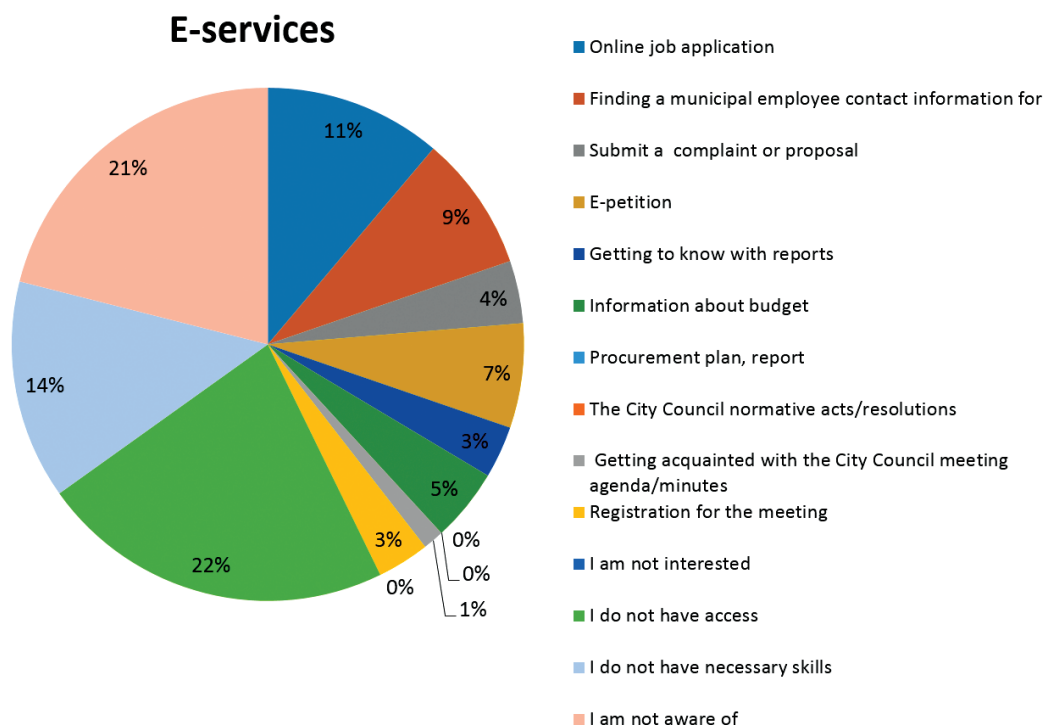
> **"I had to go out several times for one certificate, while I could very easily get it. However, they could not provide me with correct information" (a pensioner, focus group).**

Respondents of in-depth interviews also highlighted a range of issues that hinder access to e-services. They also stressed the municipal staff proper training issue:

> **"First of all, it is necessary to train municipal staff to provide relevant services to citizens. At the same time, it is necessary to devote more airtime in the media to the ongoing Public Administration Reform" (a City Hall employee).**

Qualitative survey participants believe that the official websites of the municipality work quite well. Experts have the same position. It is possible to add an online meeting platform, which, in their opinion, will make the service even more accessible.

The diagram below (#2) shows mainly what services the surveyed citizens have received.

E-services

- Online job application
- Finding a municipal employee contact information for
- Submit a complaint or proposal
- E-petition
- Getting to know with reports
- Information about budget
- Procurement plan, report
- The City Council normative acts/resolutions
- Getting acquainted with the City Council meeting agenda/minutes
- Registration for the meeting
- I am not interested
- I do not have access
- I do not have necessary skills
- I am not aware of

Diagram#2.

Compared to last year, the number of citizens who believe that the public should be promptly informed about e-services has increased from 26% to 57%, which indicates that the population's interest in this issue is growing.

Citizens most often use the municipality official website to get local services - 21%, www.my.gov.ge - citizen portal - 10%, City Hall Facebook page (7%), City Council Facebook page - 3% (56% chose the answer "None").

As it turns out, e-services improve the level of transparency of self-government activities. Respondents also named the municipality open portal, which everyone can use without interruption, create applications, use e-services and get economic benefits.

In terms of ensuring transparency, the visibility of the e-petition, the participatory budgeting program, was particularly evident. In addition, the pandemic has highlighted the importance of e-services.

3.2. SERVICE EFFICIENCY

Based on the research materials, the vectors of the services provided to the citizens by the municipality are mainly determined by the experience of previous years. However, there is an attempt to study the needs of different groups.

According to experts, the needs of specific groups are actively studied in the municipality. Focus groups are used as a research tool, which helps identify the needs of this or that vulnerable category. The programs reflected in the 2021 budget are named indicators:

> **"There is a practice of study/analysis of the needs of specific groups of citizens in the municipality. In budget drafting, the main focus is made on the challenging areas of the previous year. They discuss in detail which program worked well, how many people received the benefits and what are the needs at the local level?" (a City Council employee, in-depth interview).**

In other words, the current activities in terms of evaluating the impact of the programs are not sufficient:

> **"The quality of municipal services has not been thoroughly studied so far. It is partly prevented by a pandemic" (a City Hall employee).**

 60% of citizens find it difficult to assess how easy (or difficult) it is to use electronic services. 24% of respondents did not apply to the self-government on any issues last year. They mainly applied to the municipality to get assistance with medicines/operation funding - 20%, get the certificate - 14%, request for public information - 6%, and

land registration - 6%. The number of citizens satisfied with the service (44%) is higher than those dissatisfied (35%).

It is interesting to find out needs of which groups are considered by the municipality the most. Respondents believe that the municipality's policy is neutral and that the needs of specific groups are less taken into account. It was emphasized that a more sensitive policy towards persons with disabilities is observed compared to previous years.

> **"But there is still a lot of work to be done to create an adapted environment for people with disabilities" (a City Hall employee, in-depth interview).**

According to a qualitative study, a significant problem in the municipality is the migration of young people. As a result, some children belonging to ethnic minorities are left out of the teaching-learning process. These are ethnic Roma. According to the respondents, it is essential to pay proper attention to their integration issues.

It was noted that dialogue is vital for service efficiency.

> **"If the population does not come to the dialogue, it means they [population] have insufficient information and need to reach out to the people" (a housewife, focus group discussion).**

Participants point out that infrastructure projects and programs implemented in healthcare work but need information on how well they are planned and whether proper work is done. They also identified the groups whose needs are considered important:

> **"For example, disaster victims, because those who have social status already have services and know whom to apply. Probably, the disaster victims will also need to have assistance packages" (a business sector representative, in-depth interview).**

> **"It is necessary to improve services for the rural residents since they have difficulty accessing all the services that urban residents can receive" (a City Council official).**

According to respondents, the local government`s resources should be used on: a) social assistance; b) health care; c) infrastructure; d) promoting economic development and creating an appropriate environment on the ground; e) drinking water; f) sewage; g) repair of damaged houses/yards; h) management of stray animals; i) support services for the lonely elderly people (meals, accommodation); j) parks and landscaping; k) cleaning/waste management; other/IDPs. The needs selected by the respondents are shown in Diagram #3.

The citizens grouped a list of relevant issues in the following way: solving the problem of stray animals - 41 answers; rehabilitation of the cinema - 20; creating an adapted infrastructure for people with disabilities - 14; operation of municipal transport - 9 answers.

The respondents highlighted the importance of decentralization for the municipality to exercise its powers more effectively. Regarding inter-municipal cooperation, it was stated that:

"There is a need to create effective mechanisms for cooperation between self-governments in those areas that are decentralized and public services are provided at the local level" (a City Council employee).

The issue of social work decentralization is still relevant, which has entered a new phase with the creation of child rights departments in the city halls. Still, a new issue has been introduced - increasing the role of self-government in granting the status of victims of violence.

"The participation and inclusiveness of local self-government representatives in granting the status of socially vulnerable or victims of violence are essential. This issue should be subordinated to several agencies, which eliminates the feeling of subjectivity and bias" (a City Council employee, in-depth interview).

Experts think that the municipality should have a mechanism to prevent corruption. In their opinion, it is necessary for the municipality to take care of staff renewal and development constantly.

Local government should use its human and financial resources on:

i 2% | j 1% | k 1% | l 1% | 0%
h 7%
g 2%
f 3%
e 1%
d 12%
c 9%
b 15%
a 46%
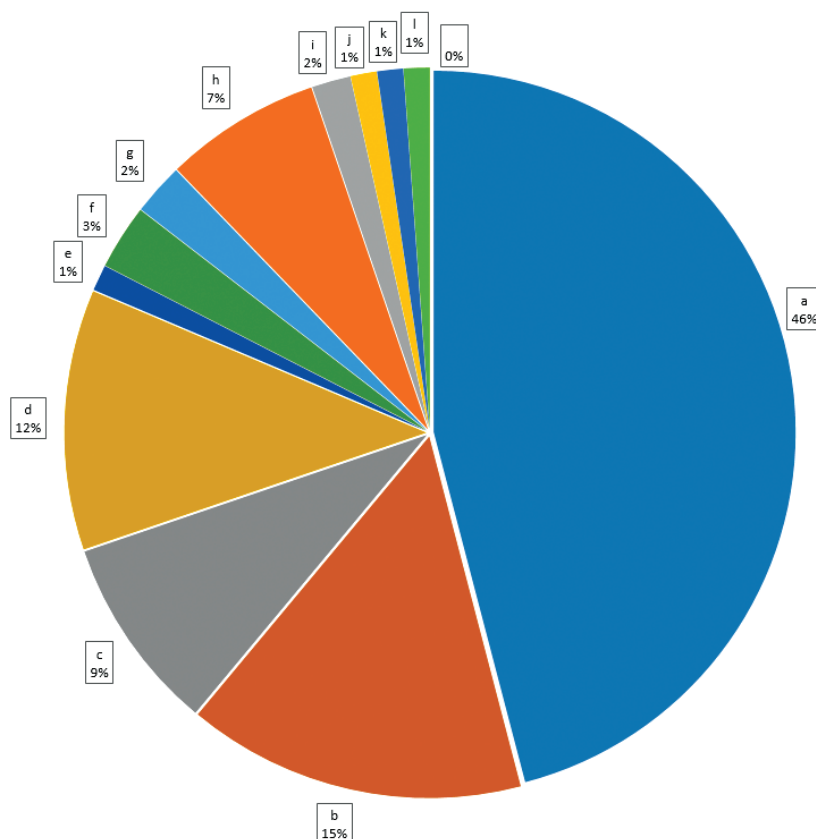
Diagram#3.

3.3. PARTICIPATION/INCLUSIVENESS

Citizens` inclusiveness in self-governance is primarily the responsibility of the local government. However, 57% of quantitative study respondents believe that this issue is only partially realized. Furthermore, only 10% believe that self-government is fully aware of the importance of this issue, and 32% "have no answer".

According to the respondents, the existing practice in the municipality is good but insufficient to ensure the participation of citizens in local governance. 34% of respondents believe that, if they wished, they had the opportunity to provide service-related comments to the self-government services. According to the qualitative study materials, citizens` participation in City Council sessions, the practice of public discussions on budget issues, etc., is ineffective. Although the City Hall provides access to information, there is no feedback system. According to the respondents, the citizens can only formally represent their visions. They are not taken into account. The most interactive and democratic form is the civil budgeting process.

According to the quantitative survey respondents, the self-government has a dialogue with the citizens regarding discussion of the citizens` initiatives (for example - the civil budget) - 15%; identification of citizens' needs - 13%; the process of setting local priorities - 12%; development of municipal programs - 11%; local budget review - 9%; (34% have no information on the issue).

According to the respondents, to ensure constructive dialogue and more inclusiveness with the self-government, there are four primary needs: periodic meetings of local government representatives with citizens for consultation (41%); strengthening the practice of civil budget, considering citizens' initiatives - 18%; inclusiveness of citizens in the process of developing municipal programs and budget review -17%. Existence of a public servant responsible for more sectoral profile/specific issues - 6%.

The experts highlighted the challenge that the municipal council has not elaborated the rules for the settlement general meeting establishment and operation in which the number of registered voters exceeds 2 000.

> **"Thus, such settlements are, in fact, in an "off-game" state" (a City Council employee, in-depth interview).**

The study participants positively assessed the use of electronic voice voucher systems for funding infrastructural projects, which, at present, has no analogue in practice. The

amount allocated to the civil budget is distributed equally, and the voucher cost is set by this method. E-services have adapted well to the petition system:

> **"An e-petition has been introduced in the municipality for several years now, and citizens are actively using it" (in-depth interview with the mayor's staff).**

Participants highlighted the role of civil society organizations regarding civil participation. They said that their participation promotes effective and inclusive policies tailored to the community needs at the local level, increasing social accountability.

Another civic actor is the private sector, which can collaborate to ensure the efficiency of local services. Self-government can lay a solid foundation for economic development regarding the private sector. It can offer a favourable environment for investment, natural resources, agriculture and tourism, and even get an important partner regarding citizen employment, support, and implementation of social and cultural, educational projects, etc.

4. CONCLUSION

There are positive trends in the implementation of Public Administration Reform in Ozurgeti Municipality. The practice of electronic services is being improved. It was affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, as there was a strong demand from citizens for online services.

The website and information delivery methodology have been modernized. As a result, the civic budgeting program has reached new heights. However, its popularity is primarily reasoned by the innovation - the electronic voucher system.

A significant segment still does not understand the importance of e-services and is not interested in using them. In addition, there are objective reasons - the difficulty of providing the Internet, the lack of proper equipment, technical skills among citizens. In some cases, there was an issue of insufficient competence of lower-rank public officials.

The need to increase focus on different vulnerable groups was identified to improve the efficiency of services (e.g. integration of ethnic Roma, maintenance of infrastructure adapted for people with disabilities).

The importance of the decentralization policy and the issue of participation in granting social status and the status of domestic violence victims to ensure social justice protection was highlighted.

The issue of protection from stray animals has taken an essential place in the list of citizens` priority needs, which is also a problem for many municipalities and emphasizes the need for inter-municipal cooperation.

The need to improve the practice of general settlement meetings was identified so that this tool could be used for efficient cooperation between the citizens and the self-government. The respondents highlighted the challenge that citizens are not always ready to have constructive cooperation with the self-government.

According to respondents, cooperation (partnership) of public and private sectors is essential. Besides, it is vital to engage local media and the non-governmental sector in monitoring budget spending efficiency.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON STUDY FINDINGS

To local self-government:

➢ It is necessary to increase providing information on the progress of Public Administration Reform. Information should be made available on the benefits of this reform: what does e-services and e-governance include, and how should the population benefit from them. For this, an action plan should be adequately developed, which will set part of television, social media, non-governmental organizations, etc. The information campaign should be well and interestingly planned. Information can be disseminated in various forms: simple guides, booklets, banners, flyers, videos, etc.;

➢ To increase the awareness and capacity of e-services, the municipality needs to provide access to e-services (e.g. online coverage); develop appropriate skills to receive services; strengthen the mayor's representative institution;

➢ local public officials need to understand their commitment to ensuring citizen inclusiveness. A critical component is the training of public servants for the municipality to ensure even more effective communication between the public structure and the population; introduce citizens` needs study, evaluate program effectiveness to implement new programs;

➢ The local government should encourage the private sector to develop responsibility for local civil processes.

To central government:

➢ The self-government needs to play a more significant role in implementing social policy: to increase its authority in granting social status and the status of victims of violence.

To NGOs:

➢ For the proper effectiveness of Public Administration Reform, it is essential for the NGO sector to be more actively involved in the political dialogue between the government and the population, identifying needs and initiating new programs.

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