



Public Awareness and Participation in Local Governance

Qualitative Research Results

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of a qualitative study conducted in the framework of the Civic Engagement in Local Governance (CELoG) program. The study included 12 focus groups conducted in 2019 in consolidated and non-consolidated Armenian communities and was aimed at revealing factors influencing the levels of civic awareness and engagement in local governance and perceptions of the community consolidation reform. The qualitative study complements existing quantitative data on the topic, suggesting some interpretations of the current situation regarding local self-governance and civic participation in Armenia.

Firstly, the focus groups revealed several reasons for the citizens' low awareness regarding local self-governance. Inside the communities, awareness is mainly created through informal mechanisms that are not efficient. Formal mechanisms of awareness-raising are not yet integrated in the communities' everyday life and culture. People prefer to become informed and acquainted with community leaders and members of the Council of Elders via personal interactions; they are not used to participating in council meetings and discussions, and are almost entirely disinterested in their communities' budgets and the activities of the Councils of Elders. No specific differences between the perceptions of people from consolidated and non-consolidated communities were found: the lack of interest and awareness appears to be a countrywide problem more dependent on the general participation culture rather than local specifics.

Overall, due to the still emerging culture of civic participation, many people do not realize the importance of civic awareness and tend to blame governance bodies for all kinds of community problems. People's lack of confidence in their capability to change anything in the community contributes to the problem. The fact that those participants of the focus groups who were regularly engaged in the civic sector were more likely to value awareness and be interested in their communities' self-governance processes, supports the argument that it is the poorly developed participation culture that results in low awareness levels. Active citizens also stated that it is the lack of awareness that contributes to the communities' negative attitudes towards self-governance bodies.

Given this situation, actions aimed at raising local awareness will be more effective if they consider social and demographic characteristics of the target groups and integrate civic awareness in the

citizens' everyday life and community culture by combining formal and informal awareness mechanisms. It is rather a question of long-term development of social structures than a specific program or reform. This said, reforms and programs can be adjusted so as to contribute to the development of this culture.

Secondly and similarly, low civic participation in self-government processes is based on low mutual trust between citizens, on the one hand, and self-government bodies, on the other, as well as on the generally low participation culture. Mistrust towards self-governance bodies is based on citizen's negative experience in dealing with community leaders or Councils of Elders, and on the perception that governance bodies pursue their own interests rather than those of the community. Additionally, some participants mentioned that poor decentralization of public administration makes it impossible to participate in the regulation of some community problems, since self-governance bodies themselves are powerless to deal with them.

The scope of readiness to participate in their community's governance highly depends on the citizens' personal attitudes towards governance bodies and community leaders. Personal trust towards community leaders often results in better attitudes and therefore higher readiness to contribute to the community's development, and vice versa.

Similar to the awareness issue, people engaged in civic initiatives were more likely to value local participation. Moreover, age is a factor: younger adults are more inclined towards participation in local self-governance, reflecting a generational transition in participation practices. Civically active citizens often serve as mediators between local self-governance bodies and other citizens, promoting their cooperation.

In this light, in order to achieve higher participation rates, this process should also be viewed as long-term development of civic participation culture that requires changes in people's lifestyles and values. Active citizens who serve as mediators between the community and the self-governance bodies play a crucial role in this process and should be considered key-informants and target groups.

Considering the existing environment of mistrust between all kinds of governance bodies and communities, the creation of a positive image of self-governance bodies and participation culture in general is also an important direction for engagement.

Thirdly and finally, the focus groups revealed the perceptions of citizens towards the community consolidation reform. While perceptions varied across and inside the already consolidated communities, people from non-consolidated communities expressed consistently negative attitudes towards the reform, arguably because they feared it. In consolidated and non-consolidated communities alike, the main reason for negative perceptions is the fear of identity loss. Even in those

communities where consolidation already took place and led to positive changes, people criticize the reform due to the disturbance of their communal identity: they view the consolidated community as an artificial union of people who do not share an identity. Moreover, negative attitudes towards reforms - and generally towards change - are enhanced by the widespread distrust towards governance bodies.

In this context, the development of mutual trust should be viewed as a key dimension of any development efforts in this area. One avenue could be the wide dissemination of success stories of the consolidation reform in particular communities, further research of the success stories and their use as the basis for future development of local self-governance.

Disclaimer

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