



Assessment of the Institutional Framework and Performance of Civil Advisory Councils in the Municipalities of Kvemo Kartli Region

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Summary

This research into the institutional framework and practices of the Civil Advisory Councils (the Councils) of Kvemo Kartli's municipalities was prepared as part of the UNDP project "Fostering Regional and Local Development in Georgia - Phase 2 (FRLD 2)."

The overall objective of the research is to facilitate the development and strengthen the capacities of the Councils in seven target municipalities of Kvemo Kartli region – Bolnisi, Gardabani, Dmanisi, Marneuli, Rustavi, Tetrtskaro, and Tsalka – by evaluating their performance and analyzing the legislative framework regulating their work.

The research activities included:

- Collection of internal regulatory documents and relevant decrees of the target municipalities and analysis of their compliance with the national laws;
- Analysis of performance of the Councils based on an exploration of their meeting notes and information gathered through in-depth interviews with stakeholders; and
- Identification of the role and engagement opportunities for the Councils in ongoing and future municipal-level projects.

The research findings are to be used as a basis for the development of municipality-specific recommendations and guidelines on how to improve the performance and institutional framework of the Councils. These recommendations will also help to facilitate greater engagement of various stakeholders in the work of the Councils, especially those related to local economic development (LED).

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1. Background

The active involvement of citizens in the decision-making process is crucial in the course of creating a stable and sustainable environment and pursuing sustainable development goals.

Globally, there has been a tendency in recent times to promote and strengthen participatory decision-making. Today, many countries are exploring and introducing different new and complex participatory forms with varying levels of civic engagement.

It is becoming more common to embrace a broader understanding of civic participation, one which goes beyond informed citizenship and facilitates citizens' active engagement in the identification of priorities, as well as the planning, implementing, and evaluation of activities.

The importance of citizens' involvement is reflected in many international norms embodied in various charters, conventions, and recommendations of international organizations. In Georgia's case, the most relevant of these is the Additional Protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government (Utrecht, 16, XI, 2009), which defines the main principles and instruments of citizens' involvement in CoE member states. Georgia became a signatory to the Protocol in 2019.

In Georgia, citizens' involvement remains remarkably low. Mechanisms of participation are regulated by law and specified in the Local Self-Government Code (Chapter XI – Participation of Citizens in the Exercise of Local-Self Government). These mechanisms include the General Assembly of a Settlement (GAofS), and the right to petition a local authority and the Councils. In addition, the Code sets out transparency and accountability guarantees, such as the requirement for local authorities to proactively publish public information, the right of citizens to attend local-self-government (LSG) sessions, and the responsibility of LSG representatives to report to citizens on the work performed on a regular basis.

Despite the above-described legal mechanisms being in place, local stakeholders (LSG, the private sector, civil society organizations (CSOs), and citizens) have limited capacities. Cooperation practices between LSG, businesses, and citizens is quite limited. LSG struggles to effectively deliver basic municipal services and create a favorable environment for investments and to stimulate LED. There are few municipal-level programs and initiatives designed to address the specific needs of various interest groups (especially the most vulnerable groups), while businesses, CSOs, and citizens have limited opportunities to play a role. It is therefore important to facilitate the creation of special mechanisms/institutions capable of stimulating development. This problem is highlighted in the Decentralization Strategy 2020-2025 (Objective 3.3: Facilitate effective participation in decision making and implementation at a local level) adopted by the Government of Georgia (GoG).

Facilitation of citizens' involvement in the local development process is one of the main priorities of the international donor organizations operating in Georgia.

The UNDP project entitled "Fostering Regional and Local Development in Georgia, Phase 2 (FRLD2)" is being implemented with the assistance of the Georgian, Swiss, and Austrian governments. Its objective is to respond to sustainable development challenges at the local level. The project recognizes the leading role of the state in the LED process and its contribution to sustainable development. One of the specific objectives (Output 3.2) of the project is to enhance the capacity of LSGs and the Councils to effectively apply citizen participation mechanisms calling for actions focused on providing institutional support and

expertise in the processes and, in particular, facilitating active engagement of the Councils in the planning and implementation of LED initiatives (Activity 3.2.2).

The presented research aims to contribute to strengthening the capacity of the Councils through assessing their performance and analyzing their institutional framework, as well as developing tailored recommendations.

2. The research methodology and process

2.1. The research objective

The overall goal of the research was to assess the institutional framework and performance of the Councils in seven municipalities of Kvemo Kartli region: Bolnisi, Gardabani, Dmanisi, Marneuli, Rustavi, Tetrtskaro, and Tsalka. In particular, the specific objectives of the research were to:

- Analyze documents regulating the establishment and functions of the Councils and their compliance with the national laws;
- Analyze reports, working documents, and meeting notes of the Councils;
- Assess the performance of the Councils (including establishment, structure, composition, and activities carried out);
- Identify success stories / projects attributable to the Councils;
- Analyze the Councils' communication strategy and practice with various interest groups; and
- Identify points of intervention and developmental activities, and draft recommendations for their implementation.

To achieve these objectives, desk and field research were conducted in all seven municipalities of Kvemo Kartli region. The research methodology was confirmed with the UNDP's FRLD2 project before the field work began.

2.2. The data collection strategy

2.2.1. Regulatory documents and normative acts

The following list of regulatory documents and normative acts was identified for assessment in the first stage of the research:

1. LSG decrees on the establishment of the Councils;
2. Amendments to the LSG decrees on establishment of the Councils;
3. Statutes of the Councils;
4. Structure and composition of the Councils;
5. Meeting notes of the Councils (2015-2020); and
6. Working documents of the Councils (e.g. agendas and project documents).

The data collection started with the exploration of official LSG websites. However, as some of them contained incomplete data, only some of the necessary documents were obtained.

Public information available on official websites

	Statutes of the Councils	Composition of the Councils	Meeting Notes of the Councils
Rustavi Municipality	+	+	+
Bolnisi Municipality	+	+	+
Gardabani Municipality	-	-	-
Dmanisi Municipality	+	+	-
Tetrtskaro Municipality	+	+	+
Marneuli Municipality	-	-	+
Tsalka Municipality	-	-	-

In addition, public information was requested from LSGs in line with Articles 37, 38, and 40 of the General Administrative Code of Georgia.

Information requested from municipalities

	Statutes of the Councils	Composition of the Councils	Meeting Notes of the Councils	Other Documents Authored by the Councils
Rustavi Municipality	-	-	-	-
Bolnisi Municipality	+	+	+	-
Gardabani Municipality	-	-	-	-
Dmanisi Municipality	+	+	+	-
Tetritskaro Municipality	+	+	+	-
Marneuli Municipality	*	*	*	*
Tsalka Municipality	+	+	-	-

**No response from the municipality*

2.2.2. Interviews

In-depth interviews based on a pre-determined format and questionnaire (see Annex 1) were carried out with the Councils' members, LSG officials, civil society representatives, and experts on self-government. Respondents were selected from the following groups:

- Leaders and active members of the Councils;
- Representatives of City Halls;
- Representatives of CSOs working in the target municipalities; and
- Representatives of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that are members of the Councils.

In total, 23 interviews were conducted.

Interviews Conducted

	Members of the Councils	Civil Servant	CSOs / Businesses	Total
Rustavi Municipality	1	1	1	3
Bolnisi Municipality	2	1	1	4
Gardabani Municipality	0	1	1	2
Dmanisi Municipality	0	2	1	3
Tetritskaro Municipality	1	1	1	3
Marneuli Municipality	1	1	1	3
Tsalka Municipality	0	3	0	3
Experts	0	0	2	2
TOTAL	5	10	8	23

2.3. Analysis of the data collected

The following criteria were used to analyze the data collected:

1. Presence of the official documentation on the work of the Councils;
2. Compliance of the official documents (including the statutes) with the national legislation;
3. Compliance of practices with the regulatory norms;
4. Frequency of the meetings of the Councils and issues discussed;
5. Number of projects implemented and their success rate;

6. Presence and format of a communication strategy; and
7. Presence of a future development vision among the Councils' members and the relevance of this vision.

The format of the Councils' work and their completed projects were analyzed during the research. The findings were generalized and grouped for each target municipality. A particular emphasis was placed on the Councils' existing and potential capacity to carry out LED projects successfully at the municipal and regional levels.

2.4. The research limitations

The research faced certain challenges that need to be acknowledged, including:

- Official LSG websites contained incomplete data and only partial information was received in response to information requests (a pertinent example here was the incomplete register of the Councils' meetings);
- Some information was missing in the documents (for instance, data about the Councils' members included only their first and last names, making it impossible to identify the interest groups they represented);
- Informal aspects of the Councils' work (for instance, in some cases the Councils' members were instrumental in ensuring the successful implementation of LED projects, or played a key role in lobbying and advocacy efforts to promote strategic visions, but their role and contribution was not formally documented); and
- Communication with LSG representatives and, consequently, data collection were hampered by the spread of COVID-19 and political tensions associated with the 2020 Parliamentary Elections.

3. Review of the legal and institutional framework

3.1. The legislation

The Councils represent one of the five mechanisms of citizens' participation in LSG identified and regulated by the Local Self-Government Code (Articles 85 and 86¹). Article 86¹ defines:

- A council of civil advisors is a deliberative body of a municipality Mayor or of a District Gamgebeli. A council of civil advisors shall be composed of the representatives of entrepreneurial legal entities, of NGOs and of the municipality population. Under this Law, the composition of the council of civil advisors shall be approved by the Mayor of a municipality/District Gamgebeli. The council of civil advisors shall be composed of at least 10 members (paragraph 1);
- The number of representatives of one gender in a council of civil advisors shall be at least one third of the total number of its members. A council of civil advisors shall not be authorised if the requirement of this paragraph has not been met (paragraph 2);
- The Mayor of a municipality shall be obliged to submit for discussion to the council of civil advisors, [a body] approved by him/her, a draft municipal budget, documents relating to the municipality spatial planning, proposals on giving names to the municipality geographical features, as well as other significant draft administrative-legal acts, and infrastructural and social projects. Other powers of the council of civil advisors approved by the Mayor and the rules of its operation shall be determined by the statute of the council of civil advisors, which shall be approved by the municipality Mayor (paragraph 3);
- A decision of the council of civil advisors shall be recorded in the minutes of the session of the council of civil advisors. A council of civil advisors shall meet at least once in three months (paragraph 5).

While the law provides a general framework of the Councils, details of its structure, composition, and work are defined by the corresponding statute. With this in mind, the legal framework of the Councils can be evaluated by analyzing the following documents:

- Individual orders / decrees by the Mayor on the establishment of the Councils and approval of their composition;
- The Statute of the Council approved by the Mayor;
- The Councils' meeting notes; and
- Documents produced by Councils (e.g., visions, strategies, statements, recommendations, and project proposals).

The research findings revealed differences across target municipalities with respect to their legal framework.

Apart from compliance with the law, the structure of the normative acts and other official documents produced by the Councils were also evaluated as part of the analysis. The results of the analysis and specific characteristics of each of the Councils are presented below.

3.2 Rustavi Municipality

Compliance of the regulations of the Council with the organic law

Requirement of the Organic Law	
The Statute and composition of the Council are approved by the respective order of the Mayor	Yes

The Council consists of representatives of businesses, CSOs, and citizens	Yes *
The Council has at least 10 members	Yes
The number of members of one sex is not less than 1/3	Yes
The Mayor submits strategic documents to the Council for consideration	Yes
Decisions of the Council at the meetings are recorded in meeting notes	Yes
The Council meets at least once every 3 months	Yes **

Notes:

**The Statute does not specify which sector or interest group the Council members represent, since they are elected based on territory (i.e. from particular districts of the city). However, all social groups are represented in the Council;*

***Some of the official documentation (including meeting notes and the Statute of the Council) are available on the Council's Facebook page instead of the municipality's official website.*

The status and responsibilities of the Council were first defined by the Rustavi Municipality Mayor's 21 September 2015 Order #1552 on "Establishment of the Rustavi Municipality Civil Advisory Council."

Currently, the Rustavi Municipality Mayor's 8 June 2017 Order #773 is in effect, introducing amendments to the Rustavi Municipality Mayor's 21 September 2015 Order #1552. The amendments introduced were effective from 1 July 2017. The Mayor's Order #773 is accompanied by an annex that presents the Statute of the Council that elaborates upon the details of its structure and work as follows:

- The Council is composed of elected representatives from Rustavi Municipality's districts, with two representatives from each district (Article 2, Paragraph 2);
- The Council is composed of a chairperson, secretary, and members (Article 2, Paragraph 3);
- Article 3 defines the functions and responsibilities of the Council including: the right to participate in the municipal budgeting process and setting of spending priorities (Paragraph 2); the right to prepare recommendations based on public discussions and opinion polls to finalize the spending priorities (Paragraph 3); and the right to review budget implementation reports (Paragraph 5); and
- Procedural regulations of the Council are defined in Article 4 (decisions are made by a simple majority, resolutions/recommendations are sent to the Mayor for approval and final decision). The article also requires the publishing of meeting notes from the Council's meetings on the official website of Rustavi Municipality (Paragraph 6).

The Council in Rustavi Municipality has a unique feature that distinguishes it from the other Councils in Kvemo Kartli region: its meetings can be chaired by an external facilitator.

The composition of the Council is determined by the Rustavi Municipality Mayor's 19 December 2017 Order #1920, which introduced amendments to the Rustavi Municipality Mayor's 21 September 2015 Order #1552. Annex 1 of the document lists the Council members, albeit without specifying which sectors or groups they represent.

The Council in Rustavi Municipality has the best-elaborated and most refined legal framework in the region. Its normative acts are fully compliant with the national laws.

3.3 Bolnisi Municipality

Compliance of the regulations of the Council with the organic law

Requirement of the Organic Law	
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The Statute and composition of the council are approved by the respective order of the Mayor	Yes
The Council consists of representatives of businesses, CSOs, and citizens	Yes
The Council has at least 10 members	Yes
The number of members of one sex is not less than 1/3	Yes
The Mayor submits strategic documents to the Council for consideration	Yes
Decisions of the Council at the meetings are recorded in meeting notes	Yes
The Council meets at least once every 3 months	No

The Council in Bolnisi Municipality was established on the basis of the 11 November 2015 Order #1471 by the *Gamgebeli* (the head of LSG) and the subsequent 10 March 2016 Order #585 introducing amendments to the 11 November 2015 Order #1471.

More recent normative acts include the Bolnisi Mayor's 20 November 2017 Order #217 on the establishment of the Council and the approval of its Statute. On 9 July 2019, the Bolnisi Municipality Mayor issued Order #2433, amending Order #217.

Comparative analysis of these Orders - Order #1471 (2015) and Order #217 (2017) - revealed that both documents established a legally well-defined procedural framework for the Council. The current Statute is highly sophisticated in terms of both legal clarity and syntax/semantic structure (see Articles 1, 2, and 5, and in particular Article 5, Paragraph 3 on provision of data electronically).

Some of the amendments are about structural and procedural issues. The amended version defines only the position of the Council chairperson, while the positions of deputy chair and secretary were removed (Article 4, Paragraph 3). Elsewhere, the clause about working relations between the head of LSG and the Council has been removed (Article 8 in the previous version). Indeed, the following Council functions, defined in the previous version, are now absent in the amended document:

- The Council has the right to have regular meetings with members of the public and representatives of political parties (Article 3, Subparagraph G);
- The Council has the right to invite external experts from different fields to discuss specific issues at its meetings (Article 5, Paragraph 4); and
- The Council has the right to seek and get external funds from private and other legal entities for its activities and initiatives (Article 9, Paragraph 3).

Finally, the 9 July 2019 Order #2433 reduced the number of Council members from 34 to 16. At the same time, the order specified which sectors and social groups must be represented.

3.4 Gardabani Municipality

Compliance of the regulations of the Council with the organic law

Requirement of the Organic Law	
The Statute and composition of the Council are approved by the respective order of the Mayor	No
The Council consists of representatives of businesses, CSOs, and citizens	No
The Council has at least 10 members	No
The number of members of one sex is not less than 1/3	No
The Mayor submits strategic documents to the Council for consideration	No
Decisions of the Council at the meetings are recorded in meeting notes	No

The Council meets at least once every 3 months	No
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Council-related information (date of establishment, selection of members, procedural rules, potential topics of discussions, and the Statute) is available only on the municipality’s official webpage (<http://gardabani.gov.ge/moqalaqeebisatvis/samoqalaqo-mrchevelta-sabtcho>). Information provided here is fully compliant with the national laws.

According to these documents, the Council’s meetings are chaired by the *Gamgebeli* or a *Gamgebeli*-appointed chair (in the event of the *Gamgebeli*’s absence). The mention of a “*Gamgebeli*” rather than a “Mayor” suggests that the document pre-dates 2017.

According to an official response from the LSG of Gardabani Municipality, there is no Council currently operating in the municipality.

3.5 Dmanisi Municipality

Compliance of the regulations of the Council with the organic law

Requirement of the Organic Law	
The Statute and composition of the Council are approved by the respective order of the Mayor	Yes
The Council consists of representatives of businesses, CSOs, and citizens	*
The Council has at least 10 members	Yes
The number of members of one sex is not less than 1/3	Yes
The Mayor submits strategic documents to the Council for consideration	Yes
Decisions of the Council at the meetings are recorded in meeting notes	Yes
The Council meets at least once every 3 months	No

* *Unclear due to lack of relevant references in the documents.*

The Council in Dmanisi Municipality was established by the *Gamgebeli* by the 10 November 2015 Order #607 on the approval of the composition and regulations of the Council of Dmanisi Municipality *Gamgebeli*. The next day, the *Gamgebeli* issued the 11 November 2015 Order #609 to amend Order #607 and change the Council’s structure and composition.

Currently, the Council in Dmanisi Municipality acts on the basis of the Dmanisi Municipality Mayor’s 27 December 2018 Order #2726 on the approval of the composition and regulations of the Council. It is important to note that Paragraph 3 of the document obliges the LSG administration to upload Council-related information to the municipality’s official website in line with the requirements of the law. Annex 1 of the order lists the Council members (10 members) but gives only their names without specifying which groups they represent. The Statute of the Council (Annex 2) includes the following information that is absent in the Council regulations of other Kvemo Kartli municipalities:

- The Council’s official address (Article 1, Paragraph 4);
- The Council’s responsibility to keep the general public informed about the major priorities of LSG policies and procedures (Article 2, Paragraph 3);
- Procedural aspects of the Council’s activities (quorum, decision-making rules, rules for convening special meetings) (Article 2, Paragraph 5; Article 5); and
- Provision of technical and organizational assistance for the Council’s work by the Mayor’s administration (Article 3, Paragraph 2).

The Statute of the Council is partly based on a template created by the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure of Georgia.

Finally, according to the Statute (Article 3, Paragraph 1), the Council is chaired by the Mayor, though it is unclear whether the Mayor is supposed to just chair the Council's meetings or its everyday activities as well.

It is worth noting that Dmanisi Municipality made the information public earlier than other Kvemo Kartli municipalities, indicating that it has an efficient database management system. The municipality's normative acts are fully compliant with the national laws.

3.6 Tetrtskaro Municipality

Compliance of the regulations of the Council with the organic law

Requirement of the Organic Law	
The statute and composition of the Council are approved by the respective order of the Mayor	Yes
The Council consists of representatives of businesses, CSOs, and citizens	Yes
The Council has at least 10 members	Yes
The number of members of one sex is not less than 1/3	Yes
The Mayor submits strategic documents to the Council for consideration	Yes
Decisions of the Council at meetings are recorded in meeting notes	Yes
The Council meets at least once every 3 months	No

The Tetrtskaro Municipality Mayor has issued the following three orders related to the Council since November 2015:

- The 11 November 2015 Order #994 on approval of the composition and regulations of the Council;
- Order #670 introducing amendments to the 11 November 2015 Order #994; and
- Order #1036 introducing amendments to the 11 November 2015 Order #994.

Currently, the Council in Tetrtskaro Municipality operates on the basis of the Mayor's 19 March 2018 Order #355 on approval of the composition and Statute of the Council. The order reorganized the Council's structure and its statute (Paragraph 1, 2) and revoked all previous normative acts (Paragraph 4). According to the Order, the Mayor's office is responsible for providing technical and administrative assistance to the Council and sharing information with relevant stakeholders (Paragraph 3, 5).

Analysis of the Statute of the Council (Annex 1 to Order #355) revealed some differences with similar documents of other municipalities in the region:

- One of the Council's functions is to analyze and evaluate the work of the LSG and come up with respective recommendations (Article 2, Paragraph 2a);
- Apart from the full list of the Council's responsibilities (Article 3), there is a detailed description of its structure (Article 4), meeting and decision-making procedures (Article 5), as well as the responsibilities of the Council chair (Article 6) and members (Article 7);
- The Council can elect two co-chairpersons, instead of one chair; and
- In addition to the responsibility of making its meeting notes public, the Council is also responsible for proactively publishing (pre-meeting) meeting agendas (Article 5, Paragraph 6).

It should be noted that Tetrtskaro Municipality (like Bolnisi Municipality) differs from other Kvemo Kartli municipalities in that the Council-related documents specify the affiliation of each member, not just their names (Order #355, Paragraph 2).

3.7 Marneuli Municipality

Compliance of the regulations of the Council with the organic law

Requirement of the Organic Law	
The Statute and composition of the Council are approved by the respective order of the Mayor	*
The Council consists of representatives of businesses, CSOs, and citizens	*
The Council has at least 10 members	*
The number of members of one sex is not less than 1/3	*
The Mayor submits strategic documents to the Council for consideration	Yes
Decisions of the Council at meetings are recorded in meeting notes	Yes
The Council meets at least once every 3 months	*

* *Unclear due to lack of relevant references in the documents or lack of relevant documentation.*

No information providing details on the structure and the Statute of the Council is available on the official website of Marneuli Municipality. All requests made to obtain official information from the LSG were left unanswered.

The only Council-related information on the website pertains to the Council's meeting notes of 9 November 2017 with two annexes – 2018 municipal budget and spending priorities – submitted by the *Gamgebeli* to the local *Sakrebulo* on 10 November 2017.

3.8 Tsalka Municipality

Compliance of the regulations of the Council with the organic law

Requirement of the Organic Law	
The Statute and composition of the Council are approved by the respective order of the Mayor	Yes
The Council consists of representatives of businesses, CSOs, and citizens	*
The Council has at least 10 members	Yes
The number of members of one sex is not less than 1/3	Yes
The Mayor submits strategic documents to the Council for consideration	Yes
Decisions of the Council at meetings are recorded in meeting notes	Yes
The Council meets at least once every 3 months	No

* *Unclear due to lack of relevant references in the documents.*

The Council in Tsalka Municipality is established based on the Mayor's 4 January 2018 Order #5 on approval of the composition and the Statute of the Council. The order does not specify explicitly that the Statute should be made public and where its contents can be obtained.

Names of the Council members (11) are given in Annex 1 to Order #5, albeit without specifying their affiliation. Annex 2 presents the Statute of the Council, including the following:

- Official address of the Council (Article 1, Paragraph 6);
- The Council's responsibility of keeping the general public informed about major priorities of LSG policies and procedures (Article 2, Paragraph 2);

- Procedural aspects of the Council's activities (quorum, decision-making rules, rules for convening special meetings) (Article 2, Paragraph 4; Article 3, Paragraphs 4 and 5); and
- Provision of technical and organizational assistance for the Council's work by the Mayor's administration (Article 3, Paragraph 2).

The Statute of the Council in Tsalka Municipality is very similar to that of Dmanisi Municipality and is largely based on a template created by the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure.

According to the Statute of the Council (Article 3, Paragraph 1), the Council is chaired by the Mayor, though it is unclear whether the Mayor is supposed to just chair the Council's meetings or govern its everyday activities as well. The Statute is fully compliant with the national laws.

4. Analysis of practice

4.1 General situation

The performance of the Councils in Kvemo Kartli region was analyzed based on the data collected from formal documents as well as in-depth interviews. The main findings of the research indicate the following similarities across the region:

- Statutes of the Councils in every municipality are compliant with the national legislation (Article 86¹ of Local Self-Government Code);
- It is difficult to verify whether Council meetings are held at least once in three months, as required by the law. Council meeting notes collected indicate that this norm is often violated. This was more evident in 2019 and 2020 when only a few meetings of the Councils were recorded in selected municipalities of the region;
- The Council meeting notes mentioned certain documents (e.g., research results, reports, and project proposals) but they are unavailable on the municipalities' official websites and absent in the LSG archives. Consequently, this material could not be analyzed. In rare cases, a brief summary of these documents can be found in the text of the meeting notes; and
- Two main factors contribute to the enhancement of the Council's work:
 - The existence of a relevant donor-supported project (external factor); and
 - The presence of people in LSG leadership who are genuinely committed to the work of the Council and to making it functional (internal factor).

The interviews and an analysis of the Council-related documents also revealed differences across the region. In general, the municipalities of the region can be divided into the following three categories in terms of Council effectiveness:

1. There is no Council present at the municipality level (Gardabani) or it exists only on paper as a mere formality;
2. The Council is active at present or was active for some time in the past; or
3. The Council is active and quite efficient.

The differences between the categories can be explained by a number of factors, including:

- Subjective factors, which include: the attitude of the Mayor towards the Council and the personal characteristics of the Council chair and members; and
- Objective factors, which include: procedures and criteria for selecting the Council members, the strength and diversity of the corresponding municipality's civil society, the Council's capacity-building projects, and other efforts made to increase citizens' participation in LSG.

The present-day situation in each municipality in Kvemo Kartli is determined by the dynamics of the given Council's development process. According to the information provided by the respondents, in many municipalities, the Councils were seen (by representatives of both the municipal leadership and civil society) – and are often seen even today – as a liability or “a headache” and as something that has to be done only because the law requires it. The newly-established Councils were even referred to by some respondents as “stillborn.” LSG leadership (currently Mayors, previously *Gamgebelis*) believe that Council functions are already built-in to other mechanisms of LSG and civic participation including community meetings, state assistance programs for rural communities, and the presence of the Mayor's representatives in settlements (*rtsmunebuli*) and *Sakrebulo* (City Council).

Such negative attitudes have significantly hampered the establishment process and undermined the credibility of the newly-formed Councils. The research showed that in many cases some members of LSG were completely unaware of the existence of the Council in their municipality.

On the other hand, the intensification of the Councils' activities and their success stories can be attributed to the following two factors:

- The Mayor's attitude towards citizens' active involvement in decision-making processes at the local level. A good example here is Marneuli Municipality in the 2014-2017 period, when the Mayor expressed interested in the work of the Council and civic participation in general. Apart from a fully functional Council, Marneuli Municipality was among the first to introduce a participatory budgeting program, which won widespread acclaim (the program was however terminated after the new Mayor was elected); and
- External assistance, such as Councils' capacity-building projects implemented by various CSOs with the financial support of donor organizations. Successful examples here include the municipalities of Tetrtskaro and Bolnisi. In both cases, the capacity-building projects have substantially improved the Council's efficiency and productivity. As a result, the Councils set up internal communication platforms, convened special meetings along with regular ones, streamlined their statutes, reshuffled members, and submitted their recommendations and project proposals for local development to the Mayor. In Tetrtskaro Municipality, the Council continued to work successfully after the end of the project, largely thanks to the skill and commitment of the Council chair and some of the Council's members. In Bolnisi Municipality, in contrast, the Council's performance has scaled down. Among other reasons, this decline in the Council's work seems to have been caused by the project's insufficient budgetary resources.

In some cases, the Council showed initiative and submitted its visions, recommendations, and project proposals to the Mayor. These cases are cited below within the descriptions of the practices of the corresponding target municipalities.

Rustavi Municipality stands out among the municipalities of Kvemo Kartli region as a **positive example of the Council's effectiveness and success, owing to a combination of factors, such as a well-developed civil sector, the Mayor's progressive views, and strong support from donors**. The establishment of the first functional Council in Rustavi was facilitated by SIDA as early as 2007, long before the formation of such bodies was mandated by the law. The Council has implemented several successful projects since then, including successfully lobbying the energy ombudsman to replace communal electricity meters with individual ones in Rustavi. The Council's development process received a further boost in 2013 from a USAID-funded awareness-raising project to facilitate the establishment of the Councils in four Georgian cities, including Rustavi. The Council was indeed formally established in Rustavi as a result but was disbanded soon after the end of the project. The EU-funded capacity-building and training project for the Council, which was implemented by the Mayor's office in partnership with local CSOs in 2017, largely contributed to the enhancement of the Council and shaped its current state. Among other aspects, the project set selection and eligibility criteria, which formed the basis for the subsequent elections and training of Council members. Today, even though the project has ended, the Council in Rustavi Municipality's continues to function effectively.

The Council in Rustavi Municipality is a positive exception, having managed to adapt to the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and successfully using online resources to continue its work. It is important to mention here that geographical factors have also played

an important and positive role in the case of Rustavi Municipality. Pertinently, Rustavi is a major industrial urban center with a large population concentrated within a relatively small area with diverse and well-developed communication channels.

4.2 Rustavi Municipality

26 Council meeting notes were collected in the course of the research:

- 2016 – 1
- 2017 – 9
- 2018 – 19
- 2019 – 15
- 2020 – 6

The Council's meeting notes dating back to 2018 are available on the Council's Facebook page. It is worth noting that the Council has held its last four meetings online due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Regular meetings and efficient activities make the Council in Rustavi Municipality a standout performer in the region.

Some of the Council's meeting notes indicate that the council has discussed the following organizational issues on various occasions: elections of the Council chair and secretary; establishment of working groups; and recommendations for the Mayor to dismiss old and recruit new Council members. It should be noted here that some of the following topics discussed by the Council in Rustavi Municipality have never been addressed by other Councils in the region:

- The Council's code of ethics (meeting notes #11 and #12, 2018); and
- Awareness-raising efforts to inform local residents of the Council's activities (including assigning a task to one of the Council members – meeting notes #16 and #22, 2018).

The main activities performed by the Council within its competencies include:

- Preparation of recommendations on how to improve the LSG's work based on analysis of various external research results;
- Assessment and identification of gaps and preparation of recommendations for the Mayor on the implementation of municipal priorities, municipal budget plans, and approved municipal budgets;
- Discussion of various municipal infrastructure, social and cultural programs, and preparation of recommendations aimed at the improvement of such programs' implementation; and
- Preparation of project proposals and analysis of ongoing projects funded by municipal budgets or external donors (i.e. participatory budgeting, social bank projects, etc.) (meeting notes #17, #20, #23, and #24, 2008).

From the viewpoint of both legal clarity and practical effectiveness, the Council in Rustavi Municipality's work is diverse and well-structured, which makes it a clear leader among municipalities in the region. Unfortunately, due to incomplete information (i.e. annexes missing from the documents including reports, programs, and project proposals), it was impossible to conduct a more thorough desk review, although it was possible to examine brief summaries of these documents which were found in the text of meeting notes.

Interviews helped to shed light on how effectively the Council operates. It is noteworthy here that Rustavi Municipality established the Council and that cooperation between the LSG and the Council was productive long before it became mandatory nationwide. Namely, the first

Council in Rustavi Municipality was founded in 2007 as a result of the project implemented by SIDA. The Council has been actively cooperating with the Mayor's office since then on a wide range of issues.

In 2013, USAID's Good Governance Initiative (GGI) was launched in Rustavi and three other cities of Georgia to create 15-member Councils composed of representatives of local civil society groups and the LSG. The main objectives of the project were to promote the transparency and accountability of LSG and to facilitate stronger relations between LSGs and their constituencies. A corresponding strategy was developed and presented to the LSGs of the target municipalities. Following local elections in 2014, however the project was terminated and the Council was disbanded.

The current Council in Rustavi Municipality was established within the framework of another project, launched in Rustavi in 2017 with financial support from the Council of Europe and the National Association of Local Self-Governments. The Council is composed of representatives of CSOs, businesses, and educational and cultural workers.

Several capacity-building projects have been carried out for the Council since then with donors' assistance. In addition, several working groups were established within the Council – each for a respective municipal budgetary priority. The Council has carried out a number of projects co-funded by donor organizations and LSG. Moreover, interestingly, according to one of the respondents, the Council was initially chaired by the Rustavi Mayor following a request from a donor organization. After the completion of the project, the Council initiated a change in this practice and selected a new chair from its members.

The Council has two Facebook accounts (one open and one closed) for internal communication and relations with the general public. Both accounts are active and used on a regular basis. The Council is committed to establishing stronger cooperation with businesses and donor organizations alike.

The Council in Rustavi Municipality is a clear leader in the region in terms of efficiency, sustainability, and number of successful initiatives.

4.3 Bolnisi Municipality

Three Council meeting notes were collected as a result of the research, all of which were dated 2019. According to these notes, the Council did not convene in other years. Apart from organizational issues (e.g., elections of the Council chair, deputy chair and secretary, amendments to the Statute of the Council, and changes in the Council structure), the Council also discussed measures to increase public awareness of its activities and submitted a proposal to the Mayor for approval (meeting note #2, 2019). Furthermore, the Council discussed and made plans with regard to efforts to improve the environmental situation in the municipality, as well as public health projects and their potential funding sources.

Special attention should be paid here to LED initiatives, particularly projects designed to promote wine-making and grain-farming in the municipality with the participation of other stakeholders. The absence of corresponding documents (i.e. annexes to the meeting notes) makes it impossible to analyze these initiatives in more detail which would have allowed for more definite conclusions to be drawn.

The successful performance of the Council in Bolnisi Municipality has been driven by external factors (support from CSOs involved in relevant projects) and internal factors (the commitment and initiative of its members). As a result of these efforts, the Council's regulatory documents were streamlined: its structure was reorganized and the composition of its members was renewed.

It should be noted that the Council set out to develop a public relations strategy but some members refrained from actively engaging in the process. Consequently, the level of interest from the Mayor was low. As a result, a final draft of the proposal was not developed to be presented to donors for their support.

The following initiatives of the Council are of particular interest:

- Development of local wine-making and grain-farming clusters, which led to the establishment of an agricultural lab in the municipality through which the Mayor could assist local farmers;
- Lobbying for the development of municipal transport services: as a result, the town of Bolnisi received 5 buses from Tbilisi, which were refurbished using municipal budgetary funds; and
- An environmental impact assessment of the gold-mining sector in the municipality and a fundraising effort, which was unsuccessful because the potential donor (Embassy of Japan) declined to fund the project, arguing that the gold-mining company should assume corporate responsibility for environmental protection.

The presence of local business representatives in the Council contributes notably to its effective performance as does the actively lobbying of its interests, together with the genuine interest in its activities and success among current LSG leadership (above all, from the Mayor).

4.4 Gardabani Municipality

As mentioned above, no Council has been established in Gardabani Municipality.

Interviews revealed that there had been several attempts made to establish the Council in the municipality before it was formally introduced in the Local Self-Government Code in 2015. A number of developmental projects were implemented in relation to this initiative.

In the course of one of these projects, which was funded by Civitas Georgica, a 30-member Council was established in Gardabani Municipality. However, with limited powers and resources, the Council was unable to achieve any meaningful results. Its failure can be attributed to the following factors:

- In the absence of real decision-making powers, the idea of such a body lacked credibility;
- The difficulty of fitting Gardabani Municipality's 19 administrative-territorial units (43 villages) into a common framework because they stretch across a vast territory and the distances between some of the are considerable; and
- The lack of active CSOs in Gardabani Municipality.

For these reasons, Gardabani's LSG has instead made use of alternative mechanisms including the Mayor's meetings with communities (as part of the state rural assistance program). Experts from academic circles and CSOs are routinely invited to advise LSG on budgeting issues, while the Georgian Association of Young Financiers was requested to offer advice of this nature in 2017-2018.

4.5 Dmanisi Municipality

Three Council meeting notes were collected as a result of the research: one dated 2015, another dated 2016, and the third dated 2019. These meetings were organized to discuss the draft municipal budgets for the respective year.

At the 2019 meeting, the Council recommended inviting agriculture and tourism experts to analyze and evaluate the municipality's farming and tourism potential. This could be considered an LED-promoting initiative.

The Council in Dmanisi Municipality was initially created as a mere formality, purely to comply with the law. The Council has convened only once a year to rubber-stamp the municipal budget plan.

Since the 2017 local elections, the new Mayor has been committed to advancing the role of the Council. Indeed, a new composition of the Council was approved. Along with members with different social group affiliations (i.e. representatives of CSOs and businesses), a Muslim mullah and a Christian priest were also invited to the Council to further strengthen ties in this diverse local community.

During the interviews, many respondents pointed to the Council's alleged passiveness. Furthermore, it was asserted that the Council has never convened on its own initiative and has come up with no project proposals so far. Improvements in current practice are not anticipated either, as there are no donor-supported projects in place to provide external support and enhance the capacity of the Council. As a result, except for a brief period of somewhat active work, the Council in Dmanisi Municipality is little more than a formality.

4.6 Tetrtskaro Municipality

Nine Council meeting notes were collected as a result of the research:

- 2015 - 1
- 2016 - 3
- 2018 - 4
- 2019 - 1

According to these notes, the Council did not convene in any other years. In 2016 and 2018, the Council convened at least once every three months, as required by the law. From this viewpoint, Tetrtskaro Municipality (together with Rustavi Municipality) stands out as a positive example among the municipalities in the region.

In addition, some of the Council's meeting agendas are made available on the municipality's official website, something rarely done by other municipalities in the region.

Parts of the Council's meetings have been dedicated to organizational issues including elections of the Council chair and secretary, as well as the discussion and approval of the Statute of the Council. Other issues discussed by the Council (within its competencies) have included:

- Deliberating on municipal budget drafts, making relevant information requests, and developing recommendations regarding spending and program priorities; and

- Deliberating on and preparing recommendations for individual project proposals (participatory budgeting) and draft projects prepared by the Mayor's office (LED action plans, tourism and cultural development strategies, and infrastructural, landscaping, and recreational projects) (meeting notes #2 (2016) and #7 (2018)).

Among the topics covered, particular attention should be paid to the following:

- Deliberation on collective complaints and petitions passed by citizens, and preparation of respective recommendations (meeting note #6, 2018) - a clear sign of the Council's effort to facilitate communication and interaction between LSG and citizens; and
- Preparation of logistical and fundraising recommendations for the draft project "Tetrtskaro Development Fund" which was designed to promote wine-making and grain-farming in Tetrtskaro Municipality (meeting note #9, 2019) - an obvious LED initiative.

The Council in Tetrtskaro Municipality was founded in 2015 immediately after the forming of such institutions became mandatory by law.

In 2016, with financial assistance from the Open Society – Georgia Foundation, the NGO Green Caucasus launched a project which included capacity-building activities for the Council.

With the facilitation and organizational support from the Council, awareness-raising meetings were held in local rural communities between LSG officials and local residents (to inform people about the state social assistance program for mountainous territories, and to share the results of LSG work, among other matters).

The Council submitted a number of initiatives to the Mayor's office to be implemented with financial support from the municipal budget. However, LSG rejected these initiatives in favor of a more resource-intensive project: a large recreational park in central Tetrtskaro. The Council was actively involved in an awareness-raising campaign to inform the public about the project and to gather feedback. Unfortunately, despite the regional and local governments' efforts, the project failed to attract investments and secure support either from the Regional Investments Fund (RIF) or in the form of private-public partnership (PPP). The Council has failed to remain active since the project concluded.

Attempts to -reactivate the Council were also made by the Mayor in the second half of 2017. Members of the Council were selected through community meetings organized by the then acting Mayor.

Currently, the work of the Council is driven mainly by the personal commitment of the Council chair and one or two members. Attempts are being made to keep the Council relevant by continuing to participate in the planning and implementation of municipal programs and by critically assessing LSG decisions. The Council has successfully managed to publicize its work through a Facebook page created by the residents of Tetrtskaro.

4.7 Marneuli Municipality

Only one meeting note (meeting note #1, 2017) is available on the municipality's official website. At this meeting, the 2018 draft municipal budget and the municipality's economic outlook for the next three years (2019-2021) were discussed. A number of recommendations were also suggested and contained in the corresponding meeting note.

The meeting was chaired by the Deputy *Gamgebeli* of the municipality. It was impossible to confirm whether an LSG official also served as the head of the Council or not as a copy of the Statute of the Council was not provided by the municipality.

Unlike in some other municipalities in the region, efforts to enhance contact and cooperation between LSG and local communities were initiated by the LSG leadership rather than being promoted externally through donor-supported projects. Several projects were initiated by the LSG in 2014-2017, while Marneuli was the first municipality in Georgia to adopt the participatory budgeting program.

Upon the decision of the Mayor, members of the Council in Marneuli Municipality were nominated by local CSOs.

Interviews showed that the Mayor regularly consulted the Council about forthcoming initiatives, while the latter provided corresponding recommendations after some deliberation.

Following a change in the composition of the LSG leadership in the wake of the 2017 local elections, the work of the Council has been gradually sidelined and currently has a low profile.

4.8 Tsalka Municipality

No meeting notes of the Council were collected or provided by the municipality during the research.

During interviews, respondents failed to provide relevant information about the Council. Moreover, many of them were unaware that such a council even existed in their municipality. Only one respondent stated that the Council was formally established because it was required by law.

5. Communication of the Councils with LSGs and the public

Communication with various social groups represents one of the main challenges faced by the Councils. Despite attempts made by some municipalities to address this problem, there no well-structured relevant strategic documents or even cases of successful activities were gleaned in this regard.

To assess the Councils' public relations policies and practices, it is important to take into consideration the following differences between the region's municipalities:

1. Some municipalities where the Councils are active, or were at some point in the past, have been quite successful and have gained some valuable working experience (Rustavi, Bolnisi, and Tetrtskaro); and
2. Some municipalities have no Council (Gardabani), while others failed to provide information (Marneuli) and the Councils of other municipalities (Dmanisi, Tsalka) exist as mere formalities.

5.1 Practices and challenges

The Councils' experience and competence in communication can be evaluated by analyzing different aspects of their communication practices in Rustavi, Bolnisi, and Tetrtskaro municipalities. The focus here is on:

- Internal communication;
- Communication with the Mayor and various LSG units; and
- Communication with civil society.

Communication with various stakeholders is often determined by technical resources available in a particular municipality and the specific needs of the Council.

The first – and most important – step towards building effective communication channels with stakeholders is having a clear vision of the Council's functions and responsibilities. The development of a goal-oriented communication strategy requires a clear understanding of the Mayor's expectations towards the Council, and of how the process is viewed by the Council members themselves and the general public. Without such an understanding, it would be premature to discuss technical resources and future action plans.

Internal communication

Relatively successful Councils rely mostly on social media, particularly Facebook, when it comes to internal communication. In Rustavi, Bolnisi, and Tetrtskaro, the Councils have created closed Facebook accounts, which are managed by the Council secretary or chairperson. Information for internal purposes (e.g., draft projects, topics for discussion, and meeting schedules) is regularly uploaded onto the Councils' Facebook pages and shared among their members. This method has proved quite effective and seems to be sufficient at present. The Council members have daily access to its Facebook page.

In 2020, the Council in Rustavi Municipality held its meetings online (using the Zoom platform) in response to the restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Council members used the closed Facebook page to on using the platform for online meetings.

Communication with the Mayor and other LSG bodies

Although the Councils do not have any special mechanisms in place for communication with the Mayor or other LSG bodies, in these three municipalities the Council chairpersons are free to communicate, and discuss ongoing projects, with LSG leaders whenever necessary. The heads of various administrative units within the Mayor's office have contact information of the Council members and have reported no difficulty in reaching them via cell phones.

In addition, deputy mayors, PR managers, and chairs of the Municipal Women's Rooms have access to the given Council's closed Facebook page. This enables the leadership of the Mayor's office to be informed about the given Council's activities on a regular basis.

Communication with the public

There is a marked difference between Rustavi and the two other municipalities, Bolnisi and Tetrtskaro, when it comes to communication with the public.

Rustavi is a big industrial city with diverse communication channels concentrated in a relatively small geographic area. It also has a more mature and vibrant civil society compared to the other municipalities in the region. Public awareness of the Council's role, one of the vital preconditions for effective communication, is noticeably higher in Rustavi Municipality because the Council members there were elected directly by local residents (two representatives from each of the city's 10 districts).

In 2018, the Council in Rustavi Municipality published a report about its activities and made it available to the general public. Regular updates about its projects and resolutions are posted on an open Facebook page, which is managed by the Council secretary.

Contrastingly, in Bolnisi and Tetrtskaro, ensuring effective communication with stakeholders across the entire municipality remains a major challenge due to a lack of resources. While it is relatively easy to use electronic modes of communication in administrative centers, it is nearly impossible at present to reach all of the municipalities' remote rural communities. Moreover, in both municipalities, there are not enough resources to organize regular meetings with the public in remote villages.

To keep the public informed about its activities, the Council in Tetrtskaro Municipality has created an open Facebook page entitled "My Tetrtskaro," which has 2,300 registered users at present. The Council in Bolnisi Municipality also has an open Facebook page designed to maintain communication with local residents.

It is worth noting that the Council in Bolnisi Municipality drafted a proposal aimed at raising public awareness about the work of the Council to be presented to donors for their support but failed to submit final proposals (see subchapter 4.3).

During the research, some respondents claimed that the Councils' communication with the general public had not been a problem since its members include civil society and business sector representatives, who interact with local residents on a daily basis. However, this form of communication lacks transparency and cannot be considered sufficient; the individual communication skills of the Councils' members and their individual interaction with citizens does not directly translate into effective public communication on the part of the Councils.

At the same time, a number of Council members expressed interest in and commitment to learning more about available communication resources and opportunities. For instance, respondents in Rustavi and Bolnisi highlighted the Councils' role in the process of

implementing various donor-funded programs (e.g. social enterprises and LED projects) at a local level.

5.2 Raising public awareness about the Councils

Lack of public awareness of the Councils' role and functions remains a problem in every municipality of the region, regardless of whether the given Council works effectively, exists only on paper, or is non-existent.

Communication between the Mayor's office and a Council is usually one-way in cases where the Council exists as a mere formality, and where the Council convenes only to listen to the Mayor. In these circumstances, the communication is initiated by the Mayor's office to inform the Council members via phone call about the meeting venue and date. When the work of the given Council is limited to a few meetings per year, there is no need for additional resources to be committed to the development of an elaborated communication strategy as the use of such resources would be ineffective and the efforts made would be less sustainable. In such cases, it would be more efficient to direct the available resources towards institutional strengthening or promoting a viable vision of the Council's role and function. Even when the given Council is more or less successful, the quality of its public relations policies is based mostly on the enthusiasm and activity of its individual members rather than on the Council's popularity as an institution.

In sum, the lack of public awareness about the Councils can be seen as the main obstacle to their effective communication with society. An overwhelming majority of citizens know little, if anything, about the Councils' role as a mechanism of civic involvement. Consequently, people have little interest in and motivation to communicate with the Councils and to learn more about their activities.

Now is a relatively good time for awareness-raising activities to promote and popularize the Councils' role and importance as local elections in Georgia are due in 2021. These elections may lead to changes in the composition of LSGs, to the Mayors, and the composition of the Councils. Therefore, it would be advisable to raise awareness about the Council as a viable institution among potential candidates for Council membership among relevant social groups (e.g. businesses, CSOs, and civil activists). In addition to the awareness-raising efforts, the stakeholders should be informed about specific opportunities and resources to implement ongoing and future projects with the support of the Councils (including donors' calls for grant applications and municipal programs).

6. Conclusions and recommendations

The following conclusions can be drawn from the research:

1. The Councils' effectiveness and success is largely dependent on the understanding of its functions and potential among the LSG leadership (the Mayor) and civil society representatives. Without the fully-fledged contribution and participation of all stakeholders, the Councils will either cease to exist or, at best, become mere formalities. With this in mind, the following recommendations are made:
 - To be sustainable and successful, the Councils should ensure that the results of their work are beneficial both for the private interests of LSG leaders and for the local community as a whole; and
 - To ensure the sustainability and success of the Councils, their members must have the required experience and skills. Without the combined effect of these two factors, the Councils will be unable to ensure sustainability and attain public confidence.
2. The lack of motivation among the Councils' members is also a challenge. When a Council convenes only to hear the Mayor's reports and when the given Council's recommendations and initiatives are routinely ignored, even its most motivated members may gradually become discouraged and start feeling worthless and look for any pretext to avoid attending Council meetings. Even the most successful Councils are facing this problem, which mostly stems from one or both of the following factors: the given Council was established as a formality; and/or the Council members have limited expertise and competence in project development and understanding of the functions and responsibilities of LSGs. In any case, it is vital to ensure that the Mayors provide an explanation and justification every time they reject Councils' recommendations or project proposals. Without personal satisfaction and/or financial rewards, Council members will inevitably view their work as a mere waste of time and travel costs. The Council members are much more motivated when they see their ideas put into practice and their proposals reflected in municipal budgets. In Rustavi Municipality, for instance, the honor of being elected to their position has given the Council members a high sense of responsibility.
3. There is a link between the success of Council activities and the presence of relatively mature internal communication mechanisms. Some municipalities commonly utilize closed and open Facebook accounts for both internal and external (public relations) communication: the former are used by the Council members to communicate with each other, while the latter provides a tool to inform the general public about the Council's projects and achievements.
4. Most ordinary citizens are unaware of – and not interested in learning about – the Councils' activities. Apart from the low level of citizens' engagement in political life, one of the main problems is that the Councils do not have an efficient public relations strategy/policy yet, and do not fully understand the importance of public awareness-raising activities. The lack of public awareness calls into question the credibility of the Councils as an efficient mechanism of citizens' participation in LSGs. Under such circumstances, the Councils are left highly dependent on local activists and CSOs, which are able to effectively interact and communicate with citizens due to the specifics of their work, and know well the problems of their municipality.
5. To perform effectively, the Councils (including those serving as a mere formality) need to obtain external support in addition to support from the Mayors and enthusiasm and commitment on the part of their members. The research showed that the Councils can

greatly benefit from capacity-building and training projects initiated by external donors. According to the research, the most productive periods of their activity almost invariably coincide with the timeline of such projects, indicating a clear connection between the Councils' efficiency and external support. As municipal budgets usually have limited funds to enhance the capacity of the Councils, external support can provide a crucial lifeline, at least in their early stages.

6. Most of the Councils' members have little knowledge and understanding of public relations, problem analysis, and LSG responsibilities. Knowledge and skills regarding the current and potential members need to be improved and they should also have open access to all of the information they need. This goal can be achieved through targeted training seminars/workshops and experience-sharing meetings. The training programs could be co-funded by LSGs and external donors alike. Besides, regular needs assessment and surveys should be carried out in municipalities with successful and efficient Councils in order to identify and analyze the problems they face in their everyday work and design corresponding solutions and recommendations.
7. It is important to raise public awareness about the Councils as an important mechanism for citizens' participation in local decision-making processes. The 2021 local elections will bring about new compositions of the Councils, which will face the same problems as before, unless potential members are informed about the Councils as key institutions for effective civic engagement.
8. Although it is clearly important, external support alone cannot ensure the sustainability of the Councils. As a rule, the Councils tend to become idle once a project concludes. To achieve sustainability:
 - Mayors and other local-level decision-makers should be actively involved in project implementation;
 - All Council-related stakeholders should be engaged to the maximum level;
 - Support should be ensured for a relatively long period; and
 - The Councils should establish cases of positive intervention and widely publicize them.
9. Currently, the following three models of Councils' performance are identified:
 - Some Councils are established as formalities, purely to comply with the requirements of the law;
 - Some Councils serve as a mechanism of civil participation and two-way communication with the public but have limited powers; and
 - Some Councils function as institutions with a major role in local development, providing a unique cooperation platform for local development actors, and acting as a place in which to generate new ideas.

The type of model applied in a municipality usually depends on its Mayor. Even if the Council has external support, the Mayor should clearly define expectations for the Council. Only with such clarity can a realistic development strategy be prepared and a logical chain of development stages be constructed for the Council. The eligibility criteria and procedures for selecting Council members, the Statute, and development strategies should be defined while taking into account the local context (e.g. geographical and social situation) and the national legislation.

10. The Councils' regulatory norms should be finalized only after (and not before) all of the above-mentioned conditions are met. The following aspects should be taken into consideration in this process:
- The Council will only be fully functional if the regulations are as simple and easily understandable as possible – over-regulation is not advisable;
 - Stakeholders should have free access to all documents produced in the course of the work of the Councils; and
 - Periodically (every 2-3 years) it is necessary to re-evaluate regulatory norms in order to adapt them to new realities, if needed.

Issues discussed during interviews

- Structure and composition of the Councils;
- Frequency of the Councils' meetings;
- Presence of the Councils' communication strategy;
- Effective implementation of the strategy, if one is present;
- The Councils' communication practices with:
 - Its own members;
 - LSG leadership;
 - Local businesses and CSOs; and
 - Citizens and social interest groups.
- Availability of information about the Council on the given municipality's official website, social networks, etc. Allocation of responsibility among Council members for information-sharing;
- Media coverage of the Councils' activities;
- Success stories / activities implemented by the given Council (specify, if yes):
 - Projects successfully completed by the Council itself or with its assistance and contribution;
 - The role played by the given Council in LED projects; and
 - LED-related initiatives and ideas, proposed by Council members.
- Source of motivation among Council members;
- Capacity-building projects (if any) aimed at enhancing the work of the given Council implemented by CSOs and results achieved; and
- The needs and opportunities with regard to enhancing the capacity of the given Council.