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Research Report

Shortfalls of Deliberative Democracy in Rural Georgia: Analysis of the General Assembly of a Settlement in Mestia Municipality

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**Shortfalls of Deliberative
Democracy in Rural Georgia:
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Assembly of a Settlement in
Mestia Municipality**

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the reasons behind citizens' refusal to participate in public deliberation through the General Assembly of a Settlement mechanism in remote communities of Georgia. The report draws on the existing academic literature on both effective deliberation processes and reasons behind public disengagement in order to explain the indifference toward deliberation processes by populations in rural Georgia. By applying an analytical framework focusing on effective deliberation and the logic of non-participation, this research report uses a single case study (Mestia municipality) and qualitative research methods to show how superficial deliberation processes cause public disenchantment toward, and a lack of engagement in local decision-making processes and foster a public perception of civic participation mechanisms as ineffective.

INTRODUCTION

Citizen participation in decision-making is usually considered a crucial element of democracy.¹ Pertinently, Georgia's path of democratization and Europeanization has increased internal and external pressures to enhance public inclusion in its policymaking. However, without the efficient engagement of the domestic drivers of democratization in the decision-making process, the country's ability to consolidate democracy and develop a 'deliberative system' is in some doubt.² The value of public participation is even more essential for countries undergoing a process of decentralization.³ Even though Georgia has implemented several reforms in this regard, the low level of citizen engagement in political decision-making has consistently been a hurdle for the country's decentralization agenda. This issue gained particular momentum after the adoption of the Organic Law of Georgia on Local Self-Government Code in 2014.⁴ The law introduced the following participatory democracy instruments: a) a General Assembly of a Settlement (GAoS); b) a petition; c) a council of civil advisors; d) participation in the sessions of the municipality Sakrebulo and the sessions of its commission; and e) hearing reports on the work performed by the Gamgebeli/Mayor of the municipality and by a member of the municipality Sakrebulo.⁵

Out of these five different public engagement mechanisms only one (the GAoS) is a deliberative public participation tool, with the other four falling under consultative public engagement. The core difference between consultative and deliberative public engagement is that, in terms of public consultation, the final decisions are made by the government based on consultation with the public. In contrast, during deliberative public engagement, decisions are made by the people and the government does as it is told.

Public deliberation has a variety of benefits when it comes to enhancing democracy. First, by making the government more accountable and policies more just,⁶ effective public deliberation enables citizens to shape their government's decisions and provide feedback on their performance.⁷ Second, public deliberation informs the government about different perspectives and increases their competence in policymaking.⁸ Deliberation also tends to promote learning.⁹ Third, by bringing a political system closer in line with its constituents' will and mobilizing citizens toward political action, by including everyone who is affected by a decision in the process leading to that decision, deliberation is capable of generating political steps that will receive broad public support.¹⁰ This creates an environment in which the community can collectively discuss a variety of important decisions. As a result, citizens feel more empowered to initiate change(s) in their community.

¹ Michels, Ank, "Innovations in democratic governance: how does citizen participation contribute to a better democracy?", *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 77, no.2 (2011): 275–293.

² Curato, Nicole and Marit, Boker, "Linking mini-publics to the deliberative system: a research agenda", *Policy sciences* 49, no.2 (2016): 173–190.

³ Buadze, Saba, "Public engagement practice in Georgia: Kutaisi and Akhaltsikhe municipalities", Tbilisi: Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI), 2017.

⁴ Organic Law of Georgia self-government code 2014, accessed 20 September 2020, <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/download/2244429/15/en/pdf>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Caluwaerts, Didier and Min Reuchamps, "Strengthening democracy through bottom-up deliberation: An assessment of the internal legitimacy of the G1000 project", *Acta Politica* 50, no.2 (2015): 151-170.

⁸ Fung, Archon. "Minipublics: Deliberative Designs and Their Consequences." In *Deliberation, Participation, and Democracy: Can the People Govern?* edited by Shawn Rosenberg, 159-183. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007.

⁹ Fishkin, James S. and Robert C. Luskin, "Experimenting with a democratic ideal: Deliberative polling and public opinion", *Acta politica*, 40 no.3 (2005): 284-298.

¹⁰ The Open Government Partnership Practice Group on Dialogue and Deliberation. "Deliberation. Getting Policymaking Out From Behind Closed Doors". May 2019, accessed 20 November 2020, <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/documents/deliberation-getting-policy-making-out-from-behind-closed-doors/>.

In Georgia, the GAofS enables citizens to assemble, discuss, and reach decisions on various issues, while making decisions through deliberation. In Georgia, the culture of public deliberation can be best analyzed through the State's Rural Support Program (SRSP) since this enables rural communities with an electorate of less than 500 citizens to convene for a day and deliberate on projects they would like to implement with the funds allocated to their villages. The local government is then required to implement the projects chosen by the public during the GAofS. However, even though the outcome of the deliberative discussion is ultimately supported by the local government within the framework of the SRSP, citizens still refuse to participate in public deliberation. Public opinion polls have highlighted the severity of citizens' disengagement, as only 14 percent of the population think that they have a significant influence over Georgia's governmental decisions.¹¹

Much of the academic literature¹² has argued that the reluctance to take part in public deliberation is rooted in the way individuals¹³ conceive their own roles in society.¹⁴ However, studies conducted in Georgia¹⁵ about the Georgian public's participation¹⁶ have highlighted that one of the main reasons for public disengagement in the decision-making process is a lack of awareness and information¹⁷ about public engagement mechanisms, civic duties and rights, along with a lack of political consciousness.¹⁸ Nevertheless, no comprehensive studies have been conducted in Georgia which might have been able to pinpoint the reasons behind citizens' indifference toward public deliberations from the perspectives of participants and non-participants (who had information about a deliberative event but still refused to participate in it). To address this research gap, the present study unravels the process of public deliberation in Georgia through the GAofS and seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How does the Georgian public deliberative mechanism of the General Assembly of a Settlement work in practice?
2. Why do citizens of Georgia refuse to participate in public deliberation through the General Assembly of a Settlement?

In order to answer the first research question, the study applies an analytical framework derived from the analysis and approaches of James Fishkin and Robert Luskin, Alfred Moore, Archon Fung, as well as Didier Caluwaerts and Min Reuchamps who wrote about deliberative democracy mechanisms should work in practice to achieve effective democracy. Meanwhile, Vincent Jacquet's six logics of non-participation¹⁹ (Table 1) are used to answer the second research question. The research relies on a single case-study, desk research, qualitative in-depth interviews, and observation. Desk research was employed to analyze the Georgian context of public deliberation through the GAofS, while observation was applied to describe the process of public deliberation in three rural communities of Georgia. Qualitative in-depth interviews were intended to assess the perspectives of citizens and local government representatives about the process of public deliberation and to highlight the underlying reasons behind citizens' refusal to participate in public deliberation through the GAofS.

¹¹ National Democratic Institute (NDI), "Georgians Losing Faith in their Country's Democracy, but Report Enthusiastic Participation in Last Election", 30 January 2019.

¹² Jacquet, Vincent, "Explaining non-participation in deliberative mini-publics", *European Journal of Political Research* 56, no. 3 (2017): 640-659.

¹³ Gherghina, Sergiu, et al., "Non-voting in the 2018 Romanian referendum: the importance of initiators, campaigning and issue saliency", *Political Science* 71, no.3 (2020):1-21.

¹⁴ Jacquet, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ Research report on "State Rural Support Program", Civil Society Institute, 2010.

¹⁶ Kharatiani Ketevan, Public participation mechanisms in Georgia, focus-groups report, Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF), 27 March 2014.

¹⁷ Tvaltvdze Nino, Assessing the existing participatory democracy instruments in the implementation of the local self-government in Georgia, 2017.

¹⁸ Monitoring and the Effectiveness Analysis of the Rural Support Program and the Fund for Implementing Projects in the Regions of Georgia, Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF), 2014.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

This research report is organized as follows. The first chapter discusses the theoretical framework of public engagement through consultation and deliberation, with an in-depth analysis of the latter. The second chapter reviews the research methodology while the next chapter discusses the public participation in Georgia with the focus on Georgian deliberative public engagement mechanism of general assembly of a settlement within the framework of the SRSP. The fourth chapter assesses the functioning of the GAofS in three rural communities of Mestia municipality and discusses the reasons for non-participation from the perspectives of non-participants and participants. Finally, a discussion and conclusions with regard to the research findings are presented in the fifth chapter, which also suggests potential avenues for further research.

1. FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS

Since the beginning of the 1990s, certain shifts have been observable in Western European democracies, after political trust had declined and the gap between politicians and citizens appeared to have grown wider than ever before.²⁰ Citizens started demanding more engagement in political decision-making.²¹ Hence, modern societies started looking for innovative ways to involve the public in policymaking. During this time, the model of deliberative democracy through public deliberation was introduced.²²

This research focuses partly on the academic literature to have discussed the features of meaningful public deliberation through mini-publics and the reasons behind citizens' disengagement in deliberative mini-publics. To assess whether the Georgian practice of public deliberation is effective and fit for purpose, the existing theoretical knowledge stemming from Fishkin and Luskin Moore, Fung, and Caluwaerts and Reuchamps is applied. Fishkin and Luskin, and Moore, stated that the process of deliberation should be organized in a manner that would enhance democracy. To that end, they discussed the core characteristics of effective public deliberation. Meanwhile, the research findings related to the Georgian practice of public deliberation will be reviewed alongside the existing theoretical knowledge to assess the value of Georgian public deliberation.

To ascertain why the citizens of Georgian rural communities generally refuse to participate in public deliberation²³, Jacquet's six logics of non-participation²⁴ are applied. In their work "Stealth Democracy," Hibbing and Theiss-Morse argued that people refuse to participate in public deliberation due to their belief that it is not the role of citizens to be more involved in the political realm.²⁵ Subsequently, Jacquet's work and several other studies²⁶ based on national surveys²⁷ have challenged this thesis by finding much more support for deliberation and participation than initially expected²⁸, and outlining multiple other reasons for citizens' withdrawal from public deliberation.²⁹

²⁰ Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, *op. cit.*

²¹ Dalton, Russell J. *Citizen politics: Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2012.

²² Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, *op. cit.*

²³ It is worth noting that the public deliberation through the GAofS within the framework of the state rural support program takes place only in rural communities of Georgia.

²⁴ Jacquet, *op. cit.*

²⁵ Hibbing, J.R. and Theiss-Morse, E., 2002. *Stealth democracy: Americans' beliefs about how government should work*. Cambridge University Press.

²⁶ Neblo, Michale et al., "Who wants to deliberate - and why?", *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 3 (2010): 566-583.

²⁷ Webb, Paul, "Who is willing to participate? Dissatisfied democrats, stealth democrats and populists in the United Kingdom". *European Journal of Political Research* 52, no.6 (2013): 747-772.

²⁸ Gherghina, Sergiu, et al., *op.cit.*

²⁹ Magdalena Wojcieszak and Clemente J. Navarro, "Participation, representation and expertise: Citizen preferences for political decision-making processes", *Political Studies* 63, (2015): 153-172.

1.1. PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT THROUGH CONSULTATION

People around the world have become less satisfied with representative democracy and trust in state institutions is diminishing.³⁰ They perceive democratic institutions as serving elites' interests, at the expense of the people's will. Diminishing trust in governments is partially explained by public concerns about governments' effectiveness (the ability to achieve its goals) and responsiveness (the paying of sufficient attention to the issues that are important to the public).³¹ Thus, governments try to involve citizens in decision-making processes to enhance democracy,³² bringing themselves closer to their constituents and sustaining their legitimacy.³³

As public anxiety and a certain disconnect persists, engaging the public in decision-making processes is becoming crucial. On the one hand, effective public engagement enables citizens to shape their governments' decisions and allows them to provide feedback on how they are performing.³⁴ On the other hand, open public participation helps governments to shape their decisions based on citizens' needs and thus ensures accountability. However, ensuring meaningful public engagement is challenging because it requires changes to the existing culture of government. In this process, power and access come into play when determining who should be involved in what conversation. Making public participation more open and inclusive demands an immense effort on the part of governments.³⁵

Public engagement is nothing new and governments have a long history of employing such tactics, dating back to town hall meetings in the early 18th century. Generally, in the past, governments engaged the public under three conditions: a) when they sought public support for new or controversial policies; b) when they needed specialists' expertise to make decisions on issues they had limited knowledge on; and c) when a compromise between powerful interest groups was needed³⁶. One of the most conventional ways in which governments engage their citizens is through public consultation.

Public consultation is among the most common and valuable public engagement mechanisms that informs governments about public opinion on a given issue, allowing an informed decision to be made. The process itself can be conducted through town hall meetings, online survey, or a call for submissions. In general, a government invites the public (or stakeholders) to discuss issues and put forward their views. During the public consultation, citizens present their views, emphasize the rationale behind their preference and hope that the decision-makers will weigh the arguments objectively and that the best argument(s) win. However, this only works if: a) the decision-makers are impartial and make decisions based on the merits of the arguments and the evidence provided by participants; and b) the participants are aware of how the decision-makers arrived at the final decision and thus perceive the process as impartial, evidence-based and fair. Once a decision is made by a government, it is critical that the public is informed about it and given some insight into how the government arrived at its decision. Results are usually presented in reports or via public announcement, after which some projects may then be implemented. The provision of a clear explanation of the role of public consultation in the decision-making process can ensure process legitimacy and meaningful public participation.³⁷

Consultation is an effective public engagement mechanism when a government wants to make a binary decision or seeks to get the public onside with its plan. When there is no, or very little, chance of a win/win scenario and people are aware of this, they will present to the officials their arguments and, later, the government

³⁰ The Open Government Partnership Practice Group on Dialogue and Deliberation. *Op. cit.*

³¹ Gherghina, Sergiu and Geissel, Brigitte., "Citizens' conceptions of democracy and political participation in Germany", Warsaw: ECPR Joint Session, 2015, accessed 20 September 2020, <https://ecpr.eu/Events/Event/PaperDetails/23476/>.

³² The Open Government Partnership Practice Group on Dialogue and Deliberation. *Op. cit.*

³³ Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, *op. cit.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

will make an informed decision privately. However, problems can surface or worsen when a government wants to solve a complex issue through consultation, particularly when people have a high stake in it and/or there are competing interests.³⁸

When solving a complex issue through consultation by engaging in trade-offs between competing values, decision-making behind closed doors is at odds with the general perception that the process is impartial and evidence-based. Public consultation sometimes even exacerbates existing conflicts, divides communities, entrenches positions, and encourages friction. Stakeholders holding different self-interests and diverging values tend not to be open to discussing the opportunity of collective actions, and thus clashes over competing values and interests are intensified. Governments struggle to deal with complex issues where they might have to compromise over competing values and where the positions of several stakeholders are entrenched. Choosing from many diverging values requires the making of decisions that might be subjective. Any decision made by a government, with stakeholder involvement or otherwise, creates “winners” and “losers” among competing groups, divides society, and stimulates opposition. Once a decision is made, those on the “losing” side will doubt the impartiality of the process and perceive it as unfair. Additionally, stakeholders trying to influence a government’s decisions might distort the facts and statistics, and/or use social media to disseminate one-sided viewpoints. This situation might even lead to the polarization of public opinion and force a government to abandon its plans. Solving complex problems thus requires the creation of effective public deliberation mechanisms, rather than spending time and resources on consultation.³⁹

1.2. DELIBERATIVE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND THE FEATURES OF MEANINGFUL MINI-PUBLICS

While public consultation allows people to present their views to the decision-makers who will later discuss trade-offs privately and make final decisions, public deliberation gives participants a greater say in the decision-making and enables them to see how such important trade-offs are being made. Thus, deliberation is an alternative method of engaging the public to tackle complex issues and fostering democracy. The term “deliberative democracy” presupposes that citizens or their representatives can consult together about what laws and policies they ought to pursue as a common good. It corresponds to the idea that legitimate lawmaking arises from public deliberation with citizens. Political deliberation requires citizens to go beyond private self-interest and to orient themselves toward the public interests of the “forum,” and deliberation from this civic standpoint is defensible only if it improves political decision-making, especially regarding the achievement of common ends. This presents an ideal of political autonomy based on the practical reasoning of citizens.⁴⁰

Deliberation is a process of public discussion in which participants offer proposals (and justifications) to support collective decisions. Such proposals are backed by justifications that appeal to other participants and by reasons that others are more likely to accept. These reasons, for example, may appeal to some common good (e.g. “This is the best way to improve our school because ...”) or common norms of fairness (e.g. “You do this for me this time, and I will do something for you next time around”). Participants should choose the proposal supported by the most compelling reasons and there should not be any force at play “except the force of the better argument.” Other decision-making methods, by contrast, might rely on authority, status, numbers, money, or even muscle. Decisions resulting from deliberation may be fairer and more legitimate because they result from actual reasons rather than arbitrary advantages. They may be wiser too because they allow for a broad range of perspectives and information to be pooled together.⁴¹

³⁸ The Open Government Partnership Practice Group on Dialogue and Deliberation. *Op. cit.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Bohman James and William Rehg. *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1997.

⁴¹ Fishkin and Luskin, *op. cit.*

One of the most-used public deliberative mechanisms is the “mini-populus,” better known as mini-publics. Mini-publics are often presented as the most promising and constructive form of public deliberation in contemporary politics.⁴² Mini-publics are participatory forums gathered for deliberation on a specific topic lasting one day or more. Various types of this mechanism exist, but the most standardized are citizens’ juries, deliberative polls, and citizens’ assemblies.⁴³ While these deliberative mechanisms may vary widely in terms of design, all of them follow the same basic rules for public deliberation.

The rules for public deliberation are clear and fit for purpose. Specifically, participants know that the process requires: 1) evidence-based decisions; 2) compromises from the beginning of the process; and 3) participants’ involvement in each phase. According to the basic rules of deliberation, they must listen to each other’s perspectives, be open to different views, discuss similarities and differences, make reasonable accommodations, weigh evidence, and come up with a shared solution which will strike a balance between diverging values and interests.⁴⁴ To conclude, public deliberation must: 1) reach a consensus; 2) entail the casting of a vote⁴⁵; or 3) simply stop without any collective decision, recommendation or concluding statement being reached. It is worth noting that consensus is considered the gold standard⁴⁶ outcome of deliberation.⁴⁷

According to Fishkin and Luskin, deliberation is a process of weighing controversial perspectives through discussion that is:

- *Informed.* Arguments expressed during deliberation are supported by reasonably accurate factual claims.
- *Balanced.* The arguments are balanced with counterarguments that are freely expressed by the participants.
- *Conscientious.* The participants are willing to listen to each other and share each other’s perspectives with civility and respect.
- *Substantive.* All arguments should be assessed based on their strength and merits and not how they are made or by whom they are expressed.
- *Comprehensive.* All sorts of views and opinions expressed by the participants should be paid enough attention.⁴⁸

To ensure meaningful public deliberation, the mini-public organizers should pay attention to several factors that can ensure a high quality of deliberative public engagement. These factors include, but are not limited to, careful consideration of issues under deliberation, knowledge of citizens on complex issues, the inclusion of vulnerable groups, protecting dialogue and discussion from damage through coercion, inequality and repression, and employing facilitators for organized deliberations.

The careful consideration of issues under public deliberation is essential. Since engagement depends upon interest, organizers should have a clear understanding of the stakes of participants in a mini-public’s deliberations. Generally, more participants might be drawn to “hot” deliberations where participants have a significant amount at stake. People will invest more of their energy and resources into the process in such cases, thus making it more thorough and creative. Moreover, the results of such deliberation are more likely to be forcefully supported and implemented. It is worth noting that some areas would not significantly benefit from deliberation because they require highly specialized knowledge or training, and often citizens have no distinctive insights or information on the given topic. To identify suitable participants, mini-public organizers

⁴² Fung, *op. cit.*

⁴³ Grönlund, Kimmo, Maija Setälä and Kaisa Herne, “Deliberation and civic virtue: lessons from a citizen deliberation experiment”, *European Political Science Review* 2, no.1 (2010): 95-117.

⁴⁴ The Open Government Partnership Practice Group on Dialogue and Deliberation. “Deliberation. Getting Policymaking Out From Behind Closed Doors”. May 2019.

⁴⁵ Caluwaerts, and Reuchamps, *op. cit.*

⁴⁶ Moore, Alfred, “Following from the front: Theorizing deliberative facilitation”, *Critical policy studies* 6, no.2 (2012):146-162.

⁴⁷ Fishkin and Luskin, *op. cit.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

should consider whether citizens possess comparative advantages over other actors such as politicians and administrators.⁴⁹

On complex issues, keeping participants informed during the deliberation is essential. A mini-public might therefore inform citizens by training them and by composing briefing materials and making expertise easily available. A good deliberation process should not depend on falsehoods. Instead, good deliberation practice should weed out false claims put forward by participants. However, when discussing technical issues where none of the participants are experts, it is difficult to filter out false information and claims. Sometimes, expert witnesses are invited who are questioned by the participants and written materials are also compiled in order to make informed decisions. In other cases, process facilitators also acquire a limited degree of expertise themselves in order to manage the discussion better, to weed out false claims, and to recognize all experts' framings of the issues under deliberation (rather than being led exclusively by one expert).⁵⁰

While inclusion in public engagement is affected by many kinds of background inequalities such as wealth, gender, education, position, and control over the means of communication and production, a mini-public should attempt to include as many diverse voices as possible.⁵¹ To guarantee diversity, random selection of participants is acknowledged as a suitable technique.⁵² In contrast, sampling methods that facilitate self-selection, such as calls for participation, foster the gathering of like-minded or already politically and socially active people.⁵³ Mini-publics should be constructed in ways that, first and foremost, allow those without a voice or will to find and form them. Public deliberation should be about providing space in which individuals can reach their own considered views and gain confidence in their own perspectives. Some critics have claimed that deliberative processes disadvantage those who speak less well, or those who speak in ways that are devalued by the dominant culture. To that end, sometimes incentives need to be offered for socially vulnerable people to participate in public deliberation. Some scholars argue that depending on the issue under deliberation, some participants such as partisans⁵⁴ and stakeholders⁵⁵ might be excluded⁵⁶ from the deliberation due to their sharpened "skills of political combat" that might lead to communicative inequality⁵⁷ in the room.⁵⁸ Discourse and dialogue during public deliberation should be protected from damage through coercion, inequality and repression. It is essential that every subject with the competence to speak and act can participate in discourse. Indeed, everyone should be allowed to express his/her attitudes, needs and desires, to introduce any claim into the discourse, and to question and challenge any assertion at any time. No speaker may be deprived of his/her own right to speak due to internal or external coercion.⁵⁹ Sometimes, people are forced to choose a certain course of action, meaning that participants suffer from coercion, so reasoned arguments are absent and the basis for legitimate decision-making is completely undermined. Effective public deliberation has to be free from pressures exerted by media, political parties or any other outside interests.⁶⁰ Some scholars such as John Dryzek (2000) have suggested that the deliberative process should be kept at "arm's length" from state institutions in order to avoid distortion of discourse and to allow critical expression.⁶¹

⁴⁹ The Open Government Partnership Practice Group on Dialogue and Deliberation. *Op. cit.*

⁵⁰ Moore, *op. cit.*

⁵¹ Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, *op. cit.*

⁵² Fishkin, James S. and Robert C. Luskin, "Deliberative Polling and Public Consultation", *Parliamentary affairs* 53, no.4 (2000): 657-666.

⁵³ Ryfe, David M., "2005. Does Deliberative Democracy Work?," *Annual Review of Political Science* 8, (2005): 49-71.

⁵⁴ Kadlec, Alison and Friedman, Will, "Deliberative Democracy and the Problem of Power", *Journal of Public Deliberation* 3, no.1 (2007):1-26.

⁵⁵ Bora, Alfons and Heiko Hausendorf, "Participatory Science Governance Revisited: Normative Expectations Versus Empirical Evidence", *Science and public policy* 33, no.7 (2006): 78-488.

⁵⁶ O'Doherty, Kieran and Helen J. Davidson, "Subject Positioning and Deliberative Democracy: Understanding Social Processes Underlying Deliberation", *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 40, no.2 (2010): 224-245.

⁵⁷ Braun, Kathrin , Alfred Moore, Sabine Könniger, "Science Governance and the Politics of Proper Talk: Governmental Bioethics as a New Technology of Reflexive Government", *Economy and society* 39, no.4 (2010): 510-533.

⁵⁸ Moore, *op. cit.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, *op.cit.*

⁶¹ Dryzek, J.S., 2002. *Deliberative democracy and beyond: Liberals, critics, contestations*. Oxford University Press on Demand.

Organized deliberative practice seems to require the presence of actors who participate actively in a dialogue for the deliberation to actually happen.⁶² Facilitators and moderators should set the ground for rules and should emphasize the goals of the group at the very beginning of the process. The role of facilitators and moderators to post instructions, record questions and highlight statements on which people agree is an essential part of good public deliberation.⁶³ Facilitators' role also includes encouraging comments from quiet participants, forming positions and referring back to the public for approval, asking participants to conclude or clarify their points, summing up discussions before moving on to another topic, asking who is for or against a particular position, managing excessive contributions, bringing back some topics into the discussion (if needed), and intervening in the case of conflicts between participants.⁶⁴ They should be capable of shaping a balanced and inclusive discussion environment⁶⁵ and of effectively tackling structural inequalities and pervasive power relations. It is worth noting that even when participants have diverging/opposing views on the issues at stake, a well-facilitated process can still deliver a reasonable outcome.⁶⁶

1.3. THE REASONS BEHIND CITIZENS' DISENGAGEMENT IN DELIBERATIVE MINI-PUBLICS

Many citizens decline the invitation to participate in deliberative mini-publics. In their book "Stealth Democracy," Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) argued that people refuse to participate in public deliberation due to their belief that it is not the role of citizens to be more involved in the political realm.⁶⁷ Subsequently, Jacquet's work and several other studies⁶⁸ based on national surveys⁶⁹ have challenged this thesis by discovering much more support for deliberation and participation than previously expected and putting forward multiple other reasons for citizens' indifference toward public deliberation.⁷⁰ It is well documented that only a small circle of the population is active in the political arena, especially when it comes to party activism or community groups. A brief literature review shows that, despite some differences between cases, the majority (70 per cent in best-case scenarios) of the covered population refuse to participate. In these circumstances, it is relevant to scrutinize the reasons for this non-participation to understand the reaction of the wider public towards deliberative mini-publics. Jacquet addressed this issue through a qualitative analysis of the perspectives of those who have declined to participate in mini-publics. He distinguished six explanatory logics of non-participation: concentration on the private sphere; internal political inefficacy; public meeting avoidance; conflict of schedule; political alienation; and the mini-public's lack of impact on the political system (see table 1).

⁶² Moore, *op. cit.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Stromer-Galley, Jennifer, "Measuring Deliberation's Content: A Coding Scheme", *Journal of public deliberation* 3, no.2 (2007):1-35.

⁶⁵ Gerber, Marlene, "Who Are the Voices of Europe? Evidence from a Pan-European Deliberative Poll", *ECPR General Conference, Reykjavik*, 2011, 25-27; Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, *op.cit.*

⁶⁶ Kleinman, Daniel Lee, Jason Delborne, and Ashley A. Anderson, "Engaging citizens: The high cost of citizen participation in high technology", *Public understanding of science* 20, no.2 (2011): 221-240.

⁶⁷ Hibbing, Elizabeth and Theiss-Morse. *Stealth democracy: Americans' beliefs about how government should work*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

⁶⁸ Neblo et al., *op. cit.*

⁶⁹ Webb, *op. cit.*

⁷⁰ Wojcieszak and Navarro, *op. cit.*

Table 1. Logics of non-participation

	Logics of Non-participation	Description
I	Concentration on the private sphere	Concentration on the private sphere refers to the preference to spend time in the private sphere, especially with family and at the workplace; withdrawal from the public arena.
II	Internal political inefficacy	Internal political inefficacy refers to self-disqualification because of a perceived lack of political competence and expertise regarding the discussed topics.
III	Public meeting avoidance	Public meeting avoidance entails the avoidance of public meetings due to a dislike of group situations, the reluctance to speak up in public, and the fear of others' judgement.
IV	Conflict of schedule	A conflict of schedule occurs where the person is committed to other events or activities planned on the same day or weekend as the mini-public.
V	Political alienation	Political alienation means the general rejection of political activities and a feeling of powerlessness; participation is seen as elite-driven manipulation.
VI	Mini-public's lack of impact on the political system	The mini-public's lack of impact on the political system stems from a negative evaluation of the mini-public because of a lack of potential outputs it has achieved regarding the political system. ⁷¹

Source: Jacquet, Vincent, "Explaining non-participation in deliberative mini-publics", *European Journal of Political Research* 56, no. 3 (2017): 640-659.

Jacquet argued that the reluctance to take part in mini-publics is rooted in the way individuals conceive their own roles, abilities, and capacities in the public sphere, as well as in the perceived output(s) of public deliberation.⁷²

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This analysis uses a case-study design, which captures the circumstances and conditions of a common situation.⁷³ The data available to researchers support the notion that public deliberation through the GAofS within the framework of the SRSP in different regions of Georgia do not significantly differ.⁷⁴ Mestia municipality was chosen for the analysis due to the existence of local key informants there who trusted the researchers and helped them to attend the public deliberations in the respective communities. The trust between the researchers and the key informants was built-up through previous working experience in the course of a project to enhance Mestia municipality's socio-economic development, co-implemented by PMC Research Center.

Mestia municipality unites 17 administrative units (16 rural communities and one town of Mestia), of which 11 communities within the framework of SRSP have decisions made under deliberative processes. The emphasis of the research was placed on an intensive examination of the settings during the public deliberations in Pari, Kala and Tskhumari communities. The GAofS meetings in Pari, Kala and Tskhumari communities were held on

⁷¹ Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, *op. cit.*

⁷² Jacquet, *op. cit.*

⁷³ Yin, Robert K. *Case Study Research Design and Methods*. 5th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009.

⁷⁴ Research report on "State Rural Support Program", *op. cit.* See also: Kharatiani Ketevan, Public participation mechanisms in Georgia, focus-groups report, Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF), 27 March 2014, besides, researchers of the present policy report have attended and explored General Assemblies of Settlements in various municipalities of Georgia, within the framework of another research project which is not publicly available.

the 14th, 15th and 16th of February 2020, respectively. The GAofS in Pari was attended by 32 participants (20 men, 12 women), the Kala edition was attended by 19 participants⁷⁵ (13 men, 6 women), and the Tskhumari version was attended by 32 participants (24 men, 8 women). The researcher observed all three meetings for their entire duration. Moreover, the researcher assumed the role of an overt participant observer⁷⁶ and witnessed interaction among the participants during the GAofS meetings, listened to the discussions and summed up impressions and experiences in field notes accordingly. It is worth noting that the researcher was minimally engaged and did not participate in discussions with the villagers.

For the purposes of this research, four focus groups and five in-depth interviews were conducted by the authors of this research report from 5th June to 25th June 2020: two focus groups were conducted with participants, and two focus groups were held with non-participants of the GAofS meetings in Pari and Tskhumari communities. A face-to-face qualitative in-depth interview was conducted with the Mayor of Mestia municipality. To further reflect on and discuss information gleaned through the focus groups, four telephone interviews were also carried out with participants and non-participants of the GAofS in Kala community and one additional telephone interview was conducted with a representative of the Mayor's office. The key informants in each community helped the researchers to plan the focus group discussions and to arrange the telephone interviews. The non-participant respondents were identified from a list of contacts whom the key informants had called before the GAofS to invite them to the meeting, which they declined.

Individuals who agreed to participate in the research were categorized according to their gender and age. This resulted in a diverse group of interviewees as illustrated in appendix 3. The focus group interviews with participants lasted between 1 hour and 20 minutes, and 1 hour and 40 minutes. The focus group interviews with non-participants took between 40 and 60 minutes. Meanwhile, the face-to-face in-depth interview with the Mayor of Mestia municipality lasted for 1 hour and 20 minutes. Elsewhere, the telephone interviews lasted between 45 minutes to 1 hour. The locations of the focus group meetings were the community center in Pari and the relevant respondent's home in Tskhumari. In addition, the in-depth interview with the Mayor of the Mestia municipality - Mr. Kapiton (Kakha) Jorjoliani - was conducted at his office in Mestia. The entirety of the focus group meetings and the face-to-face interview with the Mayor were audio-recorded with the respondents' agreement (see appendix 2). The researcher asked questions from the interview guide but, following the principles of in-depth interviewing, the structure was quite flexible and allowed topics to be covered in the order most suited to the interviewee. This approach is generally expected to yield richer answers.⁷⁷ To ensure reliability and validity, the analysis with related quotes have been thoroughly discussed with another researcher.⁷⁸ This multiple-check strategy serves to avoid biases related to a researcher's analytic preconceptions. Finally, the main findings have progressively been re-discussed and clarified on the basis of peer suggestions.

One of the standard criticisms of a case study is that findings derived from it cannot be generalized. The evidence gleaned through the analysis of the case study in this research is limited because it has restricted external validity.⁷⁹ However, generalizability was not the purpose of this research.

⁷⁵ The exact number of the participants was not available because not all the attendees signed the attendance sheet before leaving the meeting.

⁷⁶ Bryman, Alan. *Social research methods*. Oxford: Oxford university press, 2016.

⁷⁷ Ritchie, Jane, Jane Lewis, Carol McNaughton Nicholls, Rachel Ormston, eds. *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2013.

⁷⁸ Miles, Matthew B. and Michael A., Huberman. *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. London, Thousand Oaks, 1994.

⁷⁹ Bryman, *op. cit.*

3. PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY INSTRUMENTS IN GEORGIA: STEMMING FROM THE PROCESS OF DECENTRALIZATION

On its path of democratization, Georgia has undergone several waves of reforms aimed at developing inclusive policymaking practices and advancing good governance. Decentralization and the increased role of self-governments have been identified as effective instruments in bringing citizens closer to authorities and enhancing their role in the decision-making processes.⁸⁰ Since centralized governance may not reflect the local needs and problems of constituencies, the distribution of competences at the local level facilitates public participation in political life and ensures better representation of their interests.⁸¹ Decentralization has been on Georgia's domestic agenda since its first steps as an independent country. In particular, a renewed emphasis on this aspect in 2013 resulted in progress being made in terms of reforming and developing the institutional framework.⁸²

The adoption of the Organic Law of Georgia on Self-government Code in 2014 set the rules for public participation and encouraged more inclusive political processes.⁸³ According to the Self-government Code of Georgia⁸⁴:

“A General Assembly of a Settlement (‘the General Assembly’) shall be a form of citizen participation in the self-organisation of the population of a village/small town/city, and in the exercise of local self-government that ensures active engagement of the constituents registered in the relevant settlement in the discussion and solution of those issues that are important to that settlement and municipality, and in the process of initiation of the above issues before the municipal bodies.”⁸⁵

The GAofS is a deliberative democracy tool since it allows citizens to discuss and draft proposals on relevant socio-economic issues, to give feedback on ongoing projects, and to address private dilemmas. However, the GAofS could be used as both a deliberative and consultative tool depending on the number of registered constituents in the specific village or municipality. Under the Local Self-government Code, for settlements which exceed 500 residents, the GAofS is used as a consultative tool, while for places where the number of registered constituents does not exceed 500, the GAofS is used as a deliberative mechanism.⁸⁶ The dual nature of the GAofS is best examined through the lens of the SRSP.

3.1. DELIBERATIVE AND CONSULTATIVE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT WITHIN THE STATE'S RURAL SUPPORT PROGRAM

The SRSP is a government initiative which is run and implemented by the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure of Georgia. The program allows citizens to decide what projects are most important for their villages or municipalities.⁸⁷ Since the SRSP is designed to address problems of communities, the engagement

⁸⁰ United Nations Development Program (UNDP), *Fostering Decentralization and Good Governance at the Local Level*, Project document, pp. 2-5, accessed 7 May 2020,

⁸¹ Government of Georgia, “Government of Georgia has an unshaken political will to continue and complete the process of decentralization and democratization of local authorities” states Prime Minister of Georgia, 7 December 2018, accessed 7 May 2020, http://gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=497&info_id=69093.

⁸² Jgenti, Mamuka, “Needs Analysis on Decentralization and Local Government in Georgia”, 20 January 2016, pp. 7-9, accessed 7 May 2020, <https://rm.coe.int/needs-analysis-on-decentralisation-and-local-government-in-georgia-pre/168078af7c>.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Organic Law of Georgia self-government code 2014, *op. cit.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ “Government doubles funds allocated to support rural development”, *Agenda.ge*, February 2019, accessed 15 January 2020, <https://>

of local populations is of crucial importance. Therefore, throughout the program's implementation, citizens are given the opportunity to contribute to the process in various ways such as developing and submitting proposals, disseminating information about the program and their own initiatives, as well as encouraging their communities to participate in decision-making procedures.⁸⁸ At all stages of the process, the municipality ensures the accessibility of the information to all interested parties. The process is managed through a special working group set up by the Mayor of the municipality, which delegates functions among its members. The chairman or deputy chairman of the city council (Sakrebulo) is responsible for ensuring the engagement of the majoritarian MPs of the city council in the program's implementation. Meanwhile, Sakrebulo MPs, in their capacity, are responsible for conducting general meetings with the public to discuss their needs and problems. Besides, the public relations office of the municipality is responsible for the dissemination of information through social media sources, as well as local print and online media platforms. The working group convenes on a weekly basis and maps a strategy regarding the organization of the GAofS in different administrative units and discusses other issues related to the implementation of the program on the territory of the municipality.⁸⁹

The SRSP has used the GAofS flexibly, as this tool is applied both as a deliberative and a consultative mechanism depending on the registered number of citizens in the given constituencies. According to the government decree which sets out procedures for the selection of projects under the program, in a settlement in which the number of registered voters does not exceed 500, the project shall be selected at the GAofS through deliberation, while in a settlement where the number of registered voters exceeds 500, the project is selected through consultation with voters.⁹⁰ It is the Mayor's responsibility to issue a special decree which initiates the consultations or general assemblies for the purposes of the SRSP. The decree defines which form of public participation is to be used for particular settlements when it comes to selecting project proposals. Within three days of its issuance, the decree is published on the official website of the municipality. Since the process also allows citizens to register their initiatives, the GAofS or consultation cannot be convened earlier than 15 days from the issuance of the Mayor's decree. Following the receipt of citizens' proposals (if there are any), the municipality discusses their relevance in relation to the program guidelines and accordingly incorporates them in the final agenda for the GAofS and consultation. Information about the proposals, as well as the date and place of both the general assemblies and consultations, should be proactively disseminated by the municipality, the majoritarian MPs of the city council, media, and the general public.⁹¹

In the settlements where consultation is used as the mechanism for the selection of projects under the SRSP, citizens convene at a pre-determined place and, through a secret ballot vote, they select projects to be implemented. In contrast, the format of the deliberative GAofS allocates ten minutes for all authors of proposals to present their initiatives to the public to demonstrate the importance and potential benefits of their initiatives. Following this, any representative attending the meeting can express their views, ask questions, and raise ideas regarding any of the discussed initiatives. Once the discussion has concluded, an open voting procedure is held. According to the rules and procedures, the chairperson of the session explains to the public that all discussed initiatives will be voted on separately (in the order given in the list) and that members of the GAofS have the right to express their support by raising a hand. In addition, the members of the GAofS can vote in favor of multiple proposals. The authorized official of the city council counts the number of votes received for each project proposal. After the voting, the chairperson of the session announces the decision of the GAofS, and the respective minutes are drawn up which oblige the municipality to implement the decision if there are no additional circumstances hindering the implementation of the chosen proposal.

agenda.ge/en/news/2019/323.

⁸⁸ Selection of Project Proposals Under the Rural Support State Program, Manual for Municipalities.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Organic Law of Georgia self-government code 2014, *op.cit.*

⁹¹ Organic Law of Georgia self-government code 2014, *op.cit.*

According to the Organic Law of Georgia on Self-government Code⁹², the selection of projects under the SRSP is based on a participatory decision-making procedure whereby citizens effectively take the decision. The Mayor of the municipality is involved in the decision-making procedure only in extraordinary cases. Specifically, where two or more proposals receive an equal number of votes (the Mayor selects the proposal which best fits the needs and interests of the local population), or where the implementation of the selected project proposal requires co-financing from the municipal budget.⁹³ Although the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure of Georgia is responsible for the monitoring of the process, municipal bodies are advised to strongly encourage citizens' participation to increase the transparency and accountability of the process.

3.2. GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF A SETTLEMENT: AN UNDERDEVELOPED TOOL OF PUBLIC DELIBERATION

Although the development of the institutional framework is considered a substantial milestone with respect to enhanced public participation in policymaking, there are various challenges which limit genuine public inclusion. The reasons here are manifold and vary from a lack of awareness and a lack of a political culture, to an absence of necessary skills and knowledge, to the prevalence of informal societal practices. A study commissioned by the Open Society Foundation Georgia (OSGF) studied participatory democracy instruments in villages of Georgia and assessed the overall public engagement to be low.⁹⁴ The study concluded that public participation varied in different villages depending on the community and the presence of civil society organizations at the local level, as well as the existence of donor-funded projects in the region. The study identified the following as the two most important factors resulting in minimal public participation: (1) a low level of awareness among the public about their civic rights, as well as how to mobilize groups, articulate issues, and conduct advocacy campaigns; and (2) the societal values. The study placed emphasis on the existence of a barely-existent political culture in the villages of Georgia and discussed the impact of informal societal influences on public participation. In some villages of Georgia, citizens were afraid of publicly protesting and signing documents necessary to implement changes, even if the problem was pressing for them, because they were afraid of reprisals from the local self-authorities, such as losing their jobs in the public sector.⁹⁵

Another piece of research conducted in 2017 with support from the Council of Europe and the EU⁹⁶ distinguished several success stories related to public participation and offered specific recommendations to address challenges related to participatory democracy instruments. The research focused on various challenges of public participation in the decision-making process through the GAofS, including but not limited to: (1) problems in mobilization, specifically gathering 20 percent of the electorate of the municipality; (2) and the lack of readiness of the public to implement changes. The study described specific cases of a lack of awareness including among public officials regarding the functioning of the GAofS, and outlined a lack of information on how to implement decisions taken through the GAofS.⁹⁷ The Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI) further identified the low level of citizens' interest in participation in local decision-making as an essential challenge together with the lack of necessary skills and knowledge, which limits the positive impact of public participation.⁹⁸

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Selection of Project Proposals Under the Rural Support State Program, Manual for Municipalities.

⁹⁴ Kharatiani Ketevan, Public participation mechanisms in Georgia, focus-groups report, Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF), 27 March 2014.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Tvaltvdze Nino, Assessing the existing participatory democracy instruments in the implementation of the local self-government in Georgia, 2017.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

The challenges related to public engagement in decision-making within the framework of the SRSP are rather similar to the challenges related to public participation in general in Georgia.⁹⁹ A lack of necessary information has been identified as one of the major problems in this regard.¹⁰⁰ Although, overall, public awareness about the program is relatively high, there is rather limited knowledge of its particular aspects (funds, quality assessment of projects). Consequently, in most cases, it is difficult for the population to make effective decisions and assess the merits of the proposed projects.¹⁰¹ The studies¹⁰² illustrated that municipalities use different means to disseminate information regarding the GAofS for project selection within the SRSP, but better use of different information campaigns is necessary both to spread the information and to encourage public participation.¹⁰³

4. ASSESSING THE FUNCTIONING OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF A SETTLEMENT IN RURAL GEORGIA

The GAofS meetings in Mestia municipality within the framework of the SRSP took place in February 2020. On the 24th of January, the local government published the schedule of the meetings in the 16 territorial units of the municipality. A local civil society organization, the Upper Svaneti Local Action Group (LAG Upper Svaneti), started disseminating relevant information through its social media platform to encourage people to participate in the GAofS in their respective communities. In addition, the LAG Upper Svaneti board members from Pari, Kala and Tskhumari communities further disseminated information with villagers about the convening of the GAofS, and a few days before the meetings called them and asked them to attend. The GAofS meetings in Pari, Kala and Tskhumari communities were held on the 14th, 15th and 16th of February, respectively, at 12pm in Pari and Tskhumari and at 3pm in Kala community. The GAofS in Pari was attended by 32 participants (20 men, 12 women), the Kala version had 19 participants¹⁰⁴ (13 men, 6 women) and the Tskhumari meeting has 32 participants (24 men, 8 women). The researcher observed all three meetings in their entirety.

The analysis relies on the report of the participant observer, four focus group discussions, and six in-depth interviews with both those who attended the GAofS and those who rejected the invitation to do so, as well as the local government representatives who conducted the GAofS meetings in 2020. To study the reasons behind citizens' refusal to partake in the deliberation, two focus group discussions, and two in-depth telephone interviews were conducted with those who were invited to a GAofS meeting but declined to participate.

First, the present chapter outlines research findings derived from how the participant observer, the respondents, and the local government representatives evaluated the public deliberation in the form of the GAofS within the framework of the SRSP in three communities of Mestia municipality. Particular attention is paid to: the respondents' general knowledge about the public deliberative mechanism of the GAofS; the essence of active dialogue, discussions, and listening during the deliberation; inclusion of vulnerable groups; and the making of informed decisions and the ways in which final decisions are reached and implemented. Second, the reasons for non-participation are explained from the perspectives of non-participants and participants.

⁹⁹ Research report on "State Rural Support Program", *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Monitoring and the Effectiveness Analysis of the Rural Support Program and the Fund for Implementing Projects in the Regions of Georgia, Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF), 2014.

¹⁰² Research report on "State Rural Support Program", *op. cit.*

¹⁰³ Tvaltvaдзе, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁴ The exact number of participants was not available because not all the attendees signed the attendance sheet before leaving the meeting.

4.1. THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF A SETTLEMENT: PARTICIPANTS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT REPRESENTATIVES

Lack of awareness about deliberation through the GAofS

The study revealed a widespread lack of awareness of the GAofS, its functions, responsibilities and powers in all three targeted communities. Those who had attended GAofS meetings could provide some information regarding the process itself and were able to cite specific examples from the GAofS meeting(s) they have attended, however there is still a relative shortage of comprehensive understanding as to the functions and powers of the GAofS. The respondents broadly knew about the GAofS in the context of the SRSP. However, that aside,, the respondents had not participated in public deliberation through the GAofS mechanism. According to the focus group participants and the interviewees, the local government representatives of Mestia municipality provide some information about the GAofS when it is conveyed within the framework of the SRSP but even then the only information people acquire is (through the municipality's Facebook page) is when and where the GAofS meetings will take place in different administrative units. Additional information such as how many people should attend a meeting for it to be considered legitimate, how people should deliberate on pre-identified projects, or how they can cast a vote, is not provided by the local government to the local communities.

The Mayor of Mestia Municipality explained that: *"The GAofS is solely dependent on the state rural support program. Without it, this mechanism would not be functional. The funds are allocated for the state rural support program and that gives people incentives to participate in public deliberations through the GAofS."*

Absence of active dialogue, discussions, and listening

Both the participant observer's report and the focus group discussions revealed that active dialogue, discussions, and listening did not take place during public deliberation. Several reasons were put forward for this being the case. First, people are generally not aware of the agenda of a given meeting in advance, and the location of the deliberation is not fit for purpose. Second, settlers of different villages go to meetings having already chosen which project ideas to support, and they simply announce these to the local government representatives without further deliberation. Third, due to the limited time allocated for the meetings and the absence of discussion moderators who would facilitate discussions and manage conflicts, participants lack the patience to listen to each other and struggle to have their opinions heard.

Both, the participant observer's report and the individual interviews showed that the working environment of the GAofS did not allow people to deliberate and make informed decisions within the framework of the SRSP. Public deliberation through the GAofS through this program takes place in winter, sometimes outside or in a building without heating or enough seats for participants. For these reasons, people do not feel comfortable and are reluctant to deliberate for hours. Besides the lack of suitable physical infrastructure at the meetings, the respondents also noted that there was no agenda given, meaning that participants did not know any details (e.g. duration and which projects were being discussed) about the process in advance. The focus group respondents in Pari and Tskhumari communities highlighted that one of the major pitfalls of public deliberation within the framework of the SRSP was the disorganized procedure of deliberation, including the absence of an adequate space for public gatherings.

According to the rules for conducting GAofS meetings within the SRSP, villagers should prepare project proposals and submit them to the Mayor's office. The local government representatives should then draft the agenda and during the GAofS the villagers should discuss the submitted projects, listen to each other's perspectives, and vote for their preferred projects. According to the respondents in Kala, Pari and Tskhumari communities however, the villagers do not usually submit project ideas to the Mayor's office before public deliberation,

meaning that local government representatives hear project ideas for the first time during the meetings. The interviewees in all three communities said that before the GAoFS, usually the men of the village together with the village trustee liaise and discuss which project they want to be implemented through the SRSP. They make an initial decision and then spread this information among other villagers, so people generally know in advance which project idea will be announced by their fellow villagers during the public deliberation. Hence, during the GAoFS, citizens do not see the point in discussing because they do not want to go against what they conceive to be a pre-made decision, as they might be labeled disloyal by his/her fellow villagers. Moreover, the respondents of all three communities noted that the informal decision-making among villagers before the GAoFS was not an inclusive process, as it mostly included men and excluded women, youth and people with disabilities (PWDs). The participant observer also acquired the impression that decisions about the projects were not being made through deliberation, but were rather already made by the villagers and the public deliberation was simply a means of presenting particular projects to the local government representative(s). The local government representatives usually asked a few people from each village which project(s) their village wanted to be implemented, and took notes accordingly. If the villagers could underline that their village did indeed want a given project to be implemented and no objections were lodged, the decision would be made without casting a vote.

The researcher observed that deliberation among participants on project ideas was weak because discussion during the meetings was not encouraged. In Pari community, people started to discuss the rationale behind a few projects, the participants brought arguments for and against several project ideas and, in some cases, started to consider uniting their financial resources to fund a common project. Although some people were eager to deliberate on certain projects, because of the time limit the local government representatives decided to keep things brief and asked only a few people from different villages which project their village wanted to be funded. Immediately, the participants stopped deliberating, and instead started naming the projects their village wanted. In Kala and Tskhumari communities, the project ideas were not presented and discussed by the attendees. Instead, the local government representative asked whether the village residents wanted a road, a sewage system, outdoor lighting or any other infrastructural project eligible for funding, but there were limited discussions as to whether any of these projects would be feasible or whether funds would be sufficient for proper implementation. At times, concerns regarding feasibility were raised by participants, but the organizers were keen to keep the meetings short and did not open up such concerns for group discussion.

Both, the participant observer's report and the focus group discussions showed that the expression of different opinions or opposing views was not encouraged during the public deliberation. If the majority of villagers supported a project, it was extremely difficult for anyone to express an opposing view, because the majority was not willing to listen to any counterarguments. Discussion is thus not facilitated during the GAoFS meetings as attendees do not listen to each other's perspectives. The respondents in Tskhumari community stated that when opposing views were expressed, people started arguing and there was no-one in place to moderate the meeting. A few of the focus group respondents in both Pari and Tskhumari communities mentioned that due to a fear of conflicts or a fear of being judged by their fellow villagers, the attendees, especially women and youngsters, preferred to stay quiet.

A 43-year-old male from Tskhumari emphasized one of the aspects of the assembly he disliked:
"Yes, sometimes people are insulting to each other, verbally... we, the attendees try to calm our villagers down."

Inclusion of vulnerable groups

All respondents agreed that PWDs and elderly women did not participate in public deliberations, and that opinions were mixed regarding women's and youth engagement. Some respondents, mostly men and the local government representatives, claimed that both women and youth do participate in public deliberation and recalled cases where projects supported by women and youth were chosen by the communities. According to the women and youth respondents though, despite taking part in public deliberation, their engagement is low

and if the projects supported by them are to be chosen and implemented, they still need tacit approval from men. Contrarily, projects lobbied by men do not require approval from women or youth, because the former know that the latter will not oppose them during the deliberation.

One of the respondents highlighted his opinion regarding women's involvement during the public deliberation: *"Women are less engaged in the decision-making process; generally men are getting together. I think, women's involvement in village affairs is not necessary."* (51-year-old male from Tskhumari)

The Mayor of Mestia Municipality stated that: *"In some communities, women are active, they participate in public deliberations. Young people are also involved in the decision-making process. I can recall cases where the ideas of women and youth won over the views of the men."*

According to the respondents of all four focus group discussions in Pari and Tskhumari communities, men expressed their ideas more often than women during the deliberation. Women participants in Pari and Tskhumari communities noted that, generally, women's perspectives were absent during the public deliberations in Mestia municipality. They opined that the absence of women during the assembly prevented other women from advocating for their desired projects. One respondent from Pari noted that sometimes men genuinely did not understand the necessity of a particular project for women, and if more women attended the public deliberation they might be more successful in explaining their needs, expressing their views and ultimately having their projects selected at the public deliberation. Some male focus group participants in Tskhumari community justified women's lack of engagement in discussions by citing past experiences when men allowed women to choose their desired project which was not fully implemented. Thus, in his opinion, women's engagement in the decision-making process had not brought success to the community.

Some focus group respondents said that during the public deliberation some participants' ideas and views were more valued than those of others. Culture and traditions play a prominent role in such communities, granting men, and especially older men, with more power compared to the rest of the population. Cultural aspects also restrain women and youth from expressing contrary opinions in front of men and/or elderly. According to the participant observer's report, women were engaged in discussions and did express their opinions, but if their ideas went against the views of the men, the women were responded to harshly. In Tskhumari community, a group of women who wanted to cast a vote in favor of their project idea were told by some of the men that women should not be engaged in village affairs and should let men decide.

The following respondents outlined their stances regarding the importance of everyone being able to express their ideas and opinions during the public deliberation: *"I wish I could express my views, and that everyone listened to me."* (60-year-old woman from Pari)

"We should have an opportunity to freely express our opinions. All views should be equally heard." (59-year-old woman from Pari)

"The young people always abstain from expressing views against the elderly. It is our culture and tradition, and a gesture of respect towards the elderly." (51-year-old male from Tskhumari)

"All the opinions will not be equal of course, sometimes people say such nonsense... The elderly have experience and, thus, their opinions are valued the most. There is a saying: "Trust the elderly and you will not be misled." (40-year-old male from Tskhumari)

Access to information/learning during the deliberation

The respondents from all three communities stated that villagers lacked basic technical knowledge about the costs and risks related to the projects they wanted to implement in their communities. As a result, some projects are chosen that are not realistic for the available funds. Consequently, projects go unfinished or lack the desired

quality and this frustrates villagers, undermining their confidence in effective public deliberation and the local government.

The following respondents expressed their opinions about the general knowledge and information held by people while making decisions during the deliberation: *“Lack of information about the approximate costs or risks related to projects is a prominent factor preventing the successful implementation of projects in our village. We do not know about project costs before the implementation starts, and then due to limited funds the project quality is extremely poor or the project remains unfinished.”* (51-year-old male from Tskhumari)

“We do not know the project costs beforehand, and of course this factor prevents the smooth implementation of the projects. The work is half done, like we saw with the road we started last year...” (43-year-old male from Tskhumari)

“We think that 10 000 Georgian Laris are enough for ambitious projects and we choose them for implementation, but then the villagers demand way more than the individual entrepreneurs who implement the projects can realistically offer.” (39-year-old female from Pari)

All of the respondents noted that if relevant experts met the villagers before or during the public deliberation, and provided them with basic information about the possible costs of their desired projects, this would help them to make informed decisions and to spend their funds efficiently. This would also help them to not favor projects that are unrealistic for implementation given the allocated financial resources. The Mayor of Mestia municipality outlined that experts' support would help the communities to increase the quality of their deliberation. He claimed that knowledge and expertise should be shared with people before the public deliberation and that the actual deliberation should exclusively involve the villagers.

The following respondents emphasized the value of experts' involvement in the deliberation process: *“This is necessary. If an expert helps, we can also calculate the costs with him/her. Now we believe that the funds are enough, but soon we might see that we were wrong.”* (40-year-old male from Tskhumari)

“It would be great if we knew the approximate costs from the experts in advance. Once, we chose the project and then started looking for the implementer. Most of the individual entrepreneurs told us they were not interested in doing this project for the available funds.” (39-year-old woman from Pari)

Making the final decisions

The voting procedures were considered by respondents to be vague and did not always take place during the public deliberation. The respondents from all three communities noted that attendees did not raise their hands in support of their desired projects. The Mayor of Mestia municipality confirmed this and explained that people might feel insulted by being asked to vote by raising their hands. In contrast, the majority of respondents stated that including voting would help meeting participants to obtain proof that projects are indeed being selected by the majority.

The participant observer noted that in none of the three communities did the casting of a vote take place for project selection. Instead, the local government representatives wrote down in their notes the names of the projects announced by either the village trustee or random residents from different villages. The local government representative then stated out loud whether the village selected a certain project, and if this gained the consent of the attendees and no one opposed, then the decision was made. Once the local government representatives have a list of desired projects, without casting a vote, then the meeting is concluded.

The participant observer's report emphasized that sometimes the local government representatives tried to figure out which projects had been chosen mainly through the village trustee, despite being opposed by the meeting participants. In Tskhumari community, eight people were present at the meeting for a particular village,

seven women and one man. All of the women supported one project for funding, but one man and the village trustee opposed them and claimed that the majority of villagers (who were absent at the meeting) would also oppose them. The women started to demand that a vote be cast, but the local government representative said that a second meeting would have to be held for the village to arrive at a untied position. The women were against the convening of a second meeting and stated that they had the right to vote for their desired project. They complained to the local government representative and wrote their view in the minutes of the meeting. However, approximately a week later, a second GAofS was indeed held in Tskhumari community and their project was voted against at the 2nd meeting.

The local government representatives can influence the participants' final decisions at the GAofS. Indeed, the power of local authorities was observed in all three communities. Despite discussing various desired projects for their villages, in Pari and Kala communities the local government representative asked participants whether it might be better if they combined the available funds entirely for one common project, entailing the establishment of a multifunctional educational center in Pari and a multifunctional sports complex in Kala. When this idea was expressed by the local government representative, participants took it into consideration. Many assumed that the suggested project would be more favored by the local government and perceived its chances of implementation to be higher. It is worth mentioning here that, in all communities, projects suggested by local authorities were funded within the framework of the SRSP.

The respondents from all three communities noted that the decisions made during the public deliberation were not always final. Sometimes, even after the GAofS, people still did not know which projects were selected for funding because no-one summed up the results of the meeting and, occasionally, the decisions made at the GAofS were subsequently changed. The respondents from all three communities and the participant observation emphasized that the final decisions were not announced during the GAofS in 2020. Furthermore, after each meeting, the village trustee started to collect signatures of the villagers in support of another project discussed during the GAofS. According to the Mayor, sometimes the projects selected during the GAofS were replaced by other projects because villagers changed their minds. Respondents in Pari and Tskhumari communities criticized this practice and said they did not fully understand why the projects selected through the GAofS were replaced. They did not like the practice of the village trustee collecting signatures for other projects, because many signatories felt they had no choice but to sign. Many respondents stated that if a final decision made during the GAofS was to be changed, the arguments for doing so should be presented and the next GAofS should be conveyed at which a new decision would be made.

Implementation of decisions

All of the respondents from all communities and the local government representatives said that public deliberations within the SRSP were worthy because the projects chosen by the villages were always implemented, albeit to a varying standard. People thus know that funds allocated for their villages will be spent on the projects selected by the village for implementation. However, the respondents' dissatisfaction regarding the outcomes of the public deliberation within the framework of the SRSP is twofold.

First, respondents in Pari and Tskhumari communities were irritated that the decisions made through the public deliberation at the GAofS were not always the final and that, sometimes, the village trustee changed them by collecting signatures in support of a different project. The Mayor of Mestia municipality said that if the village trustee collected signatures in support of a different project, this new project would be well-known to people and it would have been discussed during the public deliberation, and that, thus, entirely new or unfamiliar project ideas were never put forward for signatures. However, many respondents claimed that collecting signatures after the public deliberation undermined the meaning of deliberation because everyone, including those who did not attend the public deliberation, could sign the form and no-one had the option to support the previously-chosen project by providing their signatures. Even if most of the villagers wanted the previously

chosen project to be implemented, if the village trustee managed to collect the signatures of 20% or more of the registered electorate in the community, the new project would be implemented.

The following respondents expressed their opinions about the process of changing the pre-made decisions during the public deliberation: *“The new minutes of the meeting were created and the process of collecting signatures started, but we did not know why.”* (53-year-old woman from Pari)

“If any changes occur, the minutes of the meeting are created, and signatures are collected. The village trustee collects people district by district, discusses changes with them and then they sign the forms.” (The Mayor of Mestia Municipality)

Second, according to many respondents, the quality of the implemented projects is often insufficient, thus people are sometimes dissatisfied with the outputs of the SRSP. Both citizens and local government representatives generally thought that funds allocated for the SRSP are limited and often not sufficient for the successful implementation of chosen projects.

4.2. REASONS FOR NON-PARTICIPATION: NON-PARTICIPANTS AND PARTICIPANTS PERSPECTIVES

Analysis of the data collected through interviews revealed several reasons behind non-participation in public deliberation through the GAoFS within the framework of the SRSP. One of the primary reasons put forward by interviewees was the culture of informal decision-making that takes place prior to the GAoFS. Respondents generally noted a feeling of powerlessness and exclusion with respect to the deliberation, which is derived from the existing culture of decision-making before the meetings, a disregard for procedures of public deliberation through the GAoFS by the organizers, a lack of diversity at the meetings, decisions being changed after the meetings without any reasoning provided to the public, and people’s perception of participation being a sort of elite-driven manipulation. Furthermore, respondents noted that citizens’ apathy toward public deliberation through the GAoFS could also be explained by the outcomes of projects ultimately implemented courtesy of the GAoFS such as poor-quality infrastructure projects.

According to respondents in the communities of Kala, Pari and Tskhumari, inhabitants do not usually submit project proposals to the Mayor’s office before public deliberation. Interviewees in all three communities said that before the GAoFS was established, the (male) heads of households, along with the village trustee, usually met informally and discussed which projects they wished to be implemented through the upcoming SRSP. The male inhabitants made an initial decision amongst themselves. This was then disseminated among the local population. As a result, villagers knew in advance which projects were going to be announced during the public deliberation. Respondents from all three communities noted that this informal decision-making process held before the GAoFS excluded women, youth and PWDs. Interviewees from all three communities stated that the pre-made decisions were sometimes discussed within families but predominantly it was the male family members who would announce the projects. The focus group participants in Kala and Tskhumari communities stated that people believed that one household should announce only one position, meaning that often the (usually male) head of the household’s choice was presented exclusively.

One 40-year-old man from Tskhumari highlighted the power of the majority during the public deliberation: *“If the majority wants something, anyone else is just yattering... We might listen, but...”* (40-year-old male from Tskhumari)

Rather than the total number of people attending the meeting, the number of village households represented by their “breadwinner” matters most at the GAoFS. As such, women, generally not considered the main income source for a household and instead being responsible for taking care of the household, generally prefer to stay at home. They do not see any point in attending the meetings and believe that their opinions will not be heard.

There was a similar response on this issue from young respondents. Indeed, young members of the communities either agreed with their elders and did not see themselves as having a purpose at the meetings. If they were inclined to disagree, they preferred not to participate in meetings or to openly voice their opinions. This is due to it being considered rude, culturally, to challenge one's elders. Respondents noted that if women and youth decided to openly oppose the position of the men and managed to mobilize supporters for their project idea, this still would not change the outcome because final decisions were not made by vote. The only way women, youth and other social groups such as PWDs believed that their desired projects could be implemented through the GAofS would be by convincing the males before or during the meeting to support them. On the contrary, it seems that men did not need support from women and youth for their favored decisions.

The following respondent explained why she considered it pointless to express an opinion contrary to the village consensus: ***“Even if I have evidence that the project will not be implemented successfully, they will not believe my arguments. The decision is already made, and it is unlikely that my arguments will change anything...”*** (18-year-old female from Pari)

Attempts by women or youth to convince men to change their pre-defined position during the GAofS were considered futile according to the focus group participants in Pari and Tskhumari communities, for several fundamental reasons. First, discussions are not encouraged during the meeting by its organizers and women and youth are often criticized by men for expressing differing views and opinions. Second, males make up the majority of attendees. Women and youth feel that they do not have anyone who would support them and their arguments, or anyone to advocate for their desired projects. Thus, they are not able to convince males that their desired projects are necessary for the community as a whole. This makes many women and youth participants feel powerless and they are therefore reluctant to participate in the public deliberation.

The following respondents explained the current situation regarding women's and youth involvement during the public deliberation: ***“I think female involvement in village affairs is not necessary.”*** (51-year-old male from Tskhumari)

“We, women, do not participate in public deliberations. Once, we wanted to fund a marquee, but the men opposed us, and we failed. Nothing has been decided by women so far.” (47-year-old female from Tskhumari)

“If I come and argue with men over the projects, they will be insistent and win. There is no sense in going to the meetings.” (60-year-old female from Pari)

“When no-one is interested in hearing your opinion, you are not going to attend a second and third time.” (34-year-old female from Tskhumari)

“We are too young to make a decision. Older, more experienced people are here so let them decide.” (18-year-old male from Tskhumari)

“Let us be honest, a few men decide village affairs... They lead the process... This year, one man started yelling at us (women) that women should stay at home and not be involved in village affairs. Men make decisions.” (47-year-old female from Tskhumari)

The factor that most demotivates participants and non-participants (both men and women) when it comes to engaging in public deliberation through the GAofS is the feeling of powerlessness derived from doubts that their participation is driven by elite manipulation. This feeling stems from past experiences where at the end of a meeting, participants still did not know the final outcome, where the decisions made at a meeting were changed by the local government representatives through collecting signatures for other projects without explaining why, and where government officials intervened in the decision-making process. The respondents from all three communities and the participant observer's report emphasized that the final decisions were not

announced during the GAofS in 2020. Furthermore, after the meetings in Pari and Tskhumari communities, the decisions made during the deliberation were changed without proper explanations being given to the public. The respondents from Pari, Kala and Tskhumari communities stated that sometimes local government representatives gave suggestions to the public as to which projects might be better implemented. The participant observation also noted that, in Pari and Kala communities, local government representatives asked participants whether it might be better if several villages combined their funds to pursue one common project, namely the establishment of a multifunctional educational center in Pari and a multifunctional sports complex in Kala. People were thus given the impression that these projects had more support from the local government and as such were more likely to be fully implemented. It is worth mentioning here that, in all communities, the projects suggested by the local authorities were funded by the SRSP.

The following respondents claimed that sometimes decisions made during the public deliberation were changed without reasons being provided to the community: *"This year, the cultural house was chosen through deliberation in our community. Then the decision was changed and now the sewage system is going to be done instead. The public deliberation was concluded in a way that we did not know what the final outcome of the deliberation was."* (39-year-old woman from Pari)

"This year, we wanted to finish the road that has been being built since last year, but all funds now are allocated to funding the stadium. In the past, the village also wanted to fund something else but the funds were allocated to outdoor lighting that's still not been finished, even now." (47-year-old male from Tskhumari)

Another reason behind citizens' reluctance to engage in the GAofS discussed by the respondents (both participants and non-participants) was people's lack of trust that their participation through the deliberation would actually enhance the quality of implemented projects. Respondents in Pari, Kala and Tskhumari communities noted that many projects chosen within the framework of the SRSP were not fully implemented or were completed at a low quality. Thus, people generally did not believe that public participation would lead to full implementation of successful projects in the community. The respondents of all three communities stated that villagers lacked the basic technical knowledge about the costs and risks related to the projects that they wished to implement in their communities, which led to unrealistic projects being chosen. The unfinished or low-quality projects that materialize as a result further demotivate the population and undermine their confidence in the effectiveness of public deliberation.

A 50-year old man from Pari highlighted one of the reasons demotivating people to take part in the GAofS: *"The projects start but do not finish. People are demotivated to participate again."*

None of the respondents in Pari, Tskhumari and Kala communities thought that people declined participation in public deliberation due on grounds of scheduling conflicts or because they thought that they would be unable to make informed decisions. The majority of the non-participants from all three communities stated that if they believed that their views would be heard and valued during public deliberation, even a scheduling conflict would not prevent them from participating in the GAofS. Furthermore, the majority of respondents from all three communities noted that although they were sometimes of poor quality, the projects chosen within the framework of the SRSP through the GAofS were always implemented, meaning that the risk of choosing a project that would never be implemented was low.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This research report set out to appraise the processes of public deliberation in Georgia through the mechanism of the GAofS within the framework of the SRSP. The research aimed to explore the Georgian public engagement mechanism of the GAofS and why some citizens of Georgia refuse to participate in public deliberation through the GAofS within the framework of the SRSP. The study's findings are derived from focus group discussions, qualitative in-depth interviews, and participant observation. Observation was applied to analyze the process of public deliberation in three rural communities of Mestia municipality, and qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted to assess the perspectives of citizens and local government representatives on the process of public deliberation and to highlight the underlying reasons behind citizens' refusal to participate in public deliberation through the GAofS. Extensive field research undertaken for this study revealed that the challenges facing Georgian public deliberation through the GAofS are manifold and range from procedural shortcomings to a lack of genuine willingness on the part of the local government to engage the public in the local decision-making processes through deliberation.

Effective public deliberation that enhances democracy should be informed, balanced, conscientious, substantive, and comprehensive. The focus group discussions and in-depth interviews revealed that the Georgian practice of public deliberation within the framework of SRSP barely corresponds to the above-mentioned five characteristics of effective deliberation. The participant observation for all three communities and the focus group discussions in Pari and Tskhumari communities highlighted that public deliberations in these communities were neither informed nor balanced. Due to limited information being made available about the real costs of infrastructure projects and a general unawareness of the risks related to project implementation, attendees of the GAofS could not express informed arguments backed by facts. Moreover, as not enough time is allocated for discussions and as there is no moderator in place for the meetings, the arguments expressed during the deliberation are not balanced with counterarguments freely expressed by participants. Furthermore, women and youth respondents in Pari and Tskhumari communities noted that discussions during the GAofS were not substantive because arguments were assessed not based on their merits but on how loudly they were made and/or by whom they were expressed. An observed quarrel in Tskhumari community when male participants stated that their opinions (rather than those of women or youth) should matter most in village affairs supports this claim. Meanwhile, discussions in all three public deliberations could not be described as conscientious according to interviewees. Participant observation revealed that participants in Tskhumari, Pari and Kala communities struggled to listen to each other respectfully. In Pari and Tskhumari communities, some attendees were prone to yelling at each other and it took some time to calm them down. Many participants of focus group discussions, especially women and youth, emphasized that discussions during the GAofS were not comprehensive, particularly the ideas of women and youth themselves, which were scarcely acknowledged by meeting attendees.

The essential factors that ensure high-quality public deliberation include, but are not limited to, careful consideration of the issues under deliberation, educating citizens on complex issues, the inclusion of vulnerable groups, protecting dialogue and discussion from coercion, prohibiting inequality and repression, and employing facilitators for organized deliberations. The research findings show that respondents in all three communities had a stake in public deliberations. The respondents were willing to invest their time and energy in the implementation of an infrastructural project serving their communities' development, and thus public deliberation over the infrastructural projects within the framework of the SRSP fits its purpose well.

All of the focus groups and in-depth interviews showed that attendees of the GAofS were making decisions on complex issues without sufficient information and knowledge, which negatively affected the outcome(s) of the deliberation. In Pari and Tskhumari communities, respondents noted that due to limited knowledge of

the costs of full implementation of projects, some them had gone unfinished or had been concluded but to a poor standard. The respondents from all three communities noted that basic information about the costs and risks related to the projects would help them to weed out false claims made by the participant(s) and to make informed decisions.

The research findings illustrate that the inclusion of vulnerable groups in public deliberation in all three communities is a severe problem. As public engagement affects people of many kinds of backgrounds, public deliberation should fairly include diverse voices accordingly. The GAofS meetings in Pari, Kala and Tskhumari communities failed to deliver in this regard. Women, youth, elderly and PWDs were either in low numbers or absent entirely from the meetings. The Mayor of Mestia municipality also noted that PWDs almost never attend the meetings, mainly due to harsh winter conditions and a lack of infrastructure to accommodate their needs, while there were also no incentives available for socially vulnerable groups such as PWDs to participate in public deliberation through the GAofS.

Besides, it is essential that every subject with the competence to speak and act can participate in discourse, express his/her attitudes, needs and desires, introduce any claim into the discourse, and question and challenge any assertion at any time. Based on the participant observation and the focus group discussions, the research findings demonstrate that public deliberations in Pari, Kala and Tskhumari communities were not well protected from coercion, inequality and repression. In Tskhumari community, some men attempted to deprive women of their right to speak up through internal coercion. In all communities, the youth are inclined to choose a certain course of action that is in line with what the elderly support, meaning that some participants do act under coercion and reasoned arguments might therefore be absent during deliberation. Participants in Pari and Tskhumari communities noted that sometimes pressure was exerted by the local government representatives who tried to steer people toward projects more feasible for implementation.

Effective public deliberation requires the presence of actors who participate actively in dialogue to make deliberation happen. The research findings illustrated that moderators or facilitators were not available in any of the three targeted communities during the public deliberation. The focus group respondents highlighted the need for a facilitator who would encourage comments from quiet participants, form positions, clarify points, sum up discussions, prevent excessive contributions from one party, and ease conflicts between the participants. In the current settings of the GAofS, there is no special person responsible for facilitating the discussion, and the conflicts or disagreements that arise can make for an unpleasant experience.

To ascertain why some citizens of Pari, Kala and Tskhumari communities¹⁰⁵ refused to participate in public deliberation, Jacquet's six logics of non-participation were applied. Placed in the context of comparative scholarship on citizens' indifference toward public deliberation, the results of this research report offer several new insights. The research findings illustrate that the GAofS within the framework of the SRSP does not serve as a deliberative public engagement mechanism in practice and could not be characterized as an effective deliberation process. One of the main reasons for many citizens' refusal to participate in the GAofS, according to both participants and non-participants, is the GAofS's inability to serve as an effective public deliberation mechanism.

According to the participant and non-participant respondents, the GAofS within the SRSP is not seen as a place for public deliberation and discussion, but rather as a space for making announcements about predetermined decisions made by the male population. Most of the respondents noted that this practice plays a significant role in citizens' apathy toward public deliberation through the GAofS. Many respondents stated that deliberation through the GAofS in their communities took place not among people, but among representatives of village households, most of whom were men. Non-participants noted that if they agreed with the projects chosen by

¹⁰⁵ It is worth noting that the public deliberation through the GAofS within the framework of the SRSP takes place only in rural communities of Georgia.

the main financial providers of their household, they could wait for the outcome at home; if they disagreed, they might try to influence the decision before the meeting, but actually attending the meeting and expressing a contrary opinion in public at the GAofS is seen as both risky and futile. The respondents added that attending the meeting itself did not have much value in terms of altering pre-made decisions. This undermines the nature of public deliberation and excludes certain citizens, especially vulnerable groups from the process. Furthermore, the meeting organizers were not willing to and lacked time to encourage discussions among participants. Therefore, attendees, who might even oppose the projects announced by their communities, did not have the opportunity or inclination to express their views or bring counterarguments to the table and, as such, feel powerless to become involved. They are broadly afraid of being judged and ostracized by their fellow villagers for opposing the majority position. In addition, they are deprived of an opportunity to express their preferences through voting, since formal voting is not conducted during the GAofS.

These research findings suggest that respondents consider themselves powerless and believe that the process of public deliberation through the GAofS is manipulated by elites. According to the respondents who participated in the GAofS, the feeling of powerlessness comes from the process itself. In all three communities, respondents noted that sometimes the final decisions are not announced at the end of the meetings at which point people remain uncertain regarding which project will ultimately be implemented. In addition, even when final decisions are made clear to all, it is possible that, after the GAofS, this decision will be altered without any due explanation. Furthermore, interviews and the participant observation showed that, sometimes, local government representatives intervened in the decision-making process and gave people advice as to which projects they should consider for funding. This practice made the meeting participants feel powerless, undermined their trust in the decisions eventually made through the deliberation, and made them think that public deliberation is ineffective.

The research findings illustrate that citizens' disengagement in public deliberation through the GAofS within the SRSP is multifaceted, and that careful attention should be paid as to how existing public participation mechanisms, specifically the deliberative GAofS, work in practice. The research findings reveal that people refused to participate in public deliberation because they see the GAofS as ineffective in achieving its intended outcomes. Even those who participated in the GAofS meetings criticized the practice of deliberation through the GAofS and put an emphasis on the aspects discouraging participation in public deliberations.

6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

For civil society organizations

- The study has revealed a widespread lack of knowledge and awareness about the GAofS and its functions, responsibilities and powers. Those attending GAofS meetings were able to provide more information regarding the process itself and could cite specific examples from those the GAofS meeting they attended, however there is still a lack of comprehensive understanding about the functions and powers of the GAofS. Civil society organizations (CSOs) should initiate and implement projects in local communities aimed at raising awareness of this deliberative mechanism.
- The representatives of civil society organizations should more actively participate in and observe the GAofS meetings and apply sustained pressure on local authorities when they see misconduct in the meetings. On its part, CSOs should put forward recommendations as to how the challenges observed in the process could be addressed.
- CSOs should devote more efforts to exploring local trends related to participation and non-participation in the GAofS meetings. In particular, they should focus on understanding the reasons behind the general lack of willingness to participate in public deliberation. CSOs should develop context-relevant long-term strategies to mitigate the root causes of problems causing non-participation with the active cooperation of local authorities and donor communities.
- Almost all interlocutors expressed concerns regarding the implementation of decisions both in terms of the quality of work, as well as sudden changes of decisions taken at GAofS. It is advisable to increase the role of CSOs in participatory monitoring and evaluation of the implementation process of the decisions made through the deliberation.
- International practice reveals that deliberative public participation mechanisms, along with providing a clear understanding of the issues under deliberation and taking trade-offs into careful consideration, should educate citizens on complex issues. In rural Georgia, the public participation mechanism not only fails to educate citizens but rarely achieves its main purpose of carefully considering the issues under deliberation. CSOs should conduct information meetings and trainings, and prepare briefing materials and explainers in advance of GAofS meetings to help local communities to better understand the agenda items discussed at the meetings.

For international donor organizations

- International donor organizations should design programs and projects to enhance the operational capacity of the GAofS. By embracing international practice and experience, and with the cooperation of local CSOs, international donors should conduct necessary trainings for public officials who participate in the activities of the GAofS.
- Inadequate facilitation of the process not only hinders a genuine deliberation process and limits participants' will to express their opinions and ideas regarding discussion topics, but it also leads to non-participation in the GAofS. Therefore, by providing necessary training to the facilitators of the GAofS, the donor community should enhance the skills and capacities of those responsible for conducting the GAofS meetings.
- When informing the public about important issues, the media play a crucial role. Therefore, the donor community should incentivize the media's increased role in democratic participation. This should take

the form of providing special grants to cover practical aspects related to the GAofS, as well as preparing targeted stories highlighting the importance of public participation in policymaking.

For local and central authorities

- Many of our interlocutors expressed concerns regarding the location of the GAofS meetings. When asked what they would like to improve about the GAofS, many pointed to infrastructural shortcomings. Both the central and local authorities should thus work to allocate funding to provide necessary infrastructure for the effective and comfortable functioning of the deliberative instrument.
- Both local and central authorities should prioritize the promotion of public participation in policymaking, including initiating legal framework revisions at the Parliament of Georgia. Although a legal framework to ensure public participation does exist, there are many loopholes including but not limited to the threshold for participation in the GAofS meetings which require careful consideration and reform to work more effectively in practice.
- In line with a decentralization strategy, the long-term vision to reform and enhance the capacity of the GAofS should be an integral component of the Government's democratization agenda. With the cooperation of CSOs and donor communities, the Government should develop a strategy aimed at enhancing the operational capacity of the GAofS.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1. INFORMATION ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Description of the research

Title of the research project: “Challenges of Deliberative Democracy in Georgia: Analysis of the General Assembly of the Settlement”

Lead researcher: Tengiz Sultanishvili; **Researcher:** Elene Panchulidze

You are invited to participate in this research project. This form includes information about the research. Please read the information carefully. Ask us if anything is unclear to you, and do not hesitate to contact us for more information. This research aims to study the challenges of deliberative democracy in Georgia, based on the analysis of a public participation instrument – the General Assembly of Settlement (GAofS). The main goal of the research is to explore and assess the effectiveness of the mechanism of deliberative democracy – the GAofS - based on the analysis of meetings held in three administrative units of Mestia municipality (Pari, Tskhumari, and Kala). As well as analyzing the reasons for citizens’ non-participation in the meetings of the GAofS. In the framework of the research, interviews will be conducted in Pari, Tskhumari and Kala with (a) citizens who had participated in the GAofS convened for the purposes of the State’s Rural Support Program (SRSP) in 2020 and (b) those who had information about the meetings but did not participate in the GAofS. Several interviews will be conducted with representatives of Mestia Municipality City Hall who take part in the convening of the GAofS, including Pari, Tskhumari and Kala communities.

Research funding

The present research is funded by Policy and Management Consulting Group (PMCG).

Procedure

If you agree to participate in the research, the researcher will ask you questions. The interview questions will be related to the functioning of the GAofS in Mestia municipality. The interview will last about 40-60 minutes.

The importance of the research to the public

Based on the findings of the present study, researchers will develop concrete policy recommendations on how to improve the mechanisms of deliberative democracy in Georgia. Therefore, the study will help decision-makers in central or local governments, as well as the representatives of donor organizations, to improve the processes of democratic participation in the country, which will eventually contribute to strengthening the process of democratization in Georgia.

Confidentiality and disclosure of information

In the framework of the research, the respondents’ rights and identities will be protected. We would like to inform you that the interview process will be recorded, and your name, surname or any other identifying information will not appear in the published research. After the research, the video/audio recordings will be deleted, however your quotes may appear in the text (without any indication of your private information). Participation in the present study is voluntary. You are not obliged to participate in the study if you do not wish to do so.

Additional information

If you have any questions, please contact us at: elene.panchulidze@coleurope.eu

You can also contact the project manager, Mr. Tengiz Sultanishvili, at: t.sultanishvili@pmcginternational.com

Thank you for reading this information.

APPENDIX 2. CONSENT FORM

Consent form

Title of the research project: "Challenges of Deliberative Democracy in Georgia: Analysis of the General Assembly of the Settlement"

Lead researcher: Tengiz Sultanishvili; **Researcher:** Elene Panchulidze

1. I certify that I have read the information about the research and before signing the consent form, I had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I realize that my participation in the study is voluntary and I can refuse to participate in it at any time, without any explanation.
3. I agree to the recording of the interview in which I participate.
4. I understand that my name will not appear in the research document.
5. I agree to participate in the study.

Respondent

Date

Signature

Respondent

Date

Signature

APPENDIX 3. RESPONDENTS OF FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS AND IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Community	Type	Gender	Age
Pari	Non-participant	Male	50
Pari	Non-participant	Male	50
Pari	Non-participant	Female	60
Pari	Non-participant	Female	36
Pari	Non-participant	Female	59
Tskhumari	Non-participant	Male	69
Tskhumari	Non-participant	Female	38
Tskhumari	Non-participant	Female	34
Tskhumari	Non-participant	Male	18
Kala	Non-participant	Female	53
Kala	Non-participant	Female	44
Pari	Participant	Female	54
Pari	Participant	Female	29
Pari	Participant	Female	18
Pari	Participant	Female	46
Pari	Participant	Female	53
Gheshderi, Pari	Participant	Female	18
Pari	Participant	Female	39
Pari	Participant	Male	36
Tskhumari	Participant	Male	51
Tskhumari	Participant	Male	43
Tskhumari	Participant	Male	40
Tskhumari	Participant	Female	47
Kala	Participant	Male	45
Kala	Participant	Female	49

Representatives of the Mayor's office

Respondent	Position	Gender
Kapiton (Kakha) Jorjoliani	Mayor of Mestia Municipality	Male
Lana Mtchedliani	Head of the Economic Department	Female



Research