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INVENTORY AND MAPPING OF THE ASSETS

*of the Akhuryan
Consolidated Community*



Capacities for Sustained
Locally-Led Development

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համայնքաին զարգացում



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List of Abbreviations

USAID	United States Agency for International Development
LLT	Local Leadership Team
NGO	Non-governmental organization
RA	Republic of Armenia
LSGB	Local Self-Government Body
CSO	Civil Society Organization
FGD	Focus Group Discussion

About the Report

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In Lieu of a Preface. Territorial and Administrative Reforms in Armenia and the Need for Participatory Governance

In 2011 the Government of Armenia adopted a concept of territorial administrative reforms in the country that assumed increasing the effectiveness and capacity of municipalities either through their consolidation or improved inter-municipal cooperation. In 2015, the territorial-administrative reform program was piloted by creating three consolidated communities - Dilijan, Tatev, and Tumanyan. In 2022, territorial and administrative reforms in Armenia resulted in enlargement of 915 local government units to 64. Yerevan and 6 other small communities retained their standalone status. Since 2012, the Government of Armenia also expressed its intention of decentralizing powers by devolving them to local governments. In 2017, the RA Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructures adopted [a roadmap for decentralization of powers](#) that foresaw the delegation of some of the central government competences to local governments.

This was suggested to be carried out in phases taking into account the communities' financial capabilities and municipal resources. On November 7th, 2023, the Concept of the Decentralization of Powers in RA was adopted by the decree of the Prime Minister of Armenia.

In its [2017-2022 program](#), following an elaborate description of the main directions of the territorial-administrative reforms and the process of the decentralization of authority, the government was planning to complete the process by the end of 2019. This, however, was not accomplished due to the Azerbaijani military operations in Nagorno Karabakh in 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic. The current [program of 2021-2026](#) briefly reinstates the government's initial intent to take measures in decentralizing authority and delegating them to local self-government bodies in some areas, including social services, healthcare, and education. The harmonized and balanced distribution of authority between central and local levels undoubtedly requires participatory decision-making through political and legislative dialogue on all levels-national, regional, and local.

As a result of the RA territorial and administrative reforms, the newly formed local self-government bodies found themselves in a new reality that can be characterized by:

- a much larger geographic coverage,
- network governance,
- the application of new toolkits for ensuring the participation of the residents in the governance of their communities (Participatory Democracy).

The impact of citizens' engagement can be observed:

- in providing services and the assessment of their outcomes,
- at the stage of service planning by making the public participation more inclusive with the help of different participatory toolkits.

With this case study, we have attempted to explore this new reality and the existing opportunities based on the example of the Akhuryan community in Shirak Province.



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General Overview of the Akhuryan Community

The Akhuryan community in Shirak Province was formed in December 2021 as a result of the reconsolidation of the Marmashen and Akhuryan consolidated communities. It is made up of 35 rural settlements: Azatan, Akhurik, Akhuryan, Akhuryan kayaran, Aygabats, Arapi, Arevik, Bayandur, Basen, Beniamin, Getk, Yerazgavors, Lernut, Kamo, Kaps, Karnut, Karmrakar, Krashen, Haykavan, Hatsik, Hatsikavan, Hovit, Hovuni, Gharibjanyan, Mayisyan, Marmashen, Mets Sarian, Shirak, Voskehask, Jajur, Jajuravan, Jrrat, Vahramaberd, Pokrashen, and Keti.

With an administrative area of 55889.73 hectares, the community had a de jure population of 44950 people in the beginning of 2022, which makes 80.43 people per square kilometer.

The altitude of its settlement ranges from 1536 to 2100 meters above sea level. There is a noticeable variation in the size of the population of individual settlements as well—from 100 people (Hatsikavan, Karmrakar) to 9100 people (Akhuryan).

The distance from the capital city is 126 km, and 3 km from the province’s administrative center (Gyumri). The distance from the international border in a straight line is 2 km.

The economy, development program, and priorities of Akhuryan community

As shown in the [5-year community development program for 2018-2022](#), agriculture takes up the larger portion of the community’s economy with the production of grain, potatoes, cabbage, and beetroot. There is a small number of entrepreneurships specializing in non-metal mining and the production of food and beverages. However, its economic potential offers a wide range of opportunities including different types of services, culture, and tourism.

The prospects for the community’s development are well elucidated in the [5-year development program for 2022-2026](#) which elaborately states the community’s top priorities for development based on its geographical, social, economical, and other characteristics. These priorities include the proportional development of community’s settlements, the improvement of the community’s financial state with increased personal income, promoting entrepreneurship and employment, developing agriculture, preserving cultural legacy, and others. Some of the top priorities set in the community development programme were the construction of roads and roadway lighting, improving the quality of the drinking water supply, revamping and expanding the existing irrigation water supply network, upgrading the agricultural machinery and the tractor fleet, protecting the environment, and boosting tourism, sports, and the cultural life in the community.



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Development Projects Implemented by International Organizations in Akhuryan

In recent years, the Akhuryan Community, like many other communities in Shirak Province, has been receiving abundant support from international organizations. The many noticeable changes in the community are the direct outcomes of the [“Local Economy and Infrastructure Development”](#) and the [“Social Investments and Local Development”](#) projects implemented by the Armenian Territorial Development Fund with a finances obtained through a World Bank loan. Both projects targeted the overhaul of the community infrastructures and the development of tourism and urban planning.

The [LEAD4Shirak](#) project financed by the EU and the Austrian Development Agency aims to improve employment rates in the community, aid the development of agriculture, empower local communities, and improve the livelihood of rural population and ensure its sustainability while protecting the environment, fostering gender equality, and empowering young people and women.

The “CapSLoc: Capacities for Sustained Locally-Led Development” project carried out by “NGO Center” Civil Society Development Non-Governmental Organization with the financial support of USAID targets the consolidated community of Akhuryan with the aim to increase the community’s capacity and sustainability for ensuring lasting development. In this regard, the purpose of the project is to address the new reality that emerged because of the territorial-administrative reforms carried out in RA and more specifically, to encourage public participation in the community’s governance. The project thus pursued two main objectives:

- enhance the capacity and commitment of the Akhuryan community and to lead its development through lifelong learning and identifying and responding to local priorities,
- increase public participation and oversight in the decision-making processes of the Akhuryan community through mobilizing the settlements and by equipping them with the required participatory decision-making and monitoring tools.

Methodology of Research

In the framework of the “CapSLoc: Capacities for Sustained Locally-Led Development” project implemented by “NGO Center” Civil Society Development Non-Governmental Organization with the financial support of USAID, Prodeform LLC conducted a study in the Akhuryan community of Shirak Province in order to identify the community’s level of preparedness for resolving the above-mentioned issues.

In designing the project methodology, the following definition for ‘capacities for sustainable locally-led development’ was taken as a starting point:

It is the community’s continuous capacity to work TOGETHER in identifying its strengths and challenges, establishing common goals, mobilizing resources, and initiating collective actions. The definition indirectly requires combining need-based approaches to community development with asset-based approaches. And while need-based approaches focus on the community’s weaknesses and incapacities expected to be fixed only by extraneous role players,



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asset-based approaches prompt locals to explore and make use of their capacity to transform their community.

One of the assets, of course, is human resources and the citizens’ participation in community development. One of the striking testimonies to the long history of ‘working together’ in Akhuryan community is that, despite the lack of statistical evidence on actual participation in governmental processes and propositions, the names of 185 active citizens is mentioned on the [Participating in the community’s development](#) platform.

With the high hopes that the findings of this study will one day help the project team facilitate the sustainable development and participatory governance capacity of Akhuryan community more efficiently, the following objectives were set out for this research:

- evaluate the progress of local self-government reforms in the community, assess the positive impact of its consolidation and the existing challenges,
- evaluate the quality and accessibility of services provided by the LSGB to the community’s residents - especially those delegated exclusively to the community,
- understand the nature of the “LSGB-public” cooperation in identifying communal problems/needs and resolving them,
- inventory the assets available for the community’s current and future development and identify the possible channels for their use.

For this research, we have applied a combined approach based on the collection and analysis of both **quantitative and qualitative data**, which allows for a more comprehensive and valid picture when juxtaposing the data retrieved from different sources.

Our **quantitative research** initially targeted the households of all the community’s settlements. However, the survey was limited to the members of the local leadership teams and local active groups with the intention to invite their attention to the community assets. The results of the 64 responses do not represent all of the community’s residents and only express the views and opinions of the active members of the community. The survey was conducted from August 30 until September 12 of 2023. The average age of the 37 male and 27 female respondents that participated in the survey was 32,5 years. Half of them had higher education, and about 63% were self-employed or waged workers. Over 2/3 of the respondents claimed they are fully proficient at writing emails and using the Internet for obtaining information. 69% said they had participated in the last LSG elections that took place in December 2021.

The **qualitative research** entailed in-depth interviews (15) with the main respondents (i.e. the formal and non-formal leaders of different settlements) and focus group discussions (10) with the community leaders/representatives, CSO representatives, civil rights activists, the representatives of different institutions in the community, organizations fulfilling LSG functions (such as the water supply company representation and the post office), and businessmen. A total of 90 people participated in the qualitative research. 75 people participated in the focus group discussions. Of these, 47 were male and 28 were female. Their average age was 38,1 and 34,9



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years respectively. In-depth interviews were conducted with 12 men (of an average age of 39,1 years) and 3 women (of an average age of 42,7 years).

To ensure maximum public participation from different settlements of the community, the settlements were grouped in the following manner:

Cluster 1. Kaps, Marmashen, Vahramaberd, Hatsik, Mayisyan, Hovuni, Pokrashen, Keti

Cluster 2. Shirak, Jajur, Jajuravan, Kamo, Lernut, Mets Sarian, Karmrakar, Krashen

Cluster 3. Akhuryan, Basen, Arevik, Hovit, Karnut, Aygabats, Jrrat

Cluster 4. Azatan, Beniamin

Cluster 5. Bayandur, Yerazgavors, Akhurik, Arapi, Voskehat, Getk, Gharibjanyan, Haykavan

2 focus group discussions and 3 in-depth interviews were conducted with each settlement cluster.

The qualitative primary data collection was carried out in parallel with desk analysis of the existing data.

Key Research Findings

As mentioned earlier, the objective of the survey was to determine the quality and the level of accessibility of the services provided by the local self-government bodies (LSGB) to the community’s residents, the public perception of the community reforms, and the respondents’ participation in the governance of the community. The electronic survey developed for this purpose comprised the following sections:

- General questions
- Quality and accessibility of public services/infrastructures
- Level of awareness on the community’s problems
- Civic engagement and participation in the decision making and administration,
- Ongoing local self-government reforms Knowledge, standpoints, and expectations
- Demographics

The responses given to the **general questions regarding the public perception of Akhuryan as a community** demonstrated that of the community’s active citizens, only 61% knew the correct year of the community’s consolidation. 88% knew the community leader’s name, and 55% knew the exact number (27) of the members in the municipal council.



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Quality and accessibility of public services/infrastructures

From the responses regarding the level of overall satisfaction with the community services, institutions, and infrastructures in different settlements, it became clear that on a scale of 1 (Not at all satisfied) to 5 (Fully satisfied), street lighting had received the highest average score (4) followed by waste disposal (3,8), veterinarian services (3,7), and the preservation of historical monuments (3,6). For 10 of the 22 services indicated in the questionnaire, the level of satisfaction was below the average score (3) (See Table 1). In almost half of the surveyed 33 settlements, infrastructures and services such as libraries and their preservation and exploitation, public transportation inside the community, green areas, parks, recreation areas, places of entertainment were non-existent.

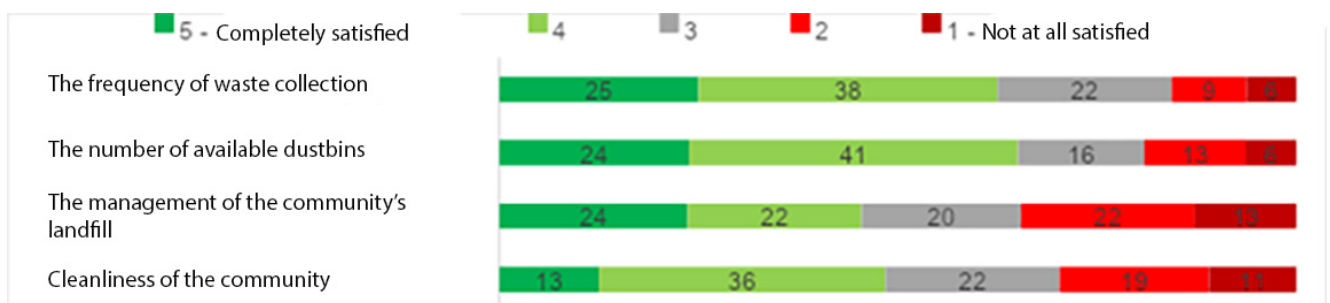
Table 1. Level of Satisfaction with Community Services and Infrastructures.

N=64	1	2	3	4	5	Average score	Not present
Street lighting in the settlement	2	7	27	20	44	4.0	7
Waste disposal, sanitary conditions	3	14	17	33	33	3.8	2
Veterinarian services	2	15	21	39	24	3.7	4
Preservation of historical monuments	9	13	21	26	30	3.7	11
Trade centers/stores	7	16	29	27	21	3.4	10
Public order and security in the community/settlement, especially at nighttime	9	16	27	24	24	3.4	11
Office for civil services	15	13	25	19	27	3.3	14
Protection and improvement of public buildings such as kindergartens, cultural centers, and ambulatory clinics	18	9	30	21	23	3.2	9
Bus stops for public transportation	8	27	24	20	20	3.2	7
Medical services in the community	10	19	29	24	19	3.2	7
Protection and cleanliness of graveyards	14	19	22	24	22	3.2	7
Maintenance and improvement of roads in your community	11	15	35	27	12	3.2	0
Availability of public transportation between your settlement and other settlements in your community	22	20	22	19	17	2.9	7
Availability of public transportation between your community and the capital city or the province's administrative center	20	22	22	22	14	2.9	7
Registry office	22	20	22	13	22	2.9	21
Preservation and restoration of roads (excluding highways) connecting your settlement with the other settlements of the community	17	29	26	20	8	2.7	1

Organization of cultural events for the public	28	21	21	14	16	2.7	9
Preservation and exploitation of libraries	24	30	20	12	14	2.6	16
Business environment and promotion of entrepreneurship	27	27	20	8	18	2.6	15
Public transportation within the settlement	40	19	13	21	8	2.4	18
Green areas, parks, recreation areas, places of entertainment	41	16	22	8	14	2.4	15
Current condition/renovation of staircases, roofs, and entrances of multi-apartment residential buildings	44	22	10	10	15	2.3	25

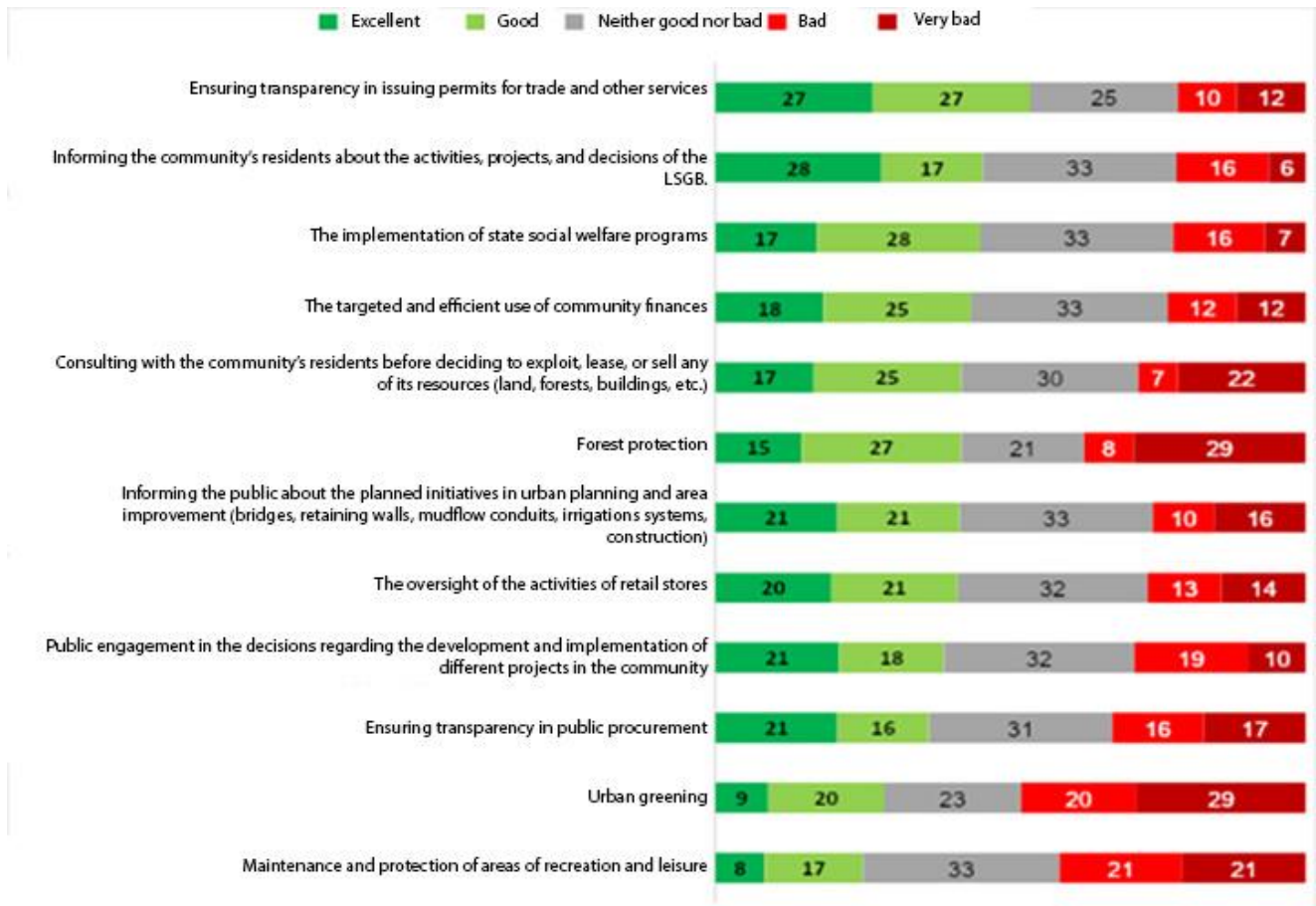
Interestingly, a slightly more comprehensive look at the services that are considered by the respondents to be relatively more satisfactory (such as waste disposal) showed that the number of available waste bins and the frequency of waste disposal cause more satisfaction among the community's residents than waste management or the cleanliness of the area (Figure 1).

Figure 1. General satisfaction with the different components of the sanitary condition in the community (% of the whole, given per component)



In evaluating some of SLGBs' main functions, the respondents gave the higher scores ('excellent' and 'good') mostly to 1. the transparency in issuing different permits for trade and other activities (54%), 2. the provision of information to the public regarding the LSGB's activities, projects, and decrees (45%), 3. the implementation of state social protection programs (45%), and 4. the targeted and efficient use of community finances (43%).

Figure 2. The evaluation of some of the functions performed by the LSGB (% of the whole, given per component)



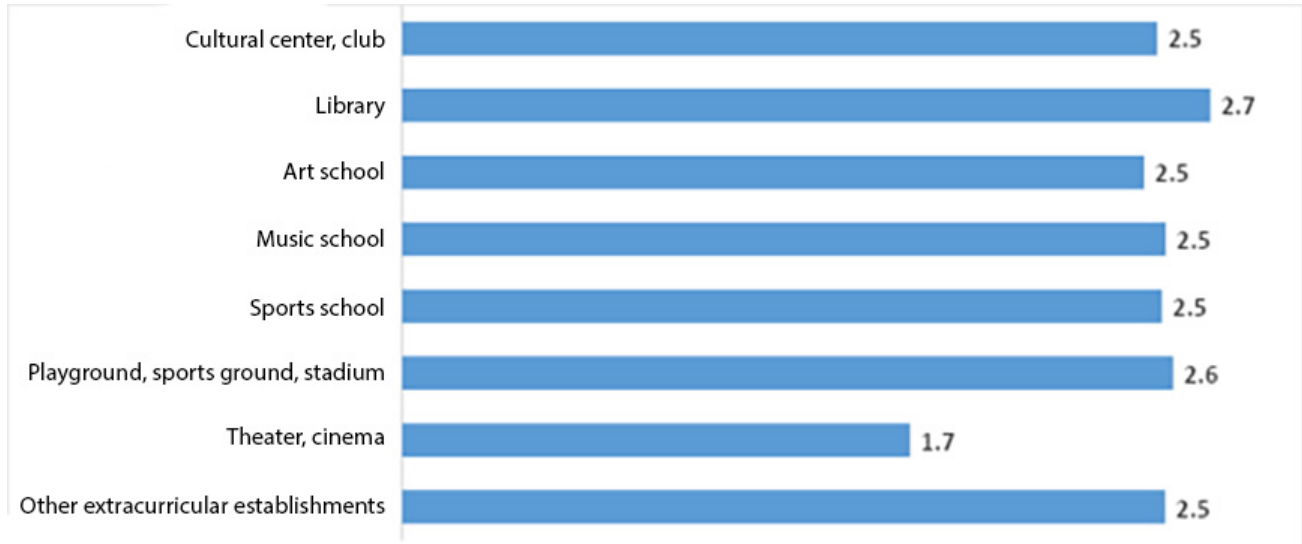
Because the responsibility of providing extracurricular education has been delegated to the communities, the respondents were also asked to evaluate the quality of extracurricular institutions and services. The responses showed that in many of the settlements, there are no cultural centers, libraries, music and fine arts schools, sports schools, sports grounds, or other similar infrastructures and that the ones in place are not operational at all. On a scale of 1 to 5, the quality of available services was assessed to be below average (Figure 3).



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Figure 3. Level of satisfaction with extracurricular institutions and services, average score

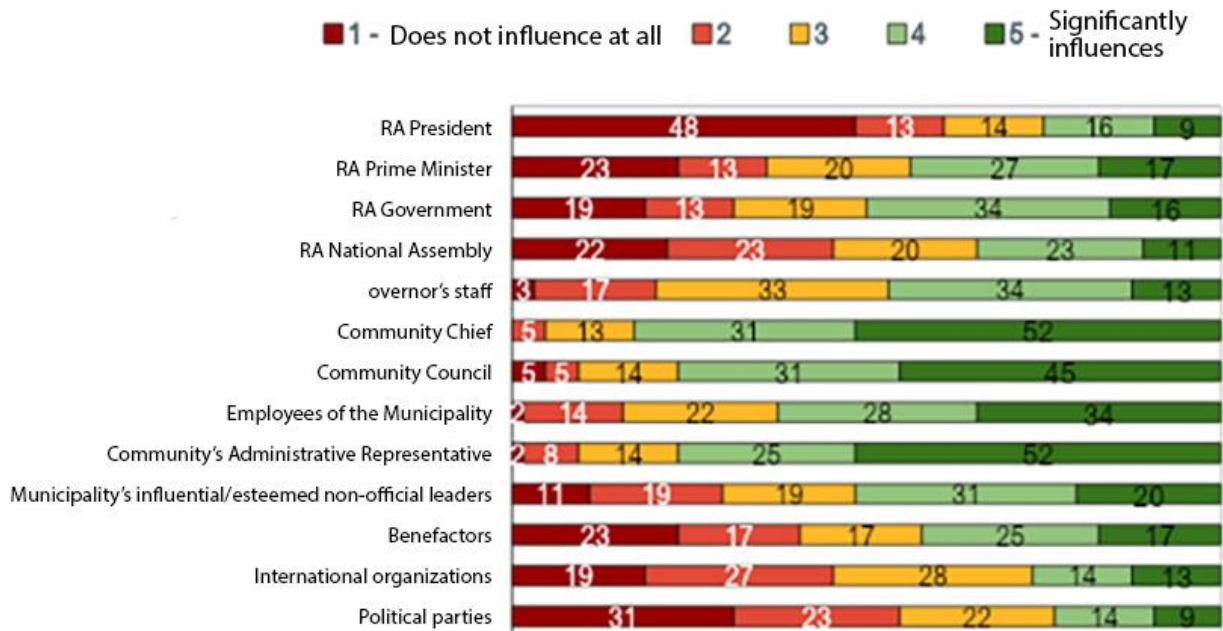


It can be inferred that the quality and accessibility of community services and infrastructures in the settlements of the Akhuryan community still require significant improvement. However, the fact that the community’s residents are appropriately informed about these processes is very commendable. For this reason, it would be interesting to see how the public, and more specifically, the community’s active citizens are informed about the different events in the life of the community.

Level of awareness on the community’s problems

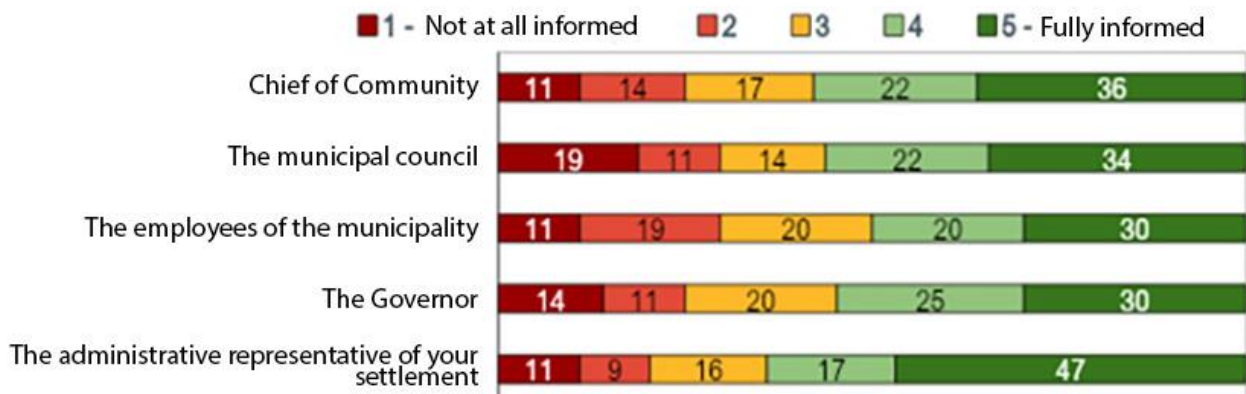
The responses to the questions in the ‘Awareness on the community’s problems’ section of the questionnaire showed that the overall public perception of the community as a decision-making territorial and administrative unit is quite positive. For the question “In general, to what extent do the following bodies/officials influence the decision-making in your community?”, the choices ‘Significantly influences’ and ‘Influences’ were selected for the 1. Chief of the Community by 83%, 2. for the municipal council and 3. the settlement’s administrative representative by 77% each, and 4. for the Municipality Staff by 63% (Figure 4).

Figure 4. In general, to what extent do the following bodies/officials influence the decision-making in your community? (% of a whole, per component)



Interestingly, only 1/3 of the respondents claimed to be fully informed about the activities of these bodies and officials. And about half of the respondents (47%) considered themselves fully informed about the activities of the settlement's administrative representative.

Figure 5. Level of awareness on the activities of the of community's management bodies/officials, %



The main sources of information about the activities and decisions of the community's LSGB, Chief, and the settlement's administrative representative are, for 22% of the respondents, the community's social network pages; for 20%, official websites; for 17%, the



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officials themselves; for 13%, the live broadcasts of the LSGB sessions; and for 12%, their neighbors and other members of the community. This shows that the overall process and channels of obtaining information regarding the life of the community is rather institutionalized. Because of this, almost a quarter (23%) of even the most active members of the community access the community’s official website and social network pages once or twice a year (11%), some- never at all (6%), or some were unaware that they existed (6%). And the people who access these platforms on a daily basis (36%) are conceivably those who are, in one way or another, involved with the LSG bodies as part of their professional duties. Over 40% of the respondents do not follow the live broadcasts of the body’s sessions or discussions (33%) or are not aware of these broadcasts at all (6%).

The **publicity and transparency** of the community’s management body’s activities were valued ‘high’ and ‘very high’ by almost half of the respondents (48%) and ‘moderate’ by 36%, whereas ‘low’ and ‘very low’ were given only by the 4%. The remaining 13% were not sure about their response.

The members of the FGD team attested that the activities of the LSGB of Akhuryan municipality have become more transparent and that the increased accountability can be attributed to the community members becoming more demanding.

They learn about the changes in the community and the council’s decisions from different social platforms and from the municipality’s website where the recordings of the council meetings, decisions, financial reports, and other material are publicly accessible.

On the other hand, the members also spoke about the influence of the council's political/partisan core on the LSGB’s decisions. In addition, some of them said that accountability should be maintained not only by the community's Chief or the administrative representative, but also the council of elders which still has a long way to go in terms of development and overcoming its inhibitions and lack of professionalism. Another important factor for community development, the members think, is the need to raise the level of literacy among the community members.

Here are some notable/representative quotes:

“It is open. We get to meet with the head of the community, and discuss different matters. Every issue is discussed.”

“When people’s requests are promptly responded to, they begin to really trust the local government. And that is how transparency and reliability are built.”

“Public hearings are very important. We, as citizens, would happily participate in them, raise problems, and suggest solutions.”

[FGD teams of the administrative representatives of Basen, Aygabats, Beniamin, Bayandur, Yerzavors, Akhurik, and Hovuni.]

“Before, nobody even knew there was a council of elders. Now, without the council’s consent, the President can’t just do whatever they want. Besides, the President reports to the council members, and they then report to the Chief so cooperation in terms of accountability is on a high level now.”



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“Our local government has its own website. They even broadcast their sessions on-line so anybody can open and watch them if they want. Although, our community members are not all that interested in what the local government is doing. People have so many worries and troubles now that hardly anyone would sit and watch an entire session or care for what decisions will be made.”

“There is one thing I want to say. According to the electoral code, the majority of the council members can be from the same party as the Chief. So, whatever decision he makes, the majority of the council members will further it.”

[LLT members, CSO representatives, and FGD groups of the activists of Kaps, Marmashen, Vahramaberd, Hatsik, Mayisyan, Hovuni, Pokrashen, and Keti.]

“The members of the council, much like many of our parliament members, don’t have their own voice. They never speak. They just vote when a majority of votes is required for a decision to be approved. Many of them don’t perform their role properly, and the settlements then suffer its consequences.”

[FGD groups of the administrative representatives of Shirak, Jajur, Jajuravan, Kamo, Lernut, Mets Sarian, Karmrakar, Krashen.]

“Before, the institution of the council of elders used to be a mere formality. I admit that. But now, despite everyone speaking about how important the council is, things have stayed the same. Like before, half of the members are the President’s allies who will approve whatever decision the President will further. And the rest of the members who represent smaller villages just have to suck it up. Most of them don’t even speak. They don’t raise the problems their villages are facing, and when they do, no one will pay heed to what they are saying.”

“The ordinary people who take an interest in such matters would hardly understand anything if they searched and found, for example, the ‘annual expenditures and revenue’ section of the website because all they will see is some random figures that don’t really tell much. Typing a few random numbers is very easy. From a quantitative perspective, everything looks perfect. The important thing is how well things really are qualitatively.”

[LLT members, CSO representatives, and FGD groups of the community members of Shirak, Jajur, Jajuravan, Kamo, Lernut, Mets Sarian, Karmrakar, and Krashen.]

“These things didn't exist before. But now, everything seems to be a little too pretentious. They organize an ordinary discussion and then call it a “public hearing”. They take more photos than hold honest discussions with the residents. ... So under ‘accountability’, they understand showing off every little thing they do to make the impression that they’re doing something of worth. But the real question is, has any of that brought any real change in the life of the villager or the community?”

[LLT members, CSO representatives, and FGD groups of the community members of Akhuryan, Basen, Arevik, Hovit, Karnut, Aygabats, and Jjarat.]



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Civic engagement and participation in the decision-making and administration

A major challenge for the community’s development is the lack of public participation in the decision-making processes—even with all the requirements set by the law.

In response to the question “What is the degree of your involvement in the community life?”, 1/3 of the members of the Local Leadership Teams claimed to be ‘very involved’. The rest thought they were ‘partially involved’. (Figure 6)

Figure 6. The degree of the LLT’s engagement in the community life



However, from the responses regarding the quality of public participation in the community’s decision-making processes showed that even for 42% of the LLT members, such participation was limited to giving suggestions during meetings with the LSGB or the Chief of Community and making decisions together with the citizens, i.e. *vertically commanded initiatives*. It is interesting that passive participation (23%) and/or being unaware of the activities of the council or the municipality (20%) are indicative of almost the same number of respondents. Only about 1 in 10 respondents reported of fully active participation in the life of the community that includes undertaking initiatives and resolving problems¹. (Figure 7)

¹ More detailed information on the types/categories of participation in the decision-making processes in the community are available in Appendix 1.



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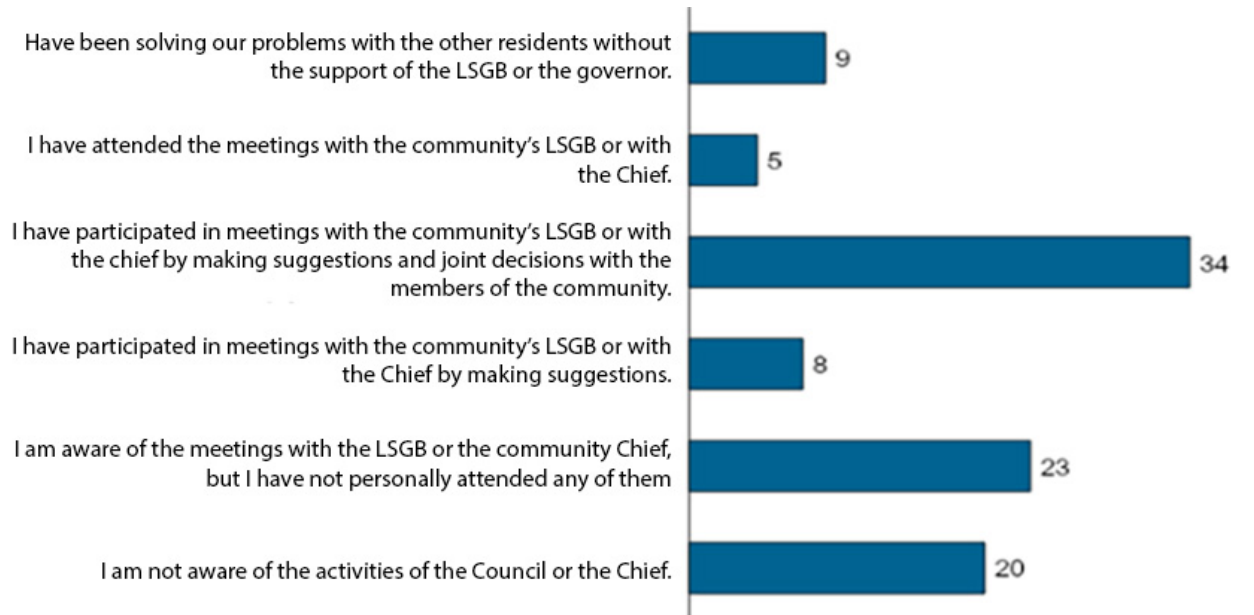
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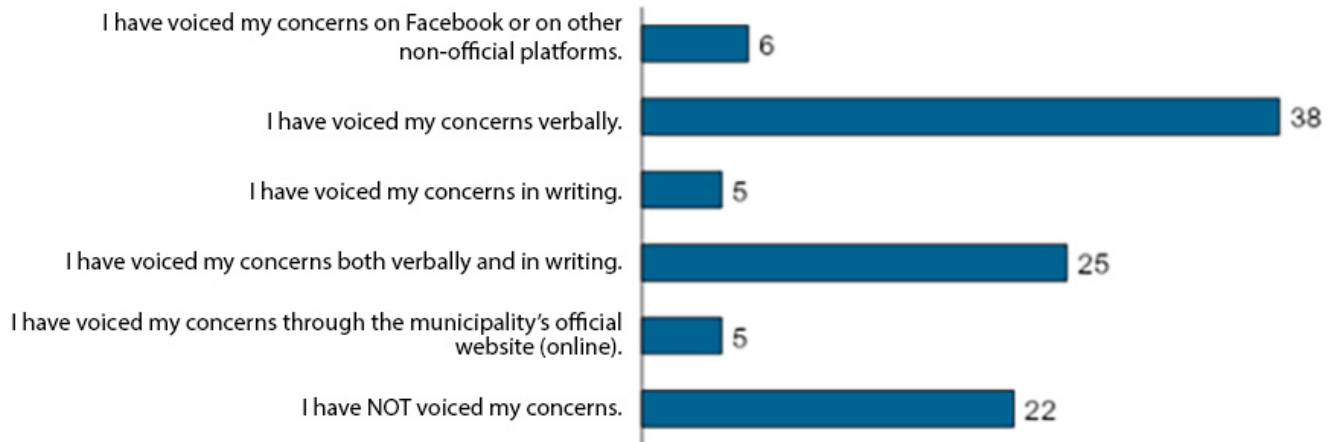
Figure 7. Which of the following best describes your participation in the decision-making processes of your community? (%)



One of the ways the residents can participate in the decision-making processes is voicing and discussing the existing problems. Even though 59% of the respondents claim that it is 'very easy' (31%) and/or 'easy' (28%) to voice their concerns or problems before the community leadership, a large portion of them has either not voiced them at all (22%) or has voiced them verbally (38%) (Figure 8).

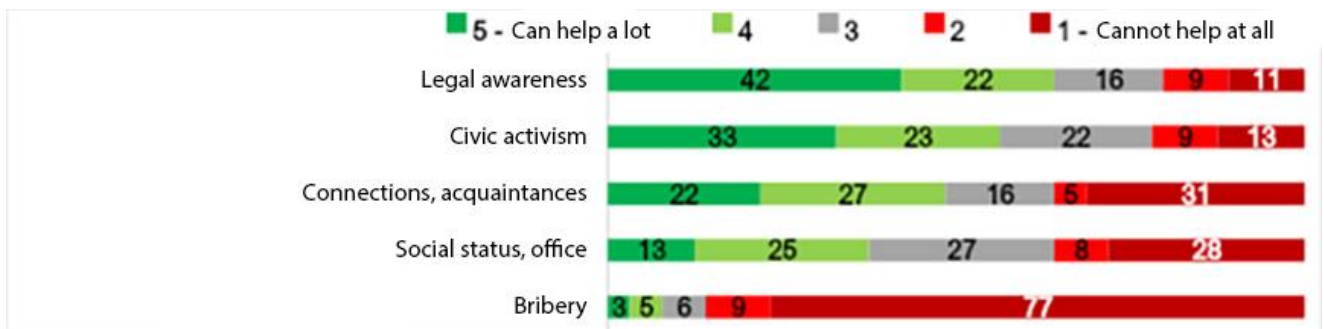
It should be noted that the scale of the types/categories of participation in the community's decision-making processes has been suggested to the participants of the FGDs and in-depths interviews. The average score they (83 participants) gave for Akhuryan community was 4,8 (on a 1-8 scale). This already presumes a transition from the 'Getting informed' type to the 'Getting informed and holding discussions' type which is, by itself, the lowest type of actual participation.

Figure 8. Have you ever voiced concerns before the community leadership that is in its power to resolve?



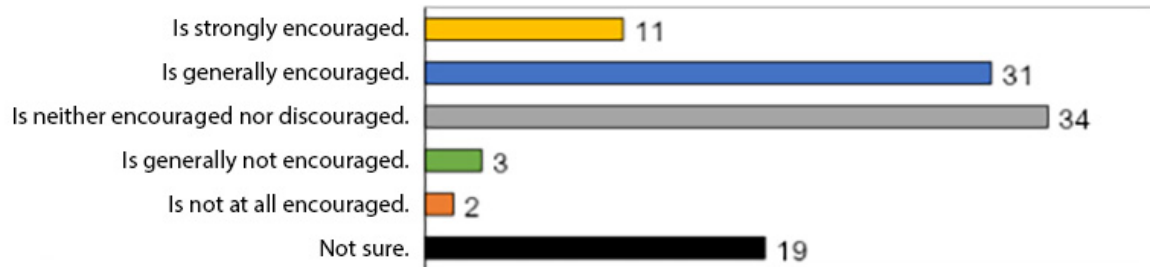
It is interesting that legal awareness and civic activism are the two most impactful factors that, according to the respondents, affect the resolution of community's problems through the LSGB. On the other hand, personal connections, acquaintances, and the social status and position of the petitioner play no less of a role. Fortunately, the presence of bribery as a means of furthering one's cause is almost insubstantial.

Figure 9. To what extent can the following factors help the residents of your community resolve their problems through the LSGB? (% per component)



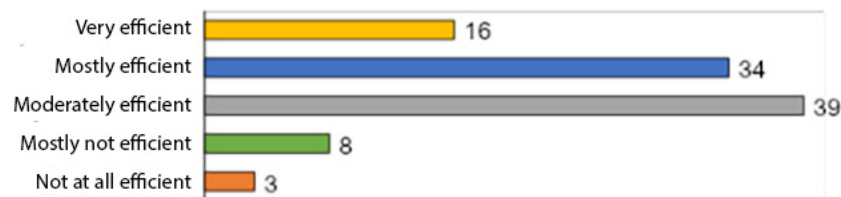
As to how much the LSGB encourages the residents to attend the council's sessions, only 42% of the respondents thought it was 'often' and 'most of the time' (Figure 10).

Figure 10. To what extent does the LSGB encourage public participation in the the council’s sessions? (%)



On the other hand, half of the respondents were certain that the sessions of the Akhuryan community council are mostly and/or very efficient when it comes to the planning and allocation of the community’s budget and discussing programs.

Figure 11. How efficient are the sessions of your community council in terms of budget planning, budget allocation, and discussing programs? (%):



It can be inferred from the different manifestations of civic activism and the participation of Akuryan’s active population in decision-making that these processes are going to be integral components of the community’s future development as a sustainable territorial unit.

This is evidenced by the [the findings of the qualitative research](#).

As far as public participation in community life is concerned, the participants of the qualitative research reported noticeable progress. According to them:

- more people now attend the public hearings and public discussions with the LSGB representatives. They voice their views and opinions regarding different problems and do their best to contribute to solving their community’s problems,
- public hearings and discussions in **settlements** now happen more frequently,
- people have become more demanding, more curious, and interested in the processes taking place in the community and their objectives and outcomes.
- However, people still often choose to voice their concerns and suggestions before the administrative representative, who, they believe, has limited authority.
- Participation, despite the progress, is yet to be improved—especially when it comes to social unity so essential for resolving more outstanding issues in the community.



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It is interesting that administrative representatives consider performing their duties to be, in and by itself, public participation.

Here are some notable/representative quotes:

“Everybody now attends the sessions and discussions when they can. People are more interested now than before ... Because they have started to take ownership of their lives, their village, and their community. This is because they now realize that if they don’t, they will ultimately lose what they have created over many years of hard work.”

“Those who never used to take an interest in the life of the community still don’t. But the ones that do voice their opinions more vehemently now—something that used to be impossible because of certain factors. People have become more active and enthusiastic about their lives in the village or its problems.”

“I think public participation depends a lot on the municipality’s attitude and performance. If the municipality encourages the citizens, they will gladly participate and voice their opinions. But if they disregard the public, they will be disappointed and public hearings and discussions won’t matter any more.”

[LLT members, CSO representatives, and FGD groups of the community members of Akhuryan, Basen, Arevik, Hovit, Karnut, Aygabats, and Jrrat.]

“Times have changed, and people now want to be informed about everything, play a part in their community’s life, participate and express their subjective opinion.”

“As far as people are concerned, those who are interested will surely participate in the decision-making. And those who don’t, they haven’t before and will not start now. I think community enlargement won’t change much here.”

[FGD group of administrative representatives, businessmen, and cultural figures of Vahramaberd, Haykavan, and Voskehask.]

“The citizens personally approach the administrative representative and demand solutions for their problems. We participate in public discussions 4 to 5 times a year ... We discussed the program during one of those hearings.”

“I think in this respect, the impact that the Chief of community can have on the public is very important. It is like an unspoken rule, understanding the citizen. Management from outside really makes solving community problems much harder. The municipality, of course, solved the problem in the end, but it was very hard.”

[FGD group of the civic activists of Azatan and Beniamin.]

“At Akhuryan municipality, we, as administrative representatives, represent the interests of our settlement, and correspondingly the representatives of the municipality among the residents of the settlement. I think this is what defines the level of our participation.”



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[FGD group of the administrative representatives and businessmen of Akhuryan, Arap, Azatan, Arevik, and Beniamin.]

“Whether we want it or not is irrelevant... Well, actually, we do whatever we do for our villages with much enthusiasm. We are already a small part of our villages and are therefore fully engaged in the life of the community. We put community’s affairs before our own.”

[FGD team of the administrative representatives of Kaps, Marmashen, Vahramaberd, Hatsik, Mayisyan, Hovuni, Pokrashen, and Ketii.]

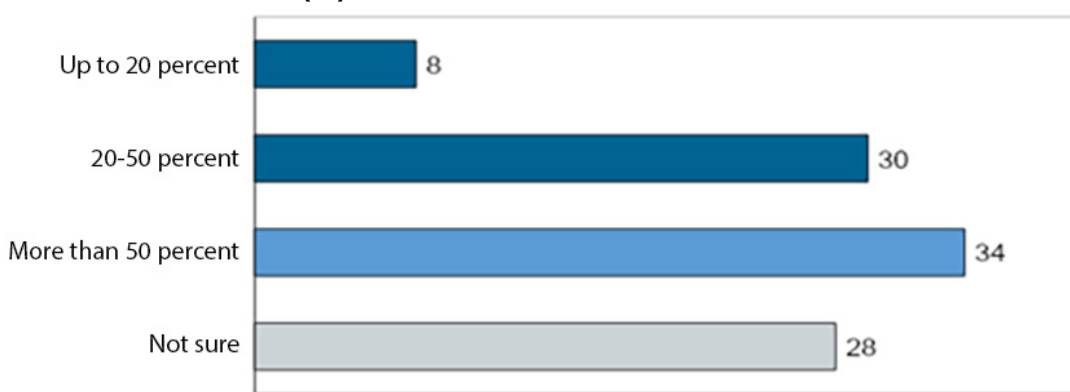
Present LSG reforms: knowledge, perspectives, and expectations

The objective of the **consolidation process** is to increase the efficiency of the administrative capacity of local self-governments, reduce administrative costs, increase the productivity of **community budgets**, strengthen the capacity of small settlements, and facilitate the decentralization of the delivery of services.

In this respect, it would be interesting to know how, in the eyes of the respondents, the consolidation process has facilitated the development of their communities. More than half of the respondents regarded the change as ‘Very positive’ and ‘Positive’, while 23% claimed they had not observed any changes at all. And only 7% considered the impacts of consolidation to have been negative and/or extremely negative. 1 in every 6 people were unsure in their response.

Community budget: only 36% of the respondents claimed to know the size of the community’s budget for the current year, and 23% were not sure. Only 60% of the respondents with a positive response had selected the correct answer of ‘more than 2 billion AMD’². Furthermore, to the question regarding which part of the community’s revenue budget the respondents thought was generated from taxes and duties, 28% were not sure, every 3-rd person thought it was ‘more than 50%’, and 30% chose ‘20-50%’ (Figure 12).

Figure 12. To your knowledge, how many percent of the community’s budget is generated from taxes and duties? (%)



² The adjusted revenue plan of Akhuryan consolidated community for 2023 is about [3,2 billion AMD](#), and for expenditures—about [4,1 billion AMD](#).



In fact, 78% of the revenues of the community budget for the current year (2023) is generated from subsidies received from the state budget in the way of financial equalization and subventions–targeted allotments provided for the financing of capital expenditures (1,5 billion and 1 billion AMD respectively). So, the share of the community’s income is only 22%.

It is interesting also that only one in every four respondents were familiar with the community chief’s last annual report.

With an open question, we attempted to find out what the three main economic, social, educational, and cultural problems are that the respondents would resolve first if they were managing the municipal resources. The coding and categorization of the answers showed that the respondent’s number 1 priority is cultural centers, libraries, and extracurricular centers (41%). The second priority is road construction and paving, and third is public events and places of entertainment (22% each) (See Table 2).

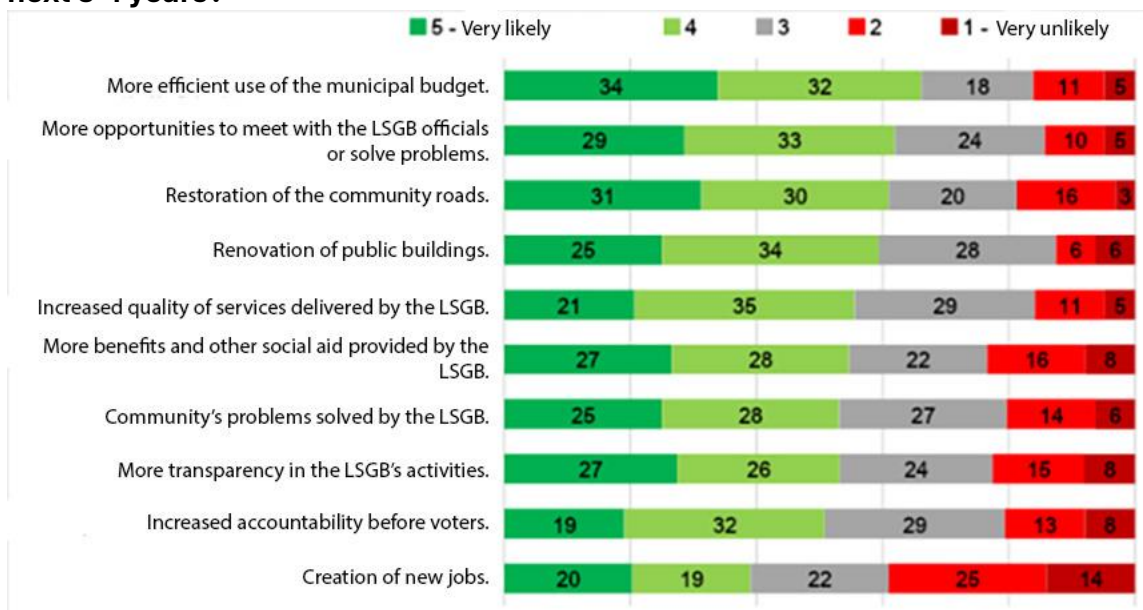
Table 2. What are the three most urgent problems that you would solve if you were in a position to make decisions and manage all of the community’s municipal resources?

Cultural center, library, center extracurricular activities	26	41%
Roads, road paving	14	22%
Public events/places of entertainment	14	22%
Jobs	11	17%
Water pipelines, reservoirs, drinking water and irrigation	10	16%
Kindergarten	10	16%
Sports ground, sports school, arena, playground	9	14%
Employment centers, entrepreneurship	8	13%
Agricultural machinery, other related resources	7	11%
Gas supply	7	11%
Transportation	5	8%
School	5	8%
Community involvement, public order	4	6%
Greening	4	6%
Waste disposal	3	5%
Social support	3	5%
Tourism development	3	5%
Engaging young people in the life of the community	3	5%
Bus stops	2	3%
Center for research and program implementation	2	3%
Elimination of trailer houses and cabins	1	2%
Don't know	3	5%

Among the **existing** resources available for solving these problems, non-functional or underutilized educational and cultural facilities, land, mineral, and water resources, and, of course, human resources were mentioned most by the respondents. As for resources that **are required but not available**, the respondents commonly cited economic and more specifically, financial resources.

Subsequently, the members of Akhuryan’s LLT were asked about **what changes they think consolidation will bring** in the next 3-4 years. Figure 13 clearly demonstrates some optimistic sentiments among the respondents. For example, 66% find the *more efficient use of the community budget in the next 3-4* to be ‘very likely’ and ‘likely’. 62% foresaw the same degree of likelihood for *more opportunities of meeting with the leadership and solving problems*, 61% for *restored community roads*, and 59% for *the renovation of public buildings*. The expectations seem to be a lot more modest when it comes to *increased accountability before voters* (41%) and the *creation of new jobs* (39%).

Figure 13. How likely do you think consolidation will allow to solve these problems in the next 3-4 years?



The results of the qualitative research regarding **the consolidation of the communities** largely shows that:

- the outcomes of the consolidation process are no longer contested and are perceived as a historical fact or a fact of life, although “the reasons why the process of consolidation had to be carried out so speedily were not justified by any state institution and the communities really had no choice.”
- the consolidation has had a positive effect on the range and quality (although not proportionally) on different services (e.g. waste management) and the development of infrastructures (e.g. road construction, street lighting in the settlements, irrigation networks).
- its negative impact, however, is observable in smaller settlements that are not proportionally represented in the council of elders.
- another problem that consolidation has caused is the abrupt reduction of the authority of administrative representatives and the absence of small financial means they can manage independently.



Here are some notable opinions:

“... Before and after the consolidation, some of the roads in the settlement were surfaced and the irrigation network underwent a major overhaul. It was due to the consolidation that in 2020, we were able to do some minor construction work on our own and still owe a debt to the construction company. Consolidation allowed us to reify equitable programs.”
[FGD team of the administrative representatives of Basen, Aygabats, Beniamin, Bayandur, Yerazgavors, Akhurik, and Hovuni.]

“If we take a more thorough look at the consolidation, view the before and the after, we will see that changes have indeed been many...” Of course, they did a pilot run first, but I think the consolidation was going to happen regardless of the results of the pilot. Whether or not it was timely is another question. There were a lot of problems that couldn't be resolved then—especially in smaller villages—that cannot be resolved now.”

“... For example, in our village, street lighting has been installed only in the streets preferred by the the Chief of community and that was it. What about the rest of the streets? I guess the residents of those streets will just have to stand by and hope for better luck.”
[LLT members, CSO representatives, and FGD groups of the activists of Kaps, Marmashen, Vahramaberd, Hatsik, Mayisyan, Hovuni, Pokrashen, and Ketj.]

“... Consolidation was a positive thing. But one of its negative effects was that small-scale initiatives in small villages are no longer financed—for example, holidays like June 1st, September 1st, teacher's day, and so on. Finances are scarce when it comes to such matters, which, I think, is one of the negative outcomes of the consolidation process. Back in the day, they used to allocate finances for such holidays, but not anymore. And people don't accept that and blame it on us, the administrative representatives. Perhaps in the future the situation will change, but at least smaller settlements benefit from large-scale projects now.”
[FGD groups of the administrative representatives of Akhuryan, Basen, Arevik, Hovit, Karnut, Aygabats, and Jrarat.]

“The bad thing is that the administrative representative is not entitled to making decisions unilaterally. This means that every little step or idea must be coordinated with the Chief of community. For example, if somebody in the settlement has passed away and the family members need financial assistance, the administrative representative has to refer to the Chief of community to be able to withdraw 50 thousand drams from the local budget. And even if the request is approved, the family of the deceased will receive the money by the person's 40th-day requiem at the earliest. This is a serious issue. Sometimes, they should let us make decisions independently.”
[FGD groups of the administrative representatives of Shirak, Jajur, Jajuravan, Kamo, Lernut, Mets Sarian, Karmrakar, and Krashen.]

“We have proper dustbins in our village, but waste disposal is not effectively conducted. In Akhuryan, for instance, the same process is performed without a hitch—unlike the smaller villages where waste disposal is not so efficiently carried out. The collection vehicle won't come as often, and the residents will keep throwing away their garbage until



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the dustbins are pouring over. And then stray cats and dogs carry the garbage all over the area. Imagine the mess!”

[LLT members, CSO representatives, and FGD groups of the community members of Akhuryan, Basen, Arevik, Hovit, Karnut, Aygabats, and Jrrarat.]

The participants of all focus group discussions spoke rather highly of the different projects brought to the community both through the subsidies allotted to the communities and the grants provided by donors. From the latter category, EAD4SHIRAK was perhaps the most cited project. It has provided many of the community’s residents with financing for entrepreneurship and business (production of dried fruits, greenhouse farming and other forms of agriculture).

From this and other questions related to community development and finances it became clear that even the LLT members are not fully aware of the sources and volumes of assets necessary for the development of the community and that non-financial resources such as human, intangible, and natural resources are extremely important for the generation thereof.

Addendum. The need for training courses developing asset-based approaches.

In order to foster public participation in community development and strengthen the knowledge and skills necessary to identify and utilize municipal assets, CapsLoc will hold a series of training courses in the Akhuryan Municipality. With the qualitative research, 10 topics were proposed to the members of the FGD teams and the participants of personal interviews, of which they were asked to choose the 3 they found to be more important.

The results of the vote of the 75 FGD members are presented in the chart below.

Table. Training course topics preferred by the members of the FGD teams.

Topic of training course	Number of notes*
Developing a community development strategy	39
Fund raising	31
Community needs inventory	29
Communication skills and platforms	21
Open and transparent management of public property	15
Human-centered design	15
Establishing and managing social entrepreneurships	14
Leadership	11
Participation capacity, its evaluation	2
Community development monitoring (e.g. monitoring of the budget)	1

* Total number of notes: 178

In the case of in-depth interviews, the respondents were encouraged to suggest topics they are most interested in. The majority of suggested topics were related to the development of agriculture, tourism, IT, and business (13 responses in total). Cooperation and participation were mentioned 6 times, the engagement of women and the youth- 3 times, soft skills and initiative- 2 times, and community development and resources- 2 times.



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Appendix 1. Typology of Public Participation in the Community’s Decision-Making.

Fake participation	
Initiatives come entirely from “above”. The citizens are consulted with, their suggestions are collected and integrated, but they are not further informed about the final decision. They usually have no idea how their ideas have been used. (Manipulation)	1
Projects and ideas are presented to the citizens without consulting with them first or taking into consideration their views and opinions. (Decoration)	2
The more or less influential members of the community are invited to ‘take part’ in the activities of the LSGB, or to form consultative bodies or committees that either approve decisions ‘provided’ to them by the initiator, or ones that are of no use or not really in the interest of many of the community’s members. Furthermore, it is not known as to how they have been elected or who they represent. (Imitation)	3
The initiator is the LSGB. The citizens are informed about the current processes and their objectives. Upon understanding the nature of the decision/project, the citizens, for example, voluntarily implement those decisions, projects, or plans. (Information)	4
Levels of Participation	
The citizens are first informed about the LSGB’s initiatives, activities and their objectives and then given the opportunity to participate in the decision-making and the planned activities with the right of consultative (advisory) vote. They (e.g. the advisors to the members of the council) then develop their suggestions and ideas and present them to the local government, which can either adopt them or take them into consideration. (Information and consultation)	5
The initiator is the LSGB. The citizens are informed about the current processes and their objectives. The citizens have the right to vote and participate in the planning of activities and the decision-making. (Joint decision-making)	6
The initiative comes entirely from the citizens who predefine the processes and their objectives. The citizens themselves implement their own initiatives with the the support of the municipality and the funds raised independently. (Independence)	7
The initiative comes entirely from the citizens who define the planned processes and their objectives. When necessary, they invite LSGB representatives to be part of the decision-making processes. The decisions are made jointly, which are then lobbied for LSG or municipal resources. (Cooperation)	8



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Appendix 2. Research Tools

Questionnaire of the survey conducted among the LLT members in Akhuryan Municipality.	https://docs.google.com/forms/d/13Zg_opq6X_Wz1cMtXE2IP7h-FxiRkjEGNZskSUcChOY/edit
FGD guide	 Microsoft Word 97 - 2003 Document
In-depth interview guide	 Microsoft Word 97 - 2003 Document
Community asset mapping tool	 Asset Mapping Tool_template.xlsx