



Municipality of Gyumri
Municipality of Vanadzor

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Call for Expression of Interest

Dear Co-Chairs,

On behalf of the Jurisdictions and CSO communities of Gyumri and Vanadzor, two largest municipalities of Armenia, we write to join the Local-OGP community. Sufficient time our two Jurisdictions have made significant efforts to establish democratic, fair, and participatory mechanisms at the Local level. Indeed, these reforms couldn't be achieved without the direct participation of citizens, the NGO community, and other stakeholders.

Armenia's regionalism is born on the ruins of Soviet's centralized economy. Majority of urban communities, built around a dominant industry, were thrown into a non-gravity environment, when the Soviet economy collapsed. Newly independent Republic had to strive for a smart decentralization reform, designing new models of local autonomy and new frameworks for resource acquisition and distribution on local level. In 2002 Armenia ratified the European Charter of Local-Self Governance and in 2013 the Additional Protocol to Charter on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority. Respective changes have also been introduced in the RA law on Local Self-Governance to enable and promote citizen participation in decision making at local level.

Both cities are members of European sister city movement with active partnerships at all levels with forefront European Cities.

Both cities are also active contributors to the European Covenant of Mayors, being environmental hotspots for growing mining and industrial capacities in the region.

Both cities are members of the Union of Communities of Armenia - a national network/platform to share and promote good governance principles among local self-governance units. As part of the decentralization reform of the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure, the cities have advanced participatory budgeting processes and installed live broadcast of community council meetings.

Accountability and direct democracy mechanisms have become key enabler for decentralization reform in Armenia. Deprived of centrifugal economic force, Armenia's young self-government had to rely on human capacity and talent. This is why, accountability and service provision efficiency rankings have been quite high on municipal level, even compared with the similar record on national level.

OGP have always been on the radar of Armenian municipalities. Local CSOs have been an integral part of the national OGP Task Forces. Municipal open governance solutions have broken the ceiling in the regional OGP competition in 2016 and brought the Asia-Pacific Award for Open Governance for the Smart Municipality tool, an e-platform for one-stop shop services on subnational level.

In its strive to officially engage in Subnational OGP network, the Government of Armenia, backed up with the support of UNDP partners, have carried a unique open governance readiness assessment among key municipalities in 2018. The tool, which is currently developed into a Barometer of open governance, was tested on the largest municipalities to measure the level of management commitment, maturity of civil society, presence of economic capacities, human talent and citizen participation record. As a result, two largest non-capital urban communities of Armenia, Gyumri and Vanadzor, have teamed up into an Urban Tandem to apply for OGP subnational membership. The two communities are geographically, historically and socially interlinked and a Tandem application for the OGP partnership may give them a chance to harmonize and advance the public service provision and citizen engagement ecosystem in the northern region of Armenia.

Both cities nominated for OGP subnational run, have been active contributors to Armenia's democratic record. Having a vibrant youth community, but also one of the most developed industrial capacities in Armenia, the cities have provided a cadre of civic activists, professionals and artists to the country.

Collaborative policy design has become the flagship action of both cities. Policies in environmental protection, waste management, public utility provision, as well as processes on basic service provision have been co-design and co-implemented by the municipal authorities and local civil society organizations.

In 2019, Vanadzor was recognized as the Youth Capital of Armenia, through a co-nomination of the Municipality and the Civil Society of the city, taking the flag from Gyumri, the previous Youth Capital of the country. Vanadzor Municipality was also the first in Armenia to provide grants to CSOs back in 2005 through a structured grant competition mechanism as part of the social partnership framework. This process was one of the best examples of CSO-local government collaboration, when a grant competition and management package was developed jointly with the local civil society.

The following are some of the major achievements in platform approach benchmarked by both municipalities:

- Organization of regular public hearings (townhalls) allowing citizen participation in decision making while designing the 5-year development programmes, municipal budgets, annual work plans, subventions, etc.
- Online gateway for citizen e-participation [via official websites](#)
- Ensured transparency of information on the official websites with regular publication of drafts of Councils' and Mayors' decisions, and allowing citizens to provide feedback on the drafts, service delivery procedures and fees, tax liabilities, reports, municipal property management, etc.
- Online submission of applications, request and complaints and tracking the status

- Online reporting of issues in the municipality
- Online broadcasting of council meeting and allowing citizens to submit questions and feedback to the council members during the meeting.
- Citizen Offices established in municipalities allowing for service provision to citizens in accordance with one-stop-shop approach, thus improving accessibility, transparency and quality of service delivery by the municipality.

Being one of the first in the country to start livestream the community council meetings, both cities have benchmarked the participation of CSOs and created a new framework of monitoring. Only five years later, under the immediate impact and advocacy of this process, the broadcasting of City Council meetings were required by local government law.

In 2019, CSOs in Vanadzor and Gyumri initiated the development of a Local Youth Policy. Representatives of municipalities, youth and other interested parties were actively involved in the process.

The following policy areas have been depicting to demonstrate joint interest of the Jurisdictions: 1. Direct democracy measures in municipal service provision; 2. Participatory policy design and implementation; 3. Outsourced and subsidized municipal programs (grants) to civil society organizations; 4. Monitoring of budget expenditures and progress; 5. Environment and ecosystem sustainability; 6. Labor rights and access to decent employment; 7. Access and quality of basic services towards a smarter city; 8. Effective management and distribution of resources; 10. Urban development and area management.

Our both Communities have a high track record in **civil society** engagement and are recognized leaders in the country for the level of civic capacity. Some of the strongest human rights and democracy institutions have headquarters in the Tandem Area, including pioneers of Armenian democracy as Andrey Sakharov Center for Human Rights (Gyumri), NGO Center (an incubator for NGOs) and Helsinki Citizen's Assembly of Vanadzor.

These civil society organizations have been actively involved in municipal life not only through watchdogging and spotlighting of challenges, but also have been engaged as elected community council members in both communities. A task force including representatives from the Government, the municipalities, civil society and international organizations was convened to support the development and implementation of municipal action plans.

The region is also known for its growing youth cadre of civic activists, who are helping to increase digital literacy and peer-to-peer support frameworks in both cities.

With a civic effort, backed up with the vibrant ICT community of the region, an CityBugs online platform for citizen reporting have been [designed and installed](#) in both cities, allowing for identification of city issues (bugs) by residents and ensuring tracking of the implementation through links with the local municipalities.

OGP membership is a "legitimization" of the civic activism of this region and a framework for institutionalized engagement of the civil society and citizenry.

The subnational OGP framework will give the Jurisdictions an opportunity to strategize open governance practices in the key suggested areas of intervention and to commit financial and institutional resources for the implementation of transformative reforms.

OGP engagement is also an opportunity to partner globally and horizontally with other forward-looking municipalities and to peer-learn on modern practices and tools of citizen engagement.

With this, we strive for the membership of OGP Subnational network to advance and sustain our progress towards open and participatory governance on local level and to roll out our best practices towards other municipalities in Armenia.

Best regards.

Mamikon Aslanyan
Mayor of Vanadzor City



Samvel Balasanyan
Mayor of Gyumri City

