Final Learning Exercise Summary Report

Akhaltsikhe, Gerogia Action Plan 2021

Dea Tsartsidze, Consultant at USAID Local Governance Program

Section 1. Snapshot of Akhaltsikhe: What lies within it?

Akhaltsikhe Municipality, nestled in Georgia's southwestern landscape, is rich in history and culture. Its name, "Newcastle," signifies its importance to the local community. With a population of approximately 39,000, Akhaltsikhe heavily depends on tourism to fuel its economy. The restored Rabati Castle, dating back to the 9th century, stands as one of the major attractions drawing visitors interested in exploring its history, alongside other historical sites. Additionally, agriculture plays a significant role in Akhaltsikhe's economy, with mostly family farms catering to household needs and selling surplus produce for income. Livestock farming, particularly dairy and meat production, benefits from the ample pastureland in the region, making the municipality one of the leading producers in the country.

Akhaltsikhe boasts a diverse population, including marginalized communities such as a mix of Georgian and Armenian ethnic minority groups. Limited integration can occur due to several factors, with one of the primary reasons being limited proficiency in the Georgian language.

Looking at the municipality's progress through the Open Government lens, there's been a noticeable shift in transformation efforts, particularly since around 2014. During this period, considerable strides have been taken to embrace open government principles, largely thanks to the support of development partners. These entities in particular USAID have played a crucial role in providing resources and expertise to advance the municipality's commitment to transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement. In 2016, Akhaltsikhe embarked on its journey with the Open Government Partnership (OGP) process, marking a pivotal moment in its dedication to openness and citizen participation. This kickstarted a

concerted effort to introduce and participate in various initiatives aimed at promoting transparency and civic involvement. For example, strengthening transparency and integrity standards, the implementation of e-participation platforms including for budget planning, and the formulation of open data action plans were significant milestones aimed at enhancing accountability, citizen engagement, and accessibility to government information as part of the OGP Georgian National Action Plan, eventually leading to the municipality becoming a Member of the OGP cohort in 2020.

Despite the progress made and the resources available, there's still room for growth in fully realizing the potential of open government principles within Akhaltsikhe. While efforts such as the implementation of the OGP Local 2021-2022 action plan have been undertaken, there's a need to ensure better integration of open government practices across the municipality to fully leverage the results of the progress made throughout this process so far. This highlights the ongoing journey towards embracing Open Government principles fully and emphasizes the continued commitment and collaboration required from all stakeholders involved.

Section 2. Action Plan Co-creation Process

2.1 Co-creation process review

The co-creation process in Akhaltsikhe, Georgia, reveals both strengths and weaknesses. One notable strength is the establishment of the *Citizen Advisory Council*, meeting the requirement for a forum. With its diverse representation from various sectors, the council holds promise for inclusivity and multi-stakeholder engagement, in line with OGP guidelines. Additionally, the involvement of the local CSO - Samtskhe-Javakheti Development Center as a partner organization suggests a valuable collaboration experience with civil society.

However, despite these positive aspects, several weaknesses and challenges emerge throughout the co-creation process. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the regularity of engagements, posing a challenge to effective co-creation by altering traditional meeting formats. This highlights the importance of adaptability and robust virtual communication channels to ensure continuous stakeholder involvement during crises. Moreover, questions arise regarding the depth of engagement and the extent to which stakeholder inputs were considered in decision-making processes despite the existence of the Citizen Advisory Council fulfilling the forum requirement. It is crucial to highlight gaps in proactive communication and accountability with wider communities. Uncertainty surrounds the accessibility of information regarding the co-creation process, with insufficient evidence of advanced information provision to stakeholders and limited feedback mechanisms for citizen inputs. This suggests a need for enhanced efforts in publicizing OGP-related activities and ensuring meaningful participation avenues for all interested parties.

Despite these challenges, notable good practices are identified, particularly in the dialogue and shared ownership between government and non-governmental stakeholders. For instance, the involvement of the Samtskhe-Javakheti Development Center, a local civil society organization, as a key stakeholder in the co-creation process demonstrates a

commitment to fostering collaboration between the government and civil society. The Samtskhe-Javakheti Development Center actively participated in meetings and discussions with the Akhaltsikhe Municipality, contributing to the development of the action plan and promoting dialogue and shared ownership. As well as the inclusive composition of the Citizen Advisory Council, with its 28 members representing local civil society organizations, businesses, academic institutions, and interested citizens, reflects a positive step towards fostering collaborative decision-making processes. However, the absence of formal feedback mechanisms and institutionalized practices for stakeholder engagement presents a significant obstacle to sustained collaboration and effective implementation of commitments.

2.2 Co-creation process recommendations

▪ **Strengthen proactive communication**: Improve proactive communication and transparency with wider communities by establishing clear channels for disseminating information related to the co-creation process. Utilize multiple communication channels such as official municipal websites, social media platforms, and community newsletters to provide regular updates, share draft documents, and solicit feedback from stakeholders. Ensure that information is easily accessible and understandable to encourage meaningful participation from all interested parties.

▪ **Develop a timeline for information sharing:** Create a clear timeline that outlines what information needs to be shared, with whom, and when. This timeline should be aligned with the key milestones of the co-creation process and ensure that stakeholders receive relevant information in a timely manner, allowing them to effectively participate and provide feedback throughout the process.

▪ **Institutionalize feedback mechanisms:** Establish formal feedback mechanisms and institutionalized practices for stakeholder engagement to ensure continuous collaboration and effective implementation of commitments. Develop clear protocols for collecting, documenting, and responding to stakeholder inputs throughout the co-creation process. Consider implementing regular feedback sessions to gather diverse perspectives and incorporate them into decision-making processes.

▪ **Develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or protocol:** Establish a formal MOU or protocol for the OGP process within the Citizen Advisory Council. This document should provide a general framework outlining the mechanisms, activities, ways of working, and stakeholder engagement processes. The MOU or protocol will help institutionalize the feedback mechanisms and ensure a structured approach to collaboration and decision-making within the council.

▪ **Foster co-creation culture:** Foster a culture of collaborative decision-making and co-creation spirit between government and non-governmental stakeholders by promoting iterative dialogue and shared ownership of commitments. Facilitate regular consultations, joint working groups, and collaborative workshops to co-create action plans and ensure that stakeholder voices are integrated into the decision-making process. Encourage meaningful engagement and active participation from all stakeholders to build consensus and drive positive change collectively.

- **Promote citizen participation**: Actively promote citizen participation in the co-creation process by raising awareness about OGP-related activities and encouraging public involvement through various channels. Organize outreach events, public forums, and community workshops to solicit input from a wide range of stakeholders, including marginalized groups and underrepresented communities. Ensure that participation events are inclusive, accessible, and tailored to the diverse needs of the population.

- **Enhance virtual engagement**: Given the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to traditional meeting formats, prioritize the development of robust virtual communication channels. Ensure these channels are accessible and user-friendly for stakeholders to participate effectively, even during crises. For instance, consider utilizing online platforms for virtual meetings, workshops, and feedback sessions to maintain stakeholder engagement despite physical limitations.

Section 3. Action Plan Commitments

3.1 Commitments implementation review

The efforts to *enhance corruption risk management* and *open data management* practices in Akhaltsikhe Municipality offer valuable insights into the implementation process and its outcomes.

In the case of corruption risk management, substantial progress was made in developing and implementing a detailed methodology for assessing corruption risks within the municipal government. Despite challenges such as delays caused by local government elections and low awareness among employees, the commitment succeeded in improving accountability and awareness regarding corruption risks. For instance, through the implementation of the corruption risk assessment methodology, the municipality identified specific corruption risks within its departments and developed corresponding mitigation measures. This process not only raised awareness among employees about potential corruption risks in their daily work but also provided concrete steps to address these risks, thereby enhancing accountability within the municipal government. However, in spite of an enhanced comprehension of the corruption risks, the Municipality has yet to undertake revisions to its Building Integrity and Transparency Strategy and Action Plan to incorporate mitigation measures for the identified risks.

Similarly, the initiative to improve open data management practices proved successful in identifying relevant data categories and publishing them in open data format on the municipal website. Despite encountering challenges such as delays and low awareness among employees, the commitment resulted in a notable improvement in access to information within the municipality. However, despite the increase in the Local Self-Governance index

rate, which has risen from 19% to 23% since 2019 in proactive public information disclosure,[1] there is still room for improvement.

Overall, both endeavors contributed to the broader goal of increasing transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement within Akhaltsikhe Municipality. While challenges were present during implementation, the successful completion of milestones underscores the municipality's commitment to open government principles. Looking ahead, addressing challenges and incorporating lessons learned will be crucial in designing effective initiatives for future action plans.

It is notable, that the Akhaltsikhe Municipality received significant support from the USAID Good Governance Initiative (USAID GGI) in Georgia during the implementation of its Action Plan commitments.

3.2 Commitments recommendations

▪ **Continuity and institutionalization**: Ensure that commitments are carried over to the next action plan to maintain momentum and build upon progress made. Internal regulations should be adopted to formalize procedures and designate responsible individuals for ongoing management and implementation of initiatives, ensuring sustainability beyond changes in leadership.

▪ **Awareness and capacity building:** Implement targeted awareness and capacity-building programs to enhance understanding and engagement among employees regarding corruption risks and the importance of open data practices. Training sessions and workshops can be conducted to raise awareness and build skills among employees at all levels of the municipality.

▪ **Expand awareness and capacity building across commitment areas:** In addition to implementing targeted awareness and capacity-building programs for corruption risks and open data practices, it is essential to extend these efforts to other commitment areas as well. To accomplish this, the municipality can: a) Conduct a comprehensive training needs assessment to identify knowledge and skill gaps across all commitment areas; b) Develop a training calendar that includes workshops or seminars covering various aspects of open government, such as citizen engagement, transparency, accountability, and innovation; c) Collaborate with external experts, civil society organizations, and academic institutions to design and deliver tailored training programs; d) Encourage peer-to-peer learning and knowledge sharing among employees by establishing communities of practice or informal learning groups focused on specific commitment areas; e) Integrate open government principles and practices into the municipality's onboarding and professional development programs to ensure sustained awareness and capacity building; f) Allocate adequate resources, including time, budget, and personnel, to support the implementation of awareness and capacity-building initiatives.

---

[1] Local Self-Governance Index, results for Akhaltsikhe Municipality available here
http://www.lsgindex.org/ge/cityanalyse/viewcityanalyse/25/?est_obj_id=4

- **Citizen participation:** Strengthen mechanisms for citizen participation by soliciting feedback and input from relevant stakeholders in the design and implementation of commitments. Regular consultations with civil society organizations, academia, media, and other stakeholders can ensure that commitments are responsive to community needs and priorities.

- **Transparency and accountability:** Enhance transparency and accountability by proactively publishing information and engaging in regular communication with the public. Develop strategies for public outreach and awareness campaigns to promote the availability and use of open data resources, fostering trust and accountability between the municipality and its residents.