



# 2019 CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

Georgia

July 2020



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Cover Photo: Members of the Beresan Youth Bank present their achievements at the 2018 Annual Civil Society Development Forum, an event organized by Ednannia with support from USAID. The Forum is the largest national platform for learning, communication, and experience sharing among nonprofit organizations in Ukraine, typically bringing together approximately 2,500 participants from the non-profit and private sectors, donor community, media, governmental bodies, and local authorities.

Photo Credit: Ednannia, Ukraine

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**Developed by:**

United States Agency for International Development  
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**Disclaimer:** The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or FHI 360.

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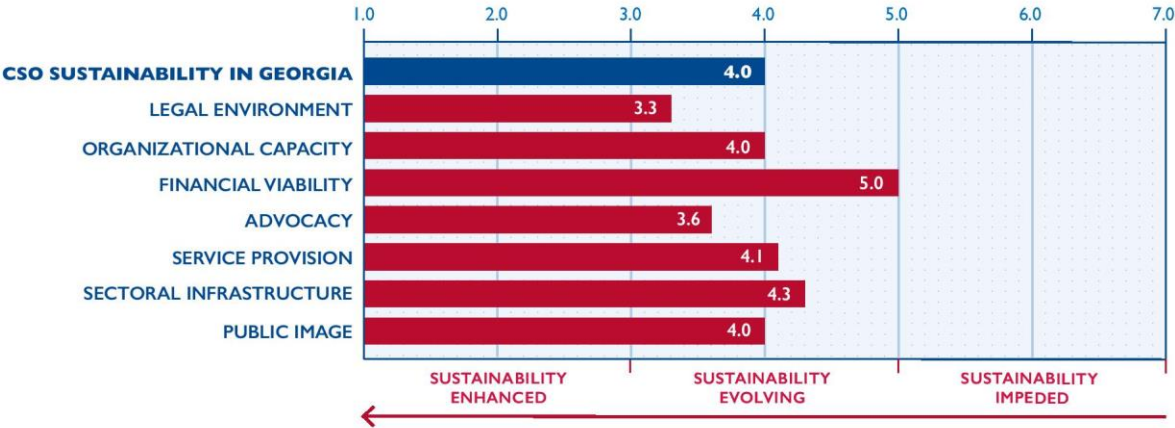
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# GEORGIA

Capital: Tbilisi  
Population: 3,997,000  
GDP per capita (PPP): \$10,700  
Human Development Index: High (0.786)  
Freedom in the World: Partly Free (61/100)

## OVERALL CSO SUSTAINABILITY: 4.0



2019 was a politically charged year in Georgia, with anti-government protesters blocking the capital city’s main thoroughfare for several months. In June, a Russian delegation of the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy visited Tbilisi. During the visit, a Russian member of parliament (MP) sat in the Georgian parliament speaker’s chair to address the guests as the President of the General Assembly. Many people viewed this as an insult to Georgian sovereignty, and thousands took to the streets to demand the resignation of key officials. When members of a largely nonviolent crowd tried to rush the parliament building, riot police used tear gas, rubber bullets, and water cannons to deter them, injuring 240 people, including journalists. CSOs expressed “grave concern” about the events and noted that the “disproportionate use of force” by the police “went beyond the boundaries of the law.” These events triggered unprecedented civic activism in the form of civic movements, informal organizations, and civic-minded individuals. Movements such as Shame (Sircxvilia), Change (Shecvale), and Dare (Gabede) benefited from strong citizen mobilization and volunteer support and generally operate in parallel to the more formalized CSO sector, without much collaboration with them.

On June 21, the Georgian parliament speaker resigned, but this did little to defuse the crisis. The protesters repeated CSOs’ long-standing demand for a fully proportional electoral system in place of the current mixed system, which, among other setbacks, is known to give advantage to the ruling parties. To calm them, the founder and head of the ruling Georgian Dream party, Bidzina Ivanishvili, agreed to introduce a fully proportional system starting with the October 2020 parliamentary polls, instead of 2024, as envisaged in the latest constitutional amendments. Protests resumed in mid-November when the ruling party backtracked on this promise and voted down an electoral reform bill that would have delivered the proportional election system. CSOs that supported the bill laid the responsibility for its demise squarely on Ivanishvili, who, they felt, sought to cling to power. CSOs asked international actors, such as the European Parliament and the Party of European Socialists (the sister party of the ruling Georgian Dream party), to pressure Georgia’s leadership into adopting the promised reforms.

Other confrontations between CSOs and the government further escalated international concerns over Georgia’s “democratic backsliding” in 2019. The ruling party spared no effort to discredit CSOs. For example, it accused well-known CSO leaders of a bias in favor of the United National Movement (UNM), the opposition party that ruled the country from 2004 to 2012. Party officials also slammed two U.S. government-supported organizations, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI), for similar bias in their public opinion surveys. According to an NDI survey from November 2019, 59 percent of respondents, the highest number of respondents in a decade, believe that Georgia is not a democracy.

Overall CSO sustainability did not change in 2019. Advocacy improved as CSO representatives were important advocates and opinion leaders, often influencing the national narrative and sharing their expertise through various media channels. Meanwhile, the sector’s public image deteriorated as the government’s negative rhetoric continued to damage public trust in CSOs. Legally, CSOs continued to operate freely, but harassment of outspoken CSOs



and their leaders was common. Weak financial viability continues to be the main problem facing the civil society sector in Georgia.

The number of registered CSOs reached 27,878 by the end of the year, an increase of approximately 3 percent since 2018. Many registered organizations are assumed to be defunct, as many inactive CSOs never officially close down given the complicated and time-consuming nature of the procedures for liquidating organizations. According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia, as of January 1, 2020, only 3,761 CSOs were active.

Very little information is available about civil society in Georgia’s breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, both of which are under the control of Moscow-backed authorities. However, it is clear that CSOs in these regions operate in a radically different environment and are subject to substantially more political pressure than those in the rest of Georgia. According to Freedom House’s 2019 Freedom in the World report, CSOs working on conflict transformation and resolution in South Ossetia have been subject to smear campaigns by the authorities and accused of being “collaborators” with Georgian and western intelligence services. A 2019 report issued by the Center for Humanitarian Program, a CSO based in Abkhazia, reports that Abkhaz authorities often ignore civil society programs and the opinions of CSO leaders. The report also noted that CSO criticism is often met with attempts by the authorities and media to discredit them.

While there are several developed and viable organizations present in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia, organizational capacity tends to be a little stronger in Abkhazia. CSOs in both regions have very limited access to funding opportunities, and recent reports indicate that CSOs are increasingly criticized for accepting foreign funding. Collaboration between CSOs across the occupation lines has been practically non-existent since the 2008 military conflict, although international organizations continue to operate in conflict regions. USAID, for example, implements at least four ongoing projects in Abkhazia in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Eurasia Partnership Foundation, Chemonics International, and International Alert.

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## LEGAL ENVIRONMENT: 3.3



The legal environment governing CSOs in Georgia did not change in 2019. CSOs, which register as non-commercial legal entities, continue to have access to quick and efficient registration procedures at the public service halls operated by the Ministry of Justice. The fee for registration, which is usually completed in one business day, is GEL 100 (approximately \$35) for both profit and nonprofit organizations. Same-day registration is possible for a fee of GEL 200 (approximately \$70).

CSOs generally operate freely under the law in Georgia and there are no legal or administrative barriers to the freedoms of association, assembly, or expression. However, some civil society groups—notably groups of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) activists—find it difficult to access these rights, as the

government fails or refuses to contain violent far-right groups. In addition, government officials often attempt to delegitimize or demonize CSOs in traditional and online media by publicly questioning their agendas, alleging political bias, or employing other tactics of misdirection and misinformation. Furthermore, CSOs viewed the increase in 2019 of government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) and government funding for them as part of the government’s effort to neutralize the voices of critical CSOs.

A 2017 tax reform, commonly referred to as the “Estonian tax model,” levies taxes on distributed profits rather than net gains. This rule was applied in 2019 to CSOs’ non-grant income, which previously was subject to profit tax if not spent during the fiscal year in which it was received, and was largely welcomed by the CSO sector, although its impact is not yet clear.

The Georgian Tax Code enables CSOs to request refunds of value-added tax (VAT) on grant expenditures. Georgia’s bilateral agreements with some donors, notably the European Union (EU) and United States, exempt

most grants from VAT. Donors' rules vary on the use of VAT refunds, but some allow CSOs to retain refunds for their own use.

Businesses may deduct the value of their donations to charities from their taxable income up to 10 percent of their net profits from the previous calendar year. To be eligible to receive such donations, CSOs must register separately as charitable organizations and provide annual activity reports to the government, which many organizations try to avoid. Individual donors do not receive deductions for charitable donations.

CSOs can engage in economic activities and apply for state funding. However, as there are no unified standards for the acquisition, management, and evaluation of government grants, CSOs, especially advocacy and watchdog organizations, voice concerns about transparency and fairness in the distribution of state funds and generally abstain from applying for these funds. Local municipalities are still not allowed to award grant funding to CSOs, despite the decades long CSO advocacy for increased decentralization.

Overall, the legal capacity of the CSO sector remains limited. A number of CSOs provide free legal services to both individuals and organizations, relying largely on donor support. Organizations in Tbilisi continue to have significantly better resources at their disposal than those in the regions

## ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY: 4.0

CSOs' organizational capacity did not change in 2019. While some Tbilisi-based CSOs, including several advocacy organizations, reported that their organizational capacities had improved in 2019, the wider sector's capacity remains underdeveloped, especially in the regions.

Donors regularly invest in CSO capacity building. For example, the USAID-funded Advancing CSO Capacity and Engaging Society for Sustainability (ACCESS) project, implemented by the East-West Management Institute (EWMI) in partnership with local CSOs, helps CSOs improve their financial sustainability, organizational management, policy influence, and civil engagement. The European Commission, Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF), and several other donors also invest in initiatives to build CSO capacity, yet the overall impact of these interventions remains limited. While direct capacity building efforts produce some immediate effects, the availability of funding ultimately determines organizational capacities and sustainability.

Constituency building remains a challenge for CSOs, especially at the grassroots level. CSOs lack close and long-lasting bonds with their beneficiaries, mainly because of their reliance on foreign funding, which keeps them accountable to their financial donors and open to changing the focus of their work depending on the availability of donor funding and shifts in donors' priorities. Many CSOs do not engage in strategic planning and lack properly functioning internal management structures. The majority of CSOs, especially in the regions, remain one-person organizations in which institutional viability is linked directly to their founders. According to Georgian law, CSOs are not legally required to have boards. When they exist, with few exceptions, boards of directors are created simply to meet donor requirements and are not functional.

While larger CSOs attract some of the country's most highly qualified staff, many organizations struggle to retain employees. Project-based funding makes it difficult for small and medium-sized CSOs to offer long-term employment, and CSOs lag behind the private sector in terms of both wages and cost-of-living adjustments. Larger grantmaking CSOs based in Tbilisi find that the staff of regional CSOs often lack requisite skills, knowledge, and experience. For example, the Center for Training and Consultancy (CTC), a partner in the consortium managing USAID's Human and Institutional Capacity Development (HICD) project, reports that it must dedicate extra staff to managing its sub-grants because its regional grantees have underdeveloped project writing, management, and reporting skills.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY IN GEORGIA



In 2019, Georgia amended the law on labor safety to require all employers with more than twenty employees, including CSOs, to introduce a full-time labor safety specialist position. Organizations with fewer than twenty employees must assign the duties to an existing employee. However, few CSOs are aware of this new rule, which went into effect in late 2019. Those that are express concern that the new requirement will entail higher upfront and ongoing personnel costs, since the specialists, whether full-time or not, must undertake government-certified training before assuming their roles.

Data on volunteering in Georgia is inconsistent. According to the 2019 Caucasus Barometer Georgia, 21 percent of respondents volunteered in the preceding six months, down from 23 percent in 2017. Young people between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five are more likely to volunteer (26 percent) than people between the ages of thirty-six and fifty-five (22 percent) and over fifty-six (15 percent). According to an IRI poll conducted in November 2019, on the other hand, only 3 percent of respondents said they had volunteered during the past six months.

CSOs generally have access to adequate technological equipment and software, but do not always have licensed copies. CSOs are rarely able to afford expensive software such as Quickbooks. While discounted subscriptions and free downloads are available via Techsoup, Microsoft, and other programs, CSOs rarely use them because of their limited administrative budgets and the general lack of consistency in their funding.

## FINANCIAL VIABILITY: 5.0



CSOs' financial viability did not change in 2019 and remains the sector's biggest problem. The majority of CSOs operate with a sense of financial instability, fueled by a lack of diversification in their funding sources.

Foreign donor funds are virtually the only source of income for local CSOs. Many CSOs fear that if foreign donors were to withdraw their financing, they would not be able to continue offering services, at least not at the same scope or quality. Large CSOs, especially major watchdog organizations working on governance and democracy issues, are particularly reliant on foreign funding. USAID and the EU remain the most important donors in the country. In 2019, USAID launched the Elections and Political Processes (EPPs) project, a four-year, \$14-million initiative to prepare for the 2020 and

2021 election cycles. By the end of the year, project funding had been awarded to the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), the Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA), Transparency International (TI) Georgia, Public Movement for Multi-National Georgia, Eastern European Center for Multiparty Democracy, and Georgian Institute of Politics. The projects focus on bolstering civic participation in political processes and oversight activities throughout the electoral process. The EU-funded Georgian Civil Society Sustainability Initiative, implemented by a consortium comprising the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, CTC, Civil Society Institute (CSI), Center for Strategic Research and Development (CSR DG), and Education Development and Employment Center, strives to increase CSOs' financial sustainability; enhance the capacity, accountability and credibility of CSOs; strengthen regional civic participation through better cooperation of CSOs with local media, businesses, and authorities; and support joint approaches of CSOs in policy dialogue towards sustainable development on the local and national levels. By the end of 2020, the consortium will have spent more than EUR 5.07 million to support more than 110 activities involving 2,500 civil society representatives from around the country.

While larger CSOs are relatively successful in raising sufficient funds from foreign donors, only a few donors provide CSOs with "core" funding for the implementation of their organizational mandates instead of specific project activities. The lack of access to unrestricted, non-project funding hinders the organizational and financial viability of the sector. In addition, most donors only accept applications in response to specific calls for proposals and their pre-defined funding agendas only allow for limited experimentation. CSOs also complain that the lack of a rapid response funding mechanism prevents them from developing timely, innovative initiatives.



The government offers several funding opportunities for CSOs, but the scope and scale of these programs are insufficient to impact the sector’s financial stability. For example, the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labor, Health and Social Affairs awards funding to CSOs to provide social services, including administering small group houses, day care centers, and shelters for people with disabilities and victims of domestic violence. In general, however, CSOs remain skeptical about accepting state funding.

Philanthropy and community fundraising remain underdeveloped. According to the Charities Aid Foundation’s 2019 World Giving Index, which aggregates data from the past ten years, only 6 percent of Georgians donated money, placing Georgia in last place among the 124 nations included in the study. CSOs’ fundraising and project-writing skills are weak. According to an IRI poll conducted in November 2019, less than 1 percent of respondents had donated money to a CSO or political party during the last six months. Instances of collaboration between businesses and CSOs are increasing, mostly in charity, education, environment, and some other non-controversial sectors, but for the most part, businesses remain skeptical of financial collaboration with CSOs. Membership-based organizations are scarce, and even at the most successful organizations, such as GYLA, membership fees generate insignificant income. Some CSOs earn income by offering various training, research, consultancy, and other services to their clientele in public and private sectors, but such transactions still remain limited and income generated through such activities generally contributes little to the financial viability of the sector.

Tbilisi-based organizations have significantly improved their financial management capacities, as a direct result of better and more sustainable access to funding, which has enabled them to engage qualified personnel. Regional organizations continue to struggle to ensure quality and consistency in their accounting, financial management, and reporting standards.

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## ADVOCACY: 3.6

CSO advocacy improved in 2019. CSOs played an active role in shaping nationwide discussions on a number of pressing issues throughout the year, including judicial appointments, media freedom, and human rights in the Russian-occupied territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

The ACCESS project issued the Georgian Civil Society Assessment in 2019, which looked at CSOs’ performance in four key areas—public trust and legitimacy, influence over policies, sustainability and viability, and inter-sectoral cooperation—between 2012 to 2018. According to the study, while CSOs play an important role in terms of policy impact, particularly in elections, human rights, gender equality, and minority rights, their work is affected by low public trust, participation and support, as well as limited openness of the sitting government to collaborate.



According to the 2019 CSO Meter, a report published by CSI that monitors and assesses the environment in which CSOs operate, although there is a growing practice of CSO participation in consultative bodies at different governmental agencies, such bodies usually exist pro forma. The CSO Meter reports that 63 percent of surveyed CSOs participated “in the work of a consultative body in the past two years,” but only 47 percent thought that authorities take the decisions of consultative bodies into consideration when preparing state policies.

The government is generally willing to cooperate with donors and CSOs on non-controversial issues, such as rural development, education, health care, environment, and waste management. CSOs take part in many advisory bodies and government working groups, although their participation is often ceremonial. CSOs’ advocacy on democracy and governance-related issues, on the other hand, is largely ignored or actively disparaged by the authorities. In 2019, the ruling party seemed less willing to accept criticism from CSOs, and government decision makers increasingly sought to discredit advocacy CSOs and their staff. Clashes between human rights activists and the Parliamentary Human Rights Committee on the draft Code of the Rights of the Child were particularly sharp, and ad hominin attacks on several activists prompted CSOs to demand the resignation of the committee’s

chairperson. Similarly, TI Georgia's recommendation that the government abstain from raising the pensions and salaries of public employees shortly before the October 2020 parliamentary election was met by a disinformation campaign against TI Georgia's executive director.

CSOs typically respond to major developments by organizing protest actions or issuing statements endorsing or disapproving of steps taken by the government. For example, in September, TI Georgia, ISFED, OSGF, and Georgian Democracy Initiative (GDI) called on the international community to pay attention to the "quality of democracy, media, and political freedoms, corruption and eventual state capture that we are facing today." In November, seventeen CSOs, including major human rights and election watchdog organizations, held the head of the ruling party responsible for parliament's rejection of electoral reforms. About the same time, twenty-nine CSOs called on the Party of European Socialists, the sister party of the ruling Georgian Dream party, to "take immediate and adequate actions" in response to the "grave challenges to pluralistic and participatory democracy" in Georgia. These statements, however, have limited impact.

CSOs' advocacy efforts often shape the public agenda. For example, women's rights organizations have strongly pushed for a gender quota in parliament. According to an NDI poll conducted in July 2019, 65 percent of the population now supports the introduction of such a quota. The Media Development Foundation, a local watchdog that monitors anti-Western propaganda in partnership with several USAID projects, has played an outsized role in raising awareness about foreign influence in the country's media.

Several coalitions worked proactively in 2019. The USAID-supported Coalition for an Independent and Transparent Judiciary, which brings together more than thirty CSOs, including GYLA, ISFED, GDI, UN Association of Georgia (UNAG), and Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, was particularly vocal as the Georgian parliament made lifetime appointments of Supreme Court justices through a highly controversial process in September. The coalition slammed the selection process for its "ceremonial nature" and criticized parliament's legal committee for excluding CSOs from a working group. The Media Advocacy Coalition, which unites ten media freedom watchdog organizations, issued several statements on topics such as the controversies regarding the ownership of Rustavi 2, one of the largest and most critical TV channels, as well as alleged attempts to change the editorial independence of Adjara TV, a publicly-funded regional broadcaster, by its new management.

CSOs made important contributions to defending the rights of LGBTI people in 2019. Despite the threats of far-right groups and the failure of the police to issue guarantees of safety, forty CSO activists held a small pride rally outside of the Ministry of Interior building in July.

After CSOs promoted the issue for years, the State Inspector's Office was finally created as an independent agency to investigate crimes committed by law enforcement officers and public officials in 2019. After being postponed twice, the Office finally was given an investigative function in November 2019.

Local watchdogs and media advocates, including Charter of Journalistic Ethics, MDF, GYLA, and TI Georgia, posted a joint statement that criticized the Georgian National Communication Commission's drafting and adoption of the National Media Literacy Strategy and Action Plan as not inclusive of all interested parties.

CSO lobbying efforts achieve various levels of success. In 2019, the parliament unanimously endorsed amendments to the Labor Code and a number of other laws supported by CSOs that defined sexual harassment and specified administrative penalties for offenses. In February, regulations and amendments that had been advocated by CSOs were adopted to bring the Organic Law of Georgia in line with international standards governing occupational health and safety. While CSOs often successfully push for important legal reforms in the parliament, implementation of these laws can be a challenge. The anti-discrimination law, for example, which was adopted in May 2014 after years of advocacy by CSOs, is hardly implemented in practice. Similarly, parliament adopted the Law on Volunteering in 2015, but never followed-up with necessary modifications to the tax code to make it usable by CSOs.

A relatively small group of CSOs is engaged in advocacy to improve CSOs' legal environment in 2019, but with limited success.

## SERVICE PROVISION: 4.1



CSO service provision was unchanged in 2019.

CSOs provide a diverse range of high-quality services, including social services in the healthcare and education sectors, as well as a broader range of services, including promoting good governance, fair elections, human rights, economic development, and environmental protection. TI Georgia provided free legal aid to more than 2,000 people in Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Batumi, and Zugdidi in 2019, and GYLA, another watchdog organization, offered legal advice to 37,291 persons in 2019. CSOs rely largely on grants from foreign donors to provide services.

CSOs offer services to local communities, government offices, and other CSOs. CSOs are increasingly aware of the need to engage more effectively with their beneficiaries, both to better align their services to their

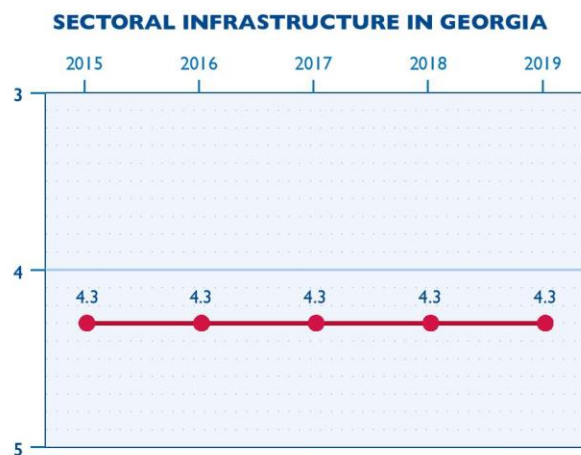
needs and to increase public support of their work. The majority of CSOs rely on focus group discussions, interviews, baseline surveys, and other sources of hard data to develop and target their services appropriately. In 2019, the USAID-funded ACCESS project prioritized CSO-community engagement under its Citizen Outreach Grant program, which targeted the problems faced by local communities and sought to directly engage citizens in resolving these issues. However, CSOs generally lack the resources to invest in the marketing, sales, and continual improvement of their services.

The services that CSOs provide to the government are generally provided within the framework of foreign donor-funded projects. However, government and commercial clients increasingly launch in-house training facilities and teams, thereby reducing the demand for these types of CSO services. In addition, the government increasingly duplicates CSO services. For example, Media Academy and the Media Literacy Project of the Georgian National Communications Commission, which launched in 2018, duplicate the very successful work of dozens of local CSOs.

## SECTORAL INFRASTRUCTURE: 4.3

In 2019, the infrastructure supporting the CSO sector did not change, and remains quite limited.

Thematic networks, regional hubs and centers, and large, intermediary organizations provide CSOs in almost all regions of the country with services, training, consultations, legal aid, and small grants for various initiatives. USAID-supported civic engagement centers (CECs) offer CSOs important resources, such as meeting rooms, conference facilities, libraries, and computer access. These resources are free of charge for CSOs based in the regions, but Tbilisi-based organizations must pay for the same services. The CECs are well used. For example, in Batumi, Georgia's third largest city, the CEC hosts an average of 8,000 people a year. The USAID-funded Promoting Integration Tolerance and Awareness (PITA) youth centers, run by UNAG, offer free space for young people to learn and practice civic activism in thirteen towns. Within the framework of the EU-funded Civil Society Development Initiative, ten CSO hubs offer support services to organizations in the regions.



A handful of local organizations, including OSGF, Europe Foundation, and the Women’s Fund in Georgia, have grantmaking capacity. These organizations make important and strategic investments in Georgian civil society, providing a lifeline for many CSOs both in Tbilisi and the regions.

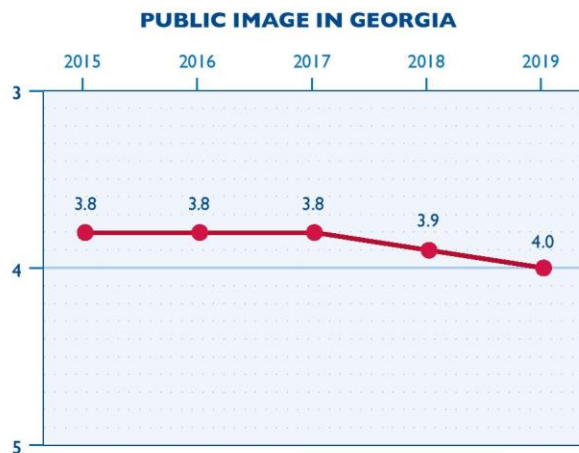
CSOs continued to cooperate through established and ad hoc platforms and coalitions in 2019. For example, the Equality Coalition, an informal movement of seven CSOs, including the Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC), Union Sapari, and Women’s Initiatives Supporting Group (WISG), fights against discrimination. The civil platform No to Phobia!, composed of fourteen CSOs and funded by USAID, aims to eliminate all forms of discrimination and hate speech in Georgian politics and media.

In recent years, several initiatives, including the ACCESS and HICD projects, have invested significant resources into strengthening CSO capacity. Local CSOs have access to plentiful training opportunities in areas such as advocacy, project management, monitoring, fundraising, and other technical areas. Fewer trainings cover financial and regulatory aspects of CSO work, such as accounting, financial management, taxation, and procedural and regulatory compliance. Trainings are more often offered in Tbilisi, and are therefore less accessible to regional CSOs, which must incur added expenses to access these opportunities. In 2019, USAID launched a new, experimental approach to build local capacity to respond to growing restrictions on democratic freedoms of association, assembly, and expression under the global INSPIRES project, led by Internews. Georgia was selected as a pilot country for the project, and three Georgian CSOs will participate in the pilot phase of the program that will begin in 2020.

Intersectoral cooperation is common. The Municipal Development Fund of Georgia, for example, collaborated with CTC in the framework of the Improved Fiscal Discipline and Accounting System. Local governments often collaborate with CSOs on service provision. For example, the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) and NDI, working with 150 volunteers, helped the office of the mayor of Marneuli survey more than 2,000 local citizens about their priority issues.

Cooperation between CSOs and businesses appears to be increasing but remains largely unexplored. The Civil Development Agency’s (CiDA) Corporate Social Responsibility Survey 2019, the first of its kind, indicates that only 25 percent of 1,053 businesses surveyed would consider working with CSOs on joint initiatives, while 53 percent responded they did not know or refused to answer whether they would do so, and 22 percent said they were not interested in cooperation. Businesses are most likely to engage in apolitical charitable activities but are wary of forming links with vocal watchdogs. Advocacy CSOs similarly view cooperation with large businesses as a potential risk to their reputations.

## PUBLIC IMAGE: 4.0



CSOs’ public image deteriorated in 2019 as a result of ongoing orchestrated campaigns by pro-government media and ruling party representatives.

For example, in what was apparently a coordinated broadside, several pro-ruling party experts appeared on TV Imedi’s talk show Arena to accuse CSOs of deep ties with UNM, the main opposition party in Georgia. The following day, Ivanishvili publicly claimed that NDI and IRI manipulate public opinion surveys in favor of UNM. Far-right groups often reiterate smear campaigns against CSOs with propaganda narratives that seek to blame “western CSOs” for undermining Georgian traditional values.

The deterioration of the relationship between Georgian civil society and the government was particularly

noticeable during the selection of judicial candidates for the Supreme Court, when CSO and their leaders were the victims of verbal attacks by high-level government officials attempting to discredit their work. Correspondingly, widespread disinformation campaigns were launched against these organizations and leaders on social media.

In December, Facebook removed more than 400 Georgian government-linked Facebook pages, groups, and accounts for “inauthentic, coordinated behavior,” some of which actively sought to discredit CSOs and their leaders. Facebook noted that the removed pages posed as news organizations and impersonated activist groups and media entities. While these pages’ impact on the image of CSOs is not yet clear, their combined reach was substantial. According to Facebook, “about 442,300 accounts followed one or more of these pages, [and] about 52,000 accounts joined at least one of these groups.”

In 2019, the media increasingly asked CSO leaders to comment on a broad range of issues, including judicial and electoral reform, human rights, media freedom, and government decisions. The national media actively covered CSOs’ statements and conferences. Online news websites such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Netgazeti.ge, Publika.ge, and Civil.ge gave positive accounts of CSO advocacy efforts. On the opposite end of the political spectrum, media coverage of CSOs was less positive.

An IRI-commissioned poll carried out in October 2019 asked residents about their perceptions of CSOs’ influence in Georgia. Fifteen percent of respondents said CSOs have a great impact on government policy (a 4 percent increase over 2017), 35 percent said they have some impact, 22 percent said they have minor impact, and 10 percent said CSOs have no impact. According to the Caucasus Barometer 2019, published by CRRC, only 3 percent of respondents fully trust CSOs and 17 percent somewhat trust them. This indicates a slight decrease in trust from the Caucasus Barometer 2017, in which 4 percent expressed full trust in CSOs and 19 percent somewhat trusted them.

Many CSOs underestimate the need for good communication strategies, but rarely have designated communications staff. Tbilisi-based organizations are more successful than local organizations at telling their stories in appealing ways, both online and offline and continue to improve their skills in this area. The social media reach of Georgia’s largest CSOs, including watchdogs, nonprofit media, and other civil society groups, is growing, with many of these groups having 20,000 to 30,000 followers. However, these numbers are still limited compared to the social media reach of groups on the opposite end of the value spectrum. Financial constraints challenge CSOs’ ability to develop and deploy successful communication campaigns and practices, and even the largest CSOs can rarely afford communications staff. CSOs increasingly voice the need for joint communications efforts to counteract the government-fueled smear campaigns and to raise public awareness about CSOs and their work.

Several projects have attempted to increase the transparency of CSOs over the years, including by creating online repositories of information about CSOs, their projects, and finances. However, these databases are no longer actively updated. Only a few CSOs see the need to conduct annual audits or can afford to do so, and only a handful of them publish the reports. Most CSOs have internal policies and guidelines that regulate professional ethics, anti-corruption, and other important aspects of organizational life. Over 200 CSOs have signed the Declaration of Key Principles of Civil Society Organizations in Georgia, spearheaded by CSI in 2017, but it is difficult to estimate adherence to these principles.

***Disclaimer:*** The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or FHI 360.



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