



# 2020 CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

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For Georgia  
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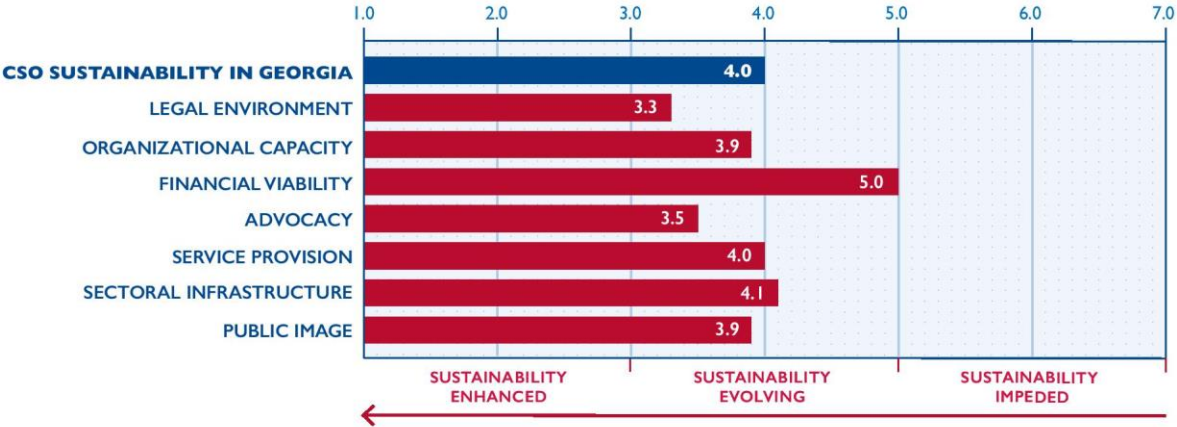
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## OVERALL CSO SUSTAINABILITY: 4.0



Georgia continued to be plagued by political crisis in 2020, which—contrary to expectations—was further deepened by hotly contested parliamentary elections in October. Major opposition parties refused to recognize the official election results, which gave the ruling Georgian Dream party its third consecutive parliamentary victory, an unprecedented feat in the history of democratic Georgia. The elections were held under a significantly modified electoral system that expanded proportional representation. The changes were adopted after a foreign-facilitated electoral reform deal between the ruling Georgian Dream party and the opposition parties. CSOs welcomed the long-sought increase in proportional representation. Despite this, the principal election watchdogs said the polls were the “least democratic and free among the elections held under the Georgian Dream rule.” The main opposition parties continued to boycott the new parliament at the end of the year.

CSOs played a key role in monitoring the elections with key watchdogs, including the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA), and Transparency International (TI) Georgia, dispatching nearly 4,000 short-term observers on election day, in addition to approximately 100 long-term observers. These domestic observers provided close oversight of the process in the face of a shortage of international observers due to the pandemic and associated travel restrictions. The elections posed a significant challenge to civil society as well. ISFED, a veteran election watchdog, admitted “human error” in its initial results of the parallel vote tabulation, which was cited by the opposition as proof of a rigged election. The new ISFED chairperson was forced to quit as the board found her responsible for the delayed communication over the controversy, which the ruling party used to further discredit the sector.

The COVID-19 pandemic further worsened Georgia’s economic and political climate. The first case of COVID-19 in the country was confirmed in late February. The first wave of the pandemic was mild in Georgia, with fewer than 1,500 infections by the end of summer. However, the situation worsened dramatically in the autumn along with the heated pre-election campaign, with the number of infections reaching a quarter million by the end of the year.

The government largely restricted international travel by mid-March and imposed mandatory two-week long quarantines for returning Georgian nationals. The country observed a two-month-long state of emergency from March 21 to May 22. Throughout much of the emergency, people were banned from gathering in groups of more than three people and were subject to a curfew. As the state of emergency expired, the Georgian Dream-led parliament granted the government emergency-like powers (with clauses allowing it to restrict constitutional rights and freedoms, including freedom of assembly and movement) without declaring a state of emergency. TI Georgia decried the bill, arguing that the legal changes “run counter to the Constitution.” In November, the government reintroduced a nationwide curfew, along with other lockdown measures, in response to the rising number of infections. The restrictions were in place throughout the end of the year.

The economy, hit hard by the two lockdowns, contracted by 6.1 percent in 2020, the steepest decline since 1994. The unemployment rate, which recently began to include self-employed Georgians engaged in subsistence farming, reached 17 percent in the third quarter. Georgians struggle with low monthly wages of just GEL 1,239 (approximately USD 380) and plummeting national currency, which depreciated by 14.3 percent against the U.S. Dollar during the year.

CSOs quickly reacted to the pandemic, adapted to the new circumstances, and provided services that complemented state aid where necessary. They mobilized support for vulnerable groups, offered free services for remote learning, and helped the state to make information about the pandemic available in minority languages.

Despite the difficult circumstances in the country, CSO sustainability remained largely stable, although improvements were noted in most dimensions. Organizational capacity and service provision both improved as CSOs demonstrated increased resiliency, flexibility, and adaptability as they reacted quickly to the needs generated by the unprecedented health crisis. The sector's public image improved as society recognized these efforts. Advocacy improved slightly as CSOs successfully advocated on a variety of issues. CSOs strengthened their networks and cooperation and made sustained efforts on long-term issues, fueling a moderate improvement in the sectoral infrastructure. The legal environment and financial viability remained largely unchanged.

CSOs in Georgia are registered as non-commercial legal entities. According to the National Statistics Office, by the end of the year, there were 28,938 non-commercial entities registered, of which only 3,774 were operational. A large share of CSOs are based in Tbilisi, the capital, as well as the largest cities of Kutaisi, Batumi, and Rustavi. CSOs work primarily in the areas of human rights, education, community development and local affairs, youth and children, and social and labor rights.

CSOs in Georgia's Russian-occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia regions operate under significantly different legal, social, and economic conditions than those in the rest of the country. There is a significant gap between the organizational capacity of CSOs based in Georgia proper and those in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. International donors provide very limited support to South Ossetian CSOs, while Abkhazia-based CSOs receive slightly more support. CSOs are more influential and have greater room to operate in Abkhazia than in South Ossetia. For example, the commission on humanitarian aid, which involves three local CSOs, resumed its work under the new de facto Abkhaz cabinet in 2020. In November 2020, however, the de facto Abkhaz authorities signed the Common Social and Economic Space program with Russia, which requires it to update its local legislation, including laws governing CSOs, and comply with Russia's restrictive foreign agent law by 2021. The Center for Humanitarian Programs, a CSO based in Abkhazia, offers free legal aid to socially vulnerable people in Sokhumi, as well as the predominantly ethnic Georgian eastern districts of the region. Meanwhile in South Ossetia, the top court in January overturned an acquittal by the first instance court on several trumped-up charges against ethnic Georgian civic activist Tamara Mearakishvili. Some experts noted a trend of increasing engagement between Georgian, Abkhaz, and South Ossetian activists in 2020; such engagement primarily took place online, as the Kremlin-backed de facto authorities kept the crossing points with Georgia proper closed throughout much of the year. The German Berghof Foundation, for example, along with Georgian and Abkhaz CSOs, reportedly organized more online meetings between Georgia, Abkhaz, and South Ossetian civic and peace activists focused on normalizing relations between the differing sides of the conflicts.

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## LEGAL ENVIRONMENT: 3.3

The legal environment governing CSOs did not change in 2020.

CSOs register through an efficient process at public service halls operated by the Ministry of Justice. Registration costs GEL 100 (\$30) and can be completed within one business day. Public service halls also offer same-day registration for double the price. At the end of March, pandemic concerns drove most of the public service halls across the country to close or work online, with some disruptions in their services for over a month. The liquidation of CSOs continues to involve lengthy and complicated procedures.

The Constitution of Georgia guarantees the freedoms of association, assembly, and expression. While CSOs can generally operate freely under Georgian legislation, some organizations, such as those working with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) population, face problems exercising their rights due to threats



from violent far-right groups and the government’s failure to protect them. The office of Tbilisi Pride, which advocates for the right of queer citizens to assemble, has been repeatedly attacked by radical groups with paint and eggs, and its staff has been verbally abused and threatened. Despite their presence near the organization’s premises, the police failed to prevent these systemic acts of violence.

In 2020, the government tightened its grip on the freedoms of expression and assembly by informal groups of activists. Citing damage to cultural heritage, Tbilisi City Hall fined two street artist activists for putting anti-government graffiti on the walls of a car tunnel near the residence of Bidzina Ivanishvili, Georgia’s richest man and the ruling party chair at the time. The activists claimed

they had not been fined for placing non-political street art on the same premises earlier. Police also fined another activist GEL 2,000 (\$610) for hanging a banner from a high-rise balcony to protest Tbilisi City Hall’s demolition of so-called illegal houses. Controversially, the fine came just a few days after a Constitutional Court ruling that found that freedom of expression in the form of placing visual media on private property could not be outweighed by claims of protecting the outward appearance of buildings. During the COVID-19 state of emergency from March to May, protests and at times gatherings of more than three people in public were restricted. In April, police fined a man who showed up at the government administration building to protest pandemic restrictions GEL 3,000 (approximately \$920). Over the year, concerns were voiced, including by CSOs and informal groups, over the government’s alleged use of the pandemic-related restrictions as a means of limiting protests during the post-election period in 2020.

Ruling party officials continued to delegitimize the work of CSOs by questioning their agendas and alleging their political bias in favor of the United National Movement (UNM), the former ruling party. In May, Facebook removed a network of 730 pages, accounts, and groups linked to Espersona media firm that were allegedly linked to the Georgian Dream party. A study by the Atlantic Council’s DFRLab, which cooperated with Facebook and enjoyed access to Espersona’s accounts before their removal, demonstrated that the network targeted both the opposition and activist groups.

Georgia’s Tax Code allows CSOs to request refunds of value-added tax (VAT) on grant expenditures within three months of the financial operations. Donor rules for the use of VAT refunds vary, with some allowing CSOs to retain the refunds. Georgian laws allow CSOs to engage in economic activities, but income from these activities is taxed at the same rate as activities pursued by any other commercial organization. The laws prevent economic activities from being CSOs’ primary activities.

CSOs seeking to specialize in charity activities need to undergo additional procedures to register as charity organizations. The head of the Revenue Service is responsible for making decisions about the registration and revocation of charity organization status in agreement with the finance minister. The Revenue Service has a month to make these decisions. Charity organizations enjoy additional tax benefits, but they are also subject to further government scrutiny and are required to submit additional financial and independent audit reports. As of the end of 2020, there were 116 active charity organizations.

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. Individual donors do not receive deductions for charitable donations.

Several legal initiatives that CSOs have long advocated for were stalled in 2020 because of the pandemic. CSOs still expect the passage of amendments that would standardize the government grant process, allow self-government entities to issue grants, and recognize community organizations and social enterprises. The draft law on social entrepreneurship, which was initially registered in the parliament in 2018, also continued to be stalled. In September, over two dozen CSOs addressed the prime minister and speaker of the parliament to pass the bill, but this effort had not yielded any results by the end of the year.

CSOs can seek legal assistance from other specialized CSOs, including GYLA, the Georgian Democracy Initiative, and Rights Georgia, both in Tbilisi and regional cities.

## ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY: 3.9<sup>1</sup>

CSOs' organizational capacity improved slightly in 2020. CSOs demonstrated their resiliency, flexibility, and adaptability to the difficult circumstances posed by the pandemic and the associated economic downturn, even as they were forced to decrease their offline activities and outreach. For example, CSOs that traditionally prioritize rights-based advocacy began to provide various services and essential supplies to communities affected by the pandemic and lockdowns. Similarly, LGBTI groups and allies mobilized to provide food, rent subsidies, and psychological services to the transgender community. CSOs that were already technologically savvy further expanded their connectivity with other organizations, stakeholders, and constituencies. Others improved their technological skills, exploring new online platforms and learning how to digitize their activities.



Despite noticeable progress in CSOs' ability to identify constituencies, CSOs struggle to establish lasting relationships with their constituencies because of the project-based nature of their work. Although CSOs were deprived of the opportunity to maintain in-person communication with their constituencies throughout much of the year due to the lockdown, a number of volunteer and CSO-led initiatives offered assistance to new constituencies affected by the pandemic.

While pandemic-related restrictions challenged CSOs' strategic planning and execution of projects, many organizations successfully adapted to the new circumstances. Faced with uncertainty, CSOs had to come up with multiple scenarios and balance the here and now with their long-term visions. Many CSOs quickly mobilized to support the government in managing the COVID-19 crisis. For example, CSOs helped disseminate safety recommendations to remote villages in minority languages; in one such initiative, the USAID-funded Promoting Integration, Tolerance and Awareness (PITA) project produced half a million copies of information pamphlets for the government. Many CSOs were forced to cancel in-person project activities due to the COVID-19 lockdown and associated travel and gathering restrictions. However, many of these were able to move activities online.

Large CSOs have well-developed management structures, strategies, and diverse sources of funding, while smaller organizations often operate on an ad hoc basis, with their existence often tied to their founders.

The largest CSOs managed to maintain or even increase their staff in 2020 despite the challenges stemming from the pandemic. For example, election monitoring CSOs kicked off new advocacy and monitoring programs for the elections, allowing them to attract new personnel. Georgia's emigration trends continue to have a negative effect on CSOs' administrative capacity. Emigration of highly qualified staff from the country, and internal migration from rural areas to the capital city of Tbilisi, create problems for CSOs in both the regions and Tbilisi. Regional CSOs and community organizations are particularly affected as qualified staff often moves to Tbilisi.

Volunteers joined forces to create ad hoc, informal groups to help the vulnerable at the onset of pandemic. In the spring, for example, activists created a Facebook group linking impoverished citizens seeking help with others

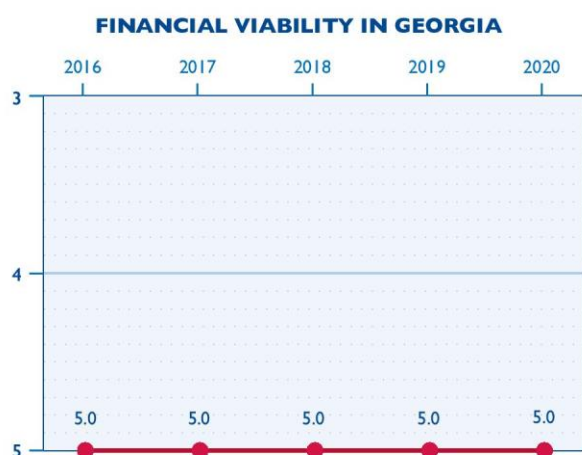
<sup>1</sup> The Organizational Capacity score was recalibrated in 2018 to better reflect the situation in the country and to better align it with other scores in the region. The score did not reflect an improvement in Organizational Capacity, which remained largely the same in 2018 as in 2017.

offering to help them cover the costs of their utilities. The durability of these initiatives and their contribution to growth in the CSO sector remains to be seen but indicates the potential of CSOs.

Tbilisi-based CSOs are technically better equipped than those in the regions, and several large CSOs, such as TI Georgia, operate regional offices. Some organizations in rural areas reported the quality and speed of internet as a pressing challenge, especially as many training and other events moved online during the pandemic.

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## FINANCIAL VIABILITY: 5.0



The financial viability of the third sector did not change in 2020.

The vast majority of CSOs remain largely reliant on foreign funding, which threatens their sustainability. The European Union (EU) and USAID remain some of the largest donors in the country. Foreign donors launched several new programs to assist CSOs during 2020. The EU allocated funds for a program focused on civil society resilience and sustainability to weather the immediate and long-term impacts of COVID on the sector in the Eastern Partnership countries, including Georgia. The four-year project, which began in July, provided thirteen emergency grants to Georgian CSOs, provided legal and psychological support to three organizations, and offered technical support grants to advance CSO digitalization to

seven organizations. In September, USAID launched the five-year Georgia Information Integrity Program, with funding of \$7.5 million, to counter disinformation in the country. Implemented by a consortium of Georgian and international organizations, the program will be managed by UK-based Zinc Network. While donors appear to have increased their financial resources for CSOs during the pandemic, it remains to be seen whether this trend will be sustained in the years to come.

Donors also made funding available through existing programs for activities that directly addressed the pandemic. Four CSOs were among eight recipients of the COVID-19 Response Grants Program under the USAID-funded Promoting Rule of Law in Georgia (PROLoG); their projects focused on aiding residents during the pandemic, tackling COVID disinformation in the media; and assessing the influence of the pandemic on the performance of the courts. At the very onset of COVID-19 in Georgia, USAID's ACCESS program issued twenty-two Rapid Response Grants (RRG) to Georgian CSOs, civic movements, and citizen groups to help mitigate the effects of the pandemic.

Donors also generally showed flexibility towards their CSO partners, allowing them to revise their activities and project timelines because of the pandemic. CSOs reported that they were able to save costs by moving planned events online, although these events were generally considered less effective than in-person engagements.

Individual and corporate philanthropy are still underdeveloped in Georgia, although there were some improvements in 2020. Some large businesses, including some in the financially strong banking sector, engage with CSOs to develop corporate social responsibility (CSR) projects. The Bank of Georgia, TBC Bank, Caucasus Online, and Glovo established partnerships with the Charte (Give Internet) platform, which allows private individuals and companies to sponsor internet access for underprivileged high-school students. The Corporate Social Responsibility Club, set up in 2015, merged under the Global Compact Network Georgia in 2020; ten CSOs are currently part of the initiative. Despite these examples, CSO collaboration with businesses is still an exception.

CSOs often mobilize funds for social purposes and emergencies, but these actions are ad hoc and involve little long-term planning. In addition, funds received through crowdfunding are modest compared to donations by foreign donors. In June, the CSO Orbeliani launched its online crowdfunding platform for various causes related to COVID-19, ecology, and education, to name a few. In six months, the platform attracted GEL 35,000 (approximately \$10,730) for fifteen initiatives. Fund-seekers could place their ideas on the platform and seek up to GEL 10,000 (approximately \$2,800) for their projects.



The share of other sources of income, including earned income from services and membership fees, in CSOs' total revenues remains low. GYLA, one of the largest CSOs in the country, is membership based but the fees it collects cover an insignificant portion of its operational costs.

The government lacks a well-established and unified policy about funding for the sector. CSOs, especially watchdogs, are reluctant to apply for government funding because of concerns about partisan influence and limited transparency in the process. The Center for Electoral Systems Development, Reforms, and Training continued distributing state funds to CSOs in 2020. The Center funded forty-four CSOs to educate voters ahead of the October elections. The opposition alleged that these funds were disbursed to government-organized NGOs (GONGOs). Local governments have no legal authority to disburse grants to CSOs.

Institutionally strong CSOs, which are typically based in Tbilisi, use advanced financial management systems and have specialized staff in place, while smaller organizations continue to lack such systems. Only well-developed CSOs conduct independent audits and publish the results.

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## ADVOCACY: 3.5

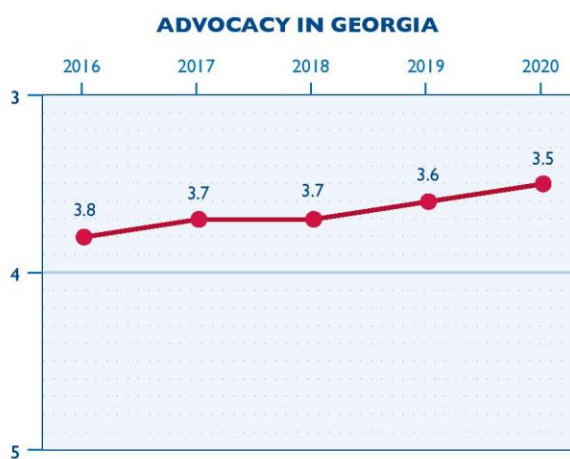
CSO advocacy improved slightly in 2020, although the context and environment for advocacy remain challenging. Despite the government's sustained criticism of top watchdog organizations, authorities remain formally open to CSO partnerships and policy initiatives. These collaborations often fail to translate into tangible policy outcomes, however, especially on politically sensitive issues. Similarly, CSOs continue to be widely invited to participate in various government working groups, councils, and consultation meetings, but their inputs are rarely reflected in decision making.

Despite these systemic obstacles, CSOs successfully advocated on a variety of issues, including the introduction of a Facebook Ad Library to make the advertising for political parties on Georgians' favorite social media platform more transparent ahead of the elections. Another successful advocacy campaign led to Facebook expanding its third-party fact-checking program to Georgia in September. Through this program, two local CSOs, the Myth Detector platform of Media Development Foundation and Factcheck.ge program by Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS), were charged with tackling misinformation spread on the platform.

CSOs were strong proponents of efforts to transfer the country's electoral system to proportional representation. In addition, their long-sought gender quota mechanism amendment made it into the electoral code. After the elections, CSOs reported a series of shortcomings in the process of complaints and appeals, both in terms of election administration and in the courts.

CSOs garnered international attention over Georgia's troubled judicial reform in 2020. During her February visit to Georgia, USAID Deputy Administrator Bonnie Glick encouraged the parliament to incorporate recommendations from civil society and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to improve the Supreme Court appointment process. In November, during his short visit to Tbilisi, outgoing U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo sat down with civil society representatives to discuss judicial independence. The U.S. Consolidated Appropriations Act for 2021, signed into law in December 2020 by President Donald Trump, added "the state of rule of law and accountable institutions" as a conditionality to the \$132 million of assistance for Georgia.

Environmental CSOs and informal activist groups galvanized attention towards the controversial construction of the Namakhvani hydropower plant in western Imereti region, including through on-site demonstrations and social media. In addition, GYLA filed a case in court to block the project. In November, police forcibly dispersed a largely peaceful crowd that was blocking the highway near the construction site. CSOs condemned the government for its use of oppressive measures against the protesters instead of engaging in dialogue.



CSOs continue to lobby for decentralization reform, including for increased possibilities to advocate to local governments, which are still highly dependent on decision making in Tbilisi. While these efforts have been largely unsuccessful to date, a number of large projects successfully support local activism, participatory advocacy, and development in the regions of Georgia. For example, Local Action Groups (LAGs) supported under the EU's European Neighborhood Program for Agriculture and Rural Development (ENPARD) engage in participatory planning and implementation of local rural development initiatives.

Press freedom remained a central issue for CSOs in 2020. The Coalition for Media Advocacy, consisting of a dozen organizations, addressed the international community over "alarming processes," including the dismissal of key journalists and anchors by the new, government-friendly director, in Adjara TV, the Batumi-based public broadcaster. The Coalition also called on the Ministry of Interior to take immediate action to prevent interference in journalists' activities in Pankisi Gorge, where a local community radio received violent threats, some of which were allegedly from local governing party officials.

In September, parliament passed a sweeping labor code package that expanded labor rights and the mandate of the State Labor Inspection; the changes were partly shaped by the guidance and expertise of CSOs. The amendments not only brought Georgian laws in line with its European and international obligations, but also included specific recommendations from civil society groups.

Eleven CSOs, along with the Public Defender's Office, pursued an advocacy campaign and submitted an alternative Universal Periodic Review (UPR) report to the UN Human Rights Council aimed at providing recommendations to international partners and diplomatic corps. The group listed a number of issues, including rights to sexual and reproductive health, socio-economic rights, rights of ethnic and religious minorities, prisoners, women, LGBTI people, children, religious freedom, and migrant rights, as well as judicial independence.

A recent report by the EU acknowledged civil society's active role and involvement in monitoring Georgia's implementation of the Association Agreement, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), policy formulation, and holding the government accountable, including at the local level to some extent.

Despite these successful examples, there is a general lack of liaison between the government and CSOs, and a scarcity of constructive cooperation between the two sectors on issues including judicial independence, electoral reforms, and human rights. CSO networks and umbrella organizations typically appeal to the government through open letters and statements, with little constructive cooperation on controversial matters. Existing dialogue between the two sectors is often held pro forma, rather than out of the government's genuine desire to take CSO opinions into consideration.

CSOs such as the Civil Society Institute continued to engage in advocacy to improve the legal environment governing the sector. However, the pandemic, hotly contested parliamentary elections, and the ongoing political crises of 2020 consumed most of the attention of civil society, media, and the donor community in Georgia, stalling such efforts.

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## **SERVICE PROVISION: 4.0**

Service provision improved slightly in 2020 as CSOs quickly reacted to the needs generated by the pandemic and increased services during the unprecedented public health crisis. For example, with the support of the EU, the Women's Information Center and its partner CSOs launched a program to support victims of domestic violence, which is widely believed to have increased during the pandemic and the nationwide lockdowns.

In general, CSO services are largely focused on social services and free legal aid, but CSOs also increasingly provide new services, including psychological, medical, and social work support services. For example, the Equality Movement, an LGBTI rights group, expanded its pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) HIV prevention program and offered program beneficiaries free Hepatitis B vaccinations in 2020.

Many believe that there is a profound disconnect between the operational focus of larger CSOs that get more press, such as advocating for good governance, and the public's general needs and interests, such as unemployment and social welfare. In general, however, most CSO services and activities effectively respond to local needs. Needs assessments are usually conducted both by donors, who solicit such assessments before finalizing the priorities for their calls for proposals, and by their implementing partners. CSOs employ various tools to identify local needs,



including surveys, key informant interviews, and consultations with local stakeholders, while others approach constituencies directly, including through public meetings.

Informal groups became more active and self-organized, even without donor backing, at the onset of the pandemic. In March and April, the “Salam” group of ethnic Azeri activists provided hard-hit ethnic Azeri communities in southern municipalities, which have poor command of the Georgian language, with relevant information on the pandemic and lockdown restrictions in their native language. Fifty-four teachers and activists volunteered as part of the “Volunteer Teacher” project, offering forty-three courses in math, English, and cinema, among others, to over 500 primary and high school

students. A group of activists, including ordinary citizens and formal CSOs, successfully implemented a fundraising campaign for transgender sex workers, who were particularly negatively affected by the two-month-long pandemic restrictions, including the curfew in the spring. The donations ensured the delivery of food and rent for a few dozen trans women, which was especially important given the inadequacy of government policies to ensure access to housing, employment, and health services.

Foreign donors supported a variety of CSO activities to respond to the needs of the pandemic. Among other activities, the Rapid Response Grants issued by USAID’s ACCESS program supported initiatives that helped vulnerable groups and built the capacity of medical personnel. USAID’s PITA project trained teachers in ethnic minority schools in online teaching after the education system got shut down for most of the year. With funding from UNDP and the UK, the UN Association of Georgia (UNAG) collaborated with the National Center for Disease Control (NCDC) to develop the national risk communication strategy for the government of Georgia, focusing both on crisis and post-crisis needs. With USAID funding, UNAG also helped the State Ministry for Reconciliation and Civic Equality to print and distribute over 300,000 copies of brochures containing information about COVID in minority languages.

A number of CSOs provide fee-based services such as training, coaching, and various master classes for other organizations, including businesses. Among other organizations, Center for Training and Consultancy (CTC) and Partners Georgia provide training and consulting services to both Georgian and foreign companies and generate income from these services. In general, however, CSOs lack capacities to generate substantial and sustainable revenues through the sale of services. CSOs generally offer their publications, including policy papers, research reports, and manuals, to other CSOs, government agencies, and academia free of charge. The sector generally provides its services to various stakeholders without discrimination.

The government recognizes the value of CSOs and their services, but only in select issue areas. It is very common for various government offices to partner with local CSOs, including as co-applicants for grant opportunities related to youth, employment, health care, and other non-political issues. It is increasingly difficult, however, to achieve a similar degree of collaboration in such high-profile issue areas as judiciary, law enforcement, electoral reform, or other hotly contested topics in Georgia.

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## SECTORAL INFRASTRUCTURE: 4.1

The infrastructure supporting the CSO sector improved moderately in 2020. CSOs strengthened their networks and cooperation and made sustained efforts on long-term issues, although ad hoc initiatives still dominate the field.

CSOs were actively involved in multiple thematic coalitions throughout the year. The Coalition for Media Advocacy, which unites GYLA, Media Club, the Journalistic Ethics Charter, Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF), and the Alliance of Regional Broadcasters, among others, continued to advocate for press freedom in the face of the deteriorating and highly polarized media environment. The Coalition for an Independent and Transparent Judiciary, uniting over forty CSOs, including OSGF, the Civil Society Institute, TI Georgia, GYLA, Rights Georgia, and Europe Foundation, fights for judicial reform. The work of coalitions continues to be sporadic

and largely project-driven, and there is room for improvement in cooperation both among and within different coalitions.

With EU support, the Caucasus Environmental NGO Network (CENN) teamed up with regional CSOs to open Innovation Hubs in disadvantaged communities in Gori, Ninotsminda, and Akhmeta that will offer modern equipment and space to youth. CENN also operates ten well-equipped Eco-Hub co-working spaces in the regions. UNAG's USAID-supported PITA program operates fourteen youth centers across the country—two in the capital city and twelve in the regions—that offer free space and activism opportunities to youth and youth CSOs.

The USAID-supported Centers for Civic Engagement (CCEs), which are located in ten large regional cities, offer various services, including meeting room rentals, event planning, catering, and photo-video services. The services are offered free of charge to regional CSOs, while Tbilisi-based organizations are charged fees. During the election period, the centers offered space to CSOs, the election administration, and local authorities. The network also offered space to political parties and candidates for free for events focused on presenting party programs and informing citizens about the election procedures. During the pandemic, the CCEs used their extensive local networks to assist the government, CSOs, and the private sector in disseminating critical information to regional stakeholders and communities.

There are several local grant-making CSOs, including the Women's Fund, OSGF, and Europe Foundation. For instance, the Women's Fund issued grants to ten CSOs and initiative groups to support a sustainable feminist movement and disbursed thirteen grants to CSOs and independent civic activists, both in Tbilisi and the regions, as part of its COVID-19 rapid reaction program. These CSOs depend on foreign donors for re-granting.

During the pandemic, access to training, albeit online, increased for CSOs. CTC offered online self-paced courses for CSOs on workplace sexual harassment, organizational leadership, and project logistics. In December, the Center for Strategic Research and Development (CSRDG) announced a contest to offer technical assistance to social enterprises. Through the program, CSRDG will offer three or four enterprises assistance in marketing and branding, public relations, business planning, production development, crisis management, and other areas.

Several CSOs offer pro bono services to other organizations. Audit Consulting Group (ACG) offered community organizations training via Zoom in taxation and accounting, Policy and Management Consulting Group (PMCG) held a webinar on how to use Microsoft Teams, while Analysis and Consulting Team held a pro bono webinar on the use of Zoom video communications. Through the informal Pro Bono Georgia network, CSOs successfully cooperate with businesses to offer free services and expertise to other CSOs.

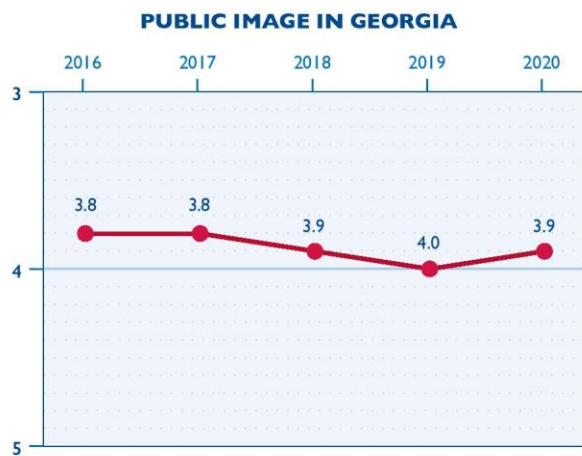
Cross-sectoral cooperation was noticeable ahead of the elections. During the pre-election period, the Central Election Commission (CEC), together with CSOs and others, led voter education campaigns. The CEC and civil society signed a memorandum of understanding on preventing the misuse of administrative resources. The CEC and local observer CSOs also came up with a code of ethics in which they committed to following Georgian laws and international best practices while observing the elections. But confrontation grew as principal watchdog organizations harshly criticized the CEC's publication of data and handling of the appeals process. CSOs boycotted the Inter-Agency Commission on Free and Fair Elections, which probed alleged election violations. CSOs criticized the Agency for its failure to follow impartial investigations, while the Agency accused CSOs of hindering its investigative capacities.

CSOs also cooperate with other sectors on other issues. Twelve LAGs across the country, funded through ENPARD, continue to serve as cooperation platforms where civil society, the private sector, and government can work together to improve the lives of rural households by diversifying local economies. In 2020, several CSOs, activists, and independent trade unions established the Fair Labor Platform, dedicated to promoting labor rights and social justice in the country.

**SECTORAL INFRASTRUCTURE IN GEORGIA**



## PUBLIC IMAGE: 3.9



CSOs' public image improved in 2020, despite the major blow struck by the ISFED controversy at the end of the year. The improvement is mostly due to CSOs' rapid reaction to the pandemic and efforts to complement state aid where necessary. According to the Caucasus Barometer 2020, a respected annual opinion survey, 24 percent of Georgian respondents said they trust NGOs, an increase from 20 percent a year before. Conversely, 22 percent said they distrusted NGOs in 2020, while the figure stood at 25 percent in 2019. Importantly, 21 percent responded to the question that they do not know, highlighting the major work CSOs still need to do to make the public aware of its work.

Media increasingly offer airtime to civil society actors to highlight their expertise and advocacy, including in the

areas of electoral reform, judicial independence, human rights, and government decisions. CSOs are present in media to comment on women's rights, environmental issues, LGBTI rights, and labor reform. But while independent and pro-opposition media invite CSO representatives to participate in debates on social and political issues, on the other side of Georgia's highly polarized media spectrum, pro-government outlets are less likely to engage these actors.

Although CSOs are committed to delivering high-quality products, they struggle to reach wider audiences, even when they have the necessary financial resources for outreach. In many cases, this is because their outputs, including statements, policy papers, recommendations, and research reports, are poorly framed for the use of modern media, both mainstream outlets and especially social media.

In the context of election monitoring, GONGOs and pro-government media offer alternative narratives, downplaying the work and findings of independent election watchdogs. As watchdogs highlighted serious shortcomings in the election process, for example, GONGOs spoke of minor procedural breaches of laws and questioned the work of independent CSOs.

The issue of partisanship in the CSO sector became more noticeable in the context of the elections in 2020, as the ruling Georgian Dream party and the largest opposition electoral bloc led by the UNM traded accusations over party-affiliated organizations registered as election monitors. The two parties claimed at least 60 out of 132 election monitoring CSOs were partisan.

The relationship between the government and civil society continued to deteriorate throughout the year. In June, more than fifty organizations publicly decried the government's nomination of then parliamentary Human Rights Committee chair Sopio Kiladze to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, citing her questionable track record, including alleged homophobic prejudices and disregard of various minorities. Tensions intensified as the German Ambassador to Georgia scolded the CSOs for engaging in "attacks of a personal nature" against Kiladze. CSOs rebuffed the Ambassador's remarks, noting that "such attitude endangers unfettered work of civil society outfits." CSOs also came at odds with the government on the issue of press freedom, the appointment of the State Inspector and the Chief Prosecutor, and controversial appointments of the Supreme Court Head and Constitutional Court Justices amid pandemic lockdowns.

Representatives of the ruling party continued to suggest that watchdog CSOs were contributing to further tensions in the country by supporting the UNM, and a Georgian Dream lawmaker even claimed that civil society actors were controlled by the UNM. CSOs faced increasing skepticism from the opposition as well, especially after the case with ISFED. The opposition labor party leader suggested that NGOs were in fact part of the government sector, sold to whoever pays more for them. Pre-election monitoring on anti-Western discourse and hate speech by political actors confirmed that CSOs were frequently targeted as part of anti-Western narratives. Far-right political groups that ran in the elections made calls for Russian-style restrictions on foreign funding for CSOs.

According to a survey commissioned by the U.S.-based National Democratic Institute (NDI) in June, 37 percent of respondents fully or partially trusted CSOs with information about COVID-19, 18 percent fully or partially distrusted them as a source for pandemic updates, and 39 percent said they did not receive information about COVID-19 from CSOs. In comparison, 90 percent fully or partially trusted the NCDC, 73 percent fully or partially trusted media/journalists, and 61 percent trusted, fully or in part, their church/religious leaders with information about COVID-19.

While the commercial sector remains “socially distanced” from the non-commercial sector, the COVID-19 crisis inspired a few positive interactions between the two. For example, Ertianoba (*Unity*, [Janoba.ge](http://Janoba.ge)) was a short-lived but widely successful charity platform that was jointly launched in response to the initial COVID-19 outbreak by key people from Adjara Group (Georgia’s hospitality giant), Georgian Farmers’ Association (a local CSO), and others.

Internet usage is steadily increasing in Georgia, with 83 percent of households having access to the web, and 95 percent of netizens participating in social networks. CSOs’ presence on social media is growing, especially as the pandemic resulted in much work being moved online. Georgian CSOs, in particular watchdog groups, increasingly use Twitter to engage with international audiences that follow Georgia. But many CSOs lack dedicated personnel to engage their audiences and beneficiaries online.

Transparency in the sector is still limited. Casual inquirers might still face challenges in accessing information about CSO activities and finances, as many CSOs still do not publish easy-to-understand reports.

***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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