

An aerial night photograph of a mountain village. Several tall, stone towers are illuminated from within, casting a warm glow. The houses and buildings are also lit up, and the surrounding landscape is dark with some greenery visible. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

# Vibrant Mountain Communities

Regional Development in Mountains:  
Realizing Potentials, Tackling Disparities

Sustainable Mountain  
Development Series



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The high-mountain town of Mestia (1 500 m asl) in the Upper Svaneti region of Georgia, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Agriculture is a pillar of the region's economy (GTW/shutterstock.com)

# Modernized administrative services for Armenian citizens

Vardan Janazyan and Lika Mkrtchyan

Armenia, a mountainous country, has been consolidating its previously fragmented – and thus ineffective – municipal landscape. Newly established “Citizen Offices” serve as municipal operation hubs and are equipped with a Municipal Management Information System to enable the exchange of data. As a result, nearly half of the country's population outside the capital, Yerevan, can now benefit from modernized, transparent and efficient access to municipal administrative services.

Zhora, one of the oldest citizens of Tumanyan municipality, benefits from the proximity of administrative services (Good Governance for Local Development South Caucasus)

The Republic of Armenia is mountainous, with steep slopes and deep river valleys. The country's topography and environment has influenced its population distribution as well as its historical, political and socio-economic situation. About three-quarters of Armenia's population live in mountainous areas [1, data from 2015]; 23 percent of people live below the national poverty line and 17 percent are unemployed [2, data from 2018]. The challenging economic situation has long led to high emigration.

In 2015, Armenia had 915 municipalities of greatly varying population size. The municipal landscape was highly fragmented and many municipalities were too small to fulfil their functions effectively. In response, the government launched the Territorial and Administrative Reform of Armenia (TARA). TARA's goal was to reduce the number of existing municipalities and support effective decentralization to provide better services to their citizens and businesses, make efficient use of the limited financial resources and support sustainable socio-economic development. By March 2020, 465 former municipalities had been merged into 52 multisettlement municipalities. The government foresees full implementation of the reform by the end of 2021, with the number of municipalities reduced to 150–200.

The resulting – much larger – municipalities are establishing “Citizen Offices”, to deliver modernized, transparent and efficient administrative services to the local population. Establishment of the Citizen Offices is part of a broader programme by the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure, funded by Switzerland and Germany and implemented by GIZ, the Council of Europe and UNDP [3, 4]. The programme aims at strengthening accountability, effectiveness, efficiency and inclusiveness of local self-government bodies. In this regard, improved service



*“ We can immediately provide a reference number for any enquiries received from our inhabitants here. Through the Municipal Management and Information System (MMIS) the citizens can then track and follow their requests online. And there is no further need for citizens to go to the centre.”*

Iveta Mirzoyan, MMIS Operator, Mets Ayrum settlement of Akhtala municipality

## Lessons learned



Rugged valleys and scattered settlements in Lori Province, Armenia (K. Faliyan/shutterstock.com)

delivery by municipalities and enhanced citizen participation in local governance, including empowerment of women, are of particular importance.

The Citizen Offices operate following the “single window” principle and serve as a hub for municipal operations. They are equipped with a web-based Municipal Management Information System (MMIS) to ensure the seamless exchange of data among local, regional and national authorities. The official municipal websites are also operated through MMIS, enabling not only access to a variety of services online, but also a say in various planning and budgeting processes. For example, citizens can participate in municipal planning and budgeting processes, and access up-to-date information on annual/multiannual development plans as well as mayoral/local council decisions. Citizens can also file tax returns (e.g. land and property tax, local duties, other fees), submit and track applications online, consult the online guides and ask questions. Accordingly, the official municipal website is the first port of call for citizens seeking information that they are entitled to under the Freedom of Information law. Moreover, the website allows the municipality to conduct citizen satisfaction surveys online.

In 2020, nearly half of the population outside the capital had access to improved administrative services through 49 Citizen Offices and MMIS that were not only introduced in all consolidated municipalities but also in about 80 municipalities that have not yet been consolidated. Citizen Offices have made it much easier and more efficient for citizens to deal with the authorities – and for public servants to carry out their work. A 2017 survey showed that 97 percent of the respondents were satisfied with the service provision, while 93 percent of the municipal staff said MMIS had considerably facilitated their work.

In April 2019, amid the decentralization of power and functions, the Armenian government delegated more than 60 state administrative services to the municipalities that operate a Citizen Office, enabling citizens to receive both municipal and state services in one location.

In 2015, a Citizen Office was established in Tumanyan, a 4 100-strong municipality of seven settlements. Located 150 km north of the capital at an elevation of about 800 m asl, Tumanyan is surrounded by mountains of over 2 000 m asl. “Grandpa” Zhora is one of the municipality’s oldest inhabitants. Sceptical about the merger of municipalities at first, he was pleasantly surprised at the positive results: “Night lighting has been repaired here – this means I can spend more time in my garden, especially at the height of cultivation season. The Citizen Office is near my house, so I go in person to pay the land tax. Processes are faster now, and the staff members know me and do their best to assist me.”

- Strong government ownership in tandem with well-coordinated donor assistance is a prerequisite for the sustainable implementation of a complex reform such as Local Self-Governance (LSG).
- Harmonization and alignment between capacity building of municipal staff and investments in infrastructure are important factors in achieving tangible, broad-scale improvements in public service provision and local economic development.
- The success and pace of the LSG reform depend on well-targeted, consistent and continuous communication between the central and local authorities.



Zhora in his garden (Good Governance for Local Development, South Caucasus)

## References and further reading

Note: URLs were last checked on 23 September 2020.

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