

**SOCIAL CAPITAL, CIVIC
ENGAGEMENT AND THE
PERFORMANCE OF LOCAL SELF-
GOVERNMENT IN AZERBAIJAN**

The research questions:

- 1. What is the role of social capital in civic engagement in the municipalities of three regions of Azerbaijan: Baku, Khachmaz and Masalli?**
- 2. How are the norms and networks of civic engagement linked to the quality of public life and the performance of local government?**

The research hypothesis

- Weak social relations (low levels of mutual aid, cooperation and trust) and insufficient community building skills among the people (getting together to resolve common problems) are the main factors contributing to explaining weak civil engagement in Azerbaijan.

Methodology and methods of research

- A questionnaire survey
- 300 respondents in total and 100 from each region were surveyed in our research.
- We have conducted qualitative research – focus groups and targeted interviews before the mass surveys.
- We also interviewed several experts on local government including representatives of government and non-government organizations as well as members of some municipalities and have also analyzed the major laws and statistical data related to the problem being studied.

PART I. GENERAL CHARACTERISTIC OF MUNICIPALITIES IN AZERBAIJAN

- The new Constitution of Azerbaijan Republic (12 December, 1995) became the primary basis for the establishment of local self-government in the country.
- In 1995, Milli Mejlis, the parliament of the country, has created the standing commission on local self-government for preparation of a package of appropriate laws.
- The campaign for creation of municipalities actually began after July 1999 when The Law on Municipal Elections and The Law on the Status of Municipalities were adopted.
- The first municipal elections took place on December 12, 1999 and the newly elected local governments started their activity in January, 2000.

PART II.SOCIAL CAPITAL IN COMMUNITIES

- Social capital is defined by academic scientists, on the one hand, as civic participation, and, on the other hand, as the networks of cooperation and solidarity (Sandra 2005).
- We understand the social capital as a certain set of informal values, tolerance, social trust, norms and networks of voluntary associations that permit people to coordinate and cooperate for mutual benefit.

Relative isolation in his/her world (individual and family) and weak social ties are reflected in how respondents prefer to spend their spare time. The majority of them prefer a narrow family circle to wide public relations (Table 1).

- As Robert Putnam notes, "strong" interpersonal ties (such as family-relative and intimate-friendly) are less important, than "weak" ties (such as acquaintances or memberships in secondary groups) which, in turn, rally a community and intensify collective action (Putnam 1993, 175). Strong enough family/relative relations are the reason for an absence of the wide, generalized social trust outside family. The narrow 'radius of trust' is characteristic for them. Intra-group solidarity limits the ability of group members to cooperate with people that are placed outside the group (Rajab et al. 2007, 19).

Table 1

Variants of answers	Baku	Khachmaz	Masalli
Read newspapers	6	16	31
Read books	28	12	14
Spend my time with family 32 36	32	36	22
I go to coffee-house/ <i>chaykhana</i>	6	11	9
Spend my time with friends 3 8	3	8	6
Watch TV	12	5	8
Work on the Internet	1	0	0
Engaged in a hobby	3	1	0
Go in for sports	0	0	5
Spend my time with the neighbors	3	0	0
Visit to my relatives	2	0	0
Do my homework	4	4	1
Work on my household	0	7	4

Table 2

**Answer distribution of respondents on trust to people
(In percentage to number of interrogated)**

Variants of answers	Baku	Khachmaz	Masalli
People can be trusted	30	47	37
In relations with people it is necessary to be cautious	70	53	63

- Therefore, in Azerbaijan, which insignificantly differs from other post-Soviet republics, public mistrust is widely spread. The previous experience with a totalitarian regime and “a socialist way of life” has left many people upset and it, in any measure, contributes to a high level of interpersonal mistrust in Azerbaijan society.
- However, we could also reveal the positive aspects which are able to promote development of the social capital. For instance, it has been found that residing in close areas with people for prolonged periods in a certain territory helps them know each other better which in turn causes good relations between each other that positively influence their lives and labor activity and as a result, the territory on which they live, is considered their native lands (Table 3).

Table 3

**Answer distribution of respondents to the question
“Does sharing a close residence and knowing the people for a
long time positively influence the activities of the local
municipality?”**

Variants of answers	Baku	Khachmaz	Masalli
Yes	39	92	70
No	34	4	12
It is difficult to say	27	4	18

- **The Azerbaijan society is characterized as having a high level of tolerance.** Actually, tolerance is the widely accepted norm and there are very few problems with xenophobia and intolerance in relation to any national/ethnic or religious groups.
- A very insignificant quantity of respondents would express a xenophobic attitude to persons of other culture who have moved near to them (in Baku - 11 %, in Khachmaz - 3 % and in Masalli - 9 %).

Relationship between NGOs and the municipalities.

- As we have learned through several queries, such cooperation is achieved mainly because of grants.
- NGOs form projects and municipalities implement them.
- Cooperation between NGOs and municipalities also include the trainings of both people among the population as well as municipality employees.
- Another kind of cooperation is the search for donor organizations for the realization of concrete work among the population within a municipality. For example, Masalli district's Chahirli municipality works with one of the foreign NGOs (USA) and is currently implementing three projects.
- One of the problems of cooperation between NGOs, and municipalities and involving the communities to these projects is the fact that NGOs themselves choose the municipalities for cooperation.

- Citizen membership in NGOs and their participation in joint projects conducted by both the municipality and NGOs remain very low **(Table 4; 5).**

Table 4

**Respondents who
are members of
associations
(In percentage to
number of
interrogated)**

Variants of answers	Bak u	Khach maz	Masalli
Yes	13	9	31
No	87	91	69

Table 5

**Participation of
respondents in projects
with local municipality
or NGO
(In percentage to
number of interrogated)**

Variants of answers	Bak u	Khach maz	Masalli
Yes	13	26	51
No	87	74	49

PHILANTHROPY

- One of the essential features of the social capital is altruism, philanthropy. In Azerbaijan philanthropy had its roots before the construction of communism. However, it was almost reduced to nothing after the establishment of the authority of the Soviets. Today, with the development of a market economy, these traditions revive again.

However, there are problems which can be subdivided into three parts: **legal, socio- psychological and organizational.**

- **First**, the absence of a law about philanthropic or charitable activities, on the one hand, and tax privileges on the other hand, result in a decrease of motivation for people to make individual donations.
- Donors do not wish to give money when a significant portion goes toward taxes instead of investment in socially beneficial programs or projects.
- Not last role in it perform also such factors, as fear for the excessive information on sources of the incomes and bureaucratic red tape, connected with official registration of documents for planned work.

- **The second** aspect consists of the fact that solvent people are engaged in charity under their own initiative, not testing special needs in advertising. Here is other aspect of the problem arises: they are willing to invest money when they know the chairman of municipality or its members personally.
- **Finally**, it is necessary to speak about the organizational aspect: the inability and inexperience of municipalities to build relationships with possible donors. The philanthropist rarely transfers money to the budget of a municipality, preferring to provide the help directly, without intermediaries (executive authority or the government of municipality).
- In an article about the budgets of municipalities there is a discussion on other methods of assistance. The point made is to allow such people as philanthropists to be involved in the process of drawing up the municipal budget and show their contributions in the budget.

- The awareness of respondents to the actions charities and philanthropists remains very low. (Table 6).
- Generalizing charities in municipalities, it is possible to come to the following conclusions: philanthropy in communities, as a whole, is weakly developed and is explained by objective and subjective reasons; philanthropy in districts is developed more than in the capital city of Baku, and finally, people in the districts are more aware of who is involved in charity than those in the capital.

Table 6

**Answer distribution of respondents to the question
“Are you informed on material aid of any philanthropist
to the local municipality?”
(In percentage to number of interrogated)**

Variants of answers	Baku	Khachmaz	Masalli
Yes	12	41	52
No	88	59	48

- According to our research, the basic kinds of works which are carried out by municipalities which are most widely known by respondents are: construction of roads (63% of respondents in Khachmaz are informed on it, 54% - in Masalli and 35% - in Baku), work on an improvement of territory (accordingly 31% of respondents in Khachmaz, 27% - in Baku and 21% - in Masalli) and building of parks (14 % - Baku, 7 % - Masalli and 1 % - Khachmaz).
- Naturally, municipalities carry out also other works that are not named here. However, on our parameters, respondents are most informed of these activities.

TABLE 7

**Knowledge of respondents of the work done by local municipality
(In percentage to number of interrogated)**

Variants of answers	Baku	Khachmaz	Masalli
Yes	20	85	85
No	80	15	15

- **What, in opinion of respondents, is the main thing for the improvement of work of the municipality?**
- In all regions, respondents consider the holding of fair elections as most important. In Baku it is considered so by 52% of respondents, in Masalli - 45%, and in Khachmaz - 34%.
- The next highest percentages of answers went to: correct personnel selection (in Baku - 18%), improvement of financial opportunities of municipalities (in Khachmaz - 19 %) and providing investment with additional powers to the municipalities (in Masalli - 16%).

PART III. CIVIL PARTICIPATION IN MUNICIPALITIES

Over the last several years in Azerbaijan, citizens began to apply to municipalities to resolve their problems more than ever before.

- This is confirmed with the data from our research. To the question **“Have you applied to the local municipality for help in economic, social and other problems?”** 76% of respondents answered positively from Masalli, 59% from Khachmaz and 10% from Baku. These appeals in individual and collective forms are carried out, respectively, in Khachmaz at 55% and 41%, 50% and 32% in Masalli, and 25% and 34% in Baku. Complete help from municipalities was given to 44% of respondents from Masalli, 49% from Khachmaz and 12% from Baku. The help received “in a certain level” and “in an insignificant level” from the municipality was recorded at 36% and 10% of respondents from Masalli, 31% and 9% from Khachmaz and 4% and 72% of respondents from Baku.

What concrete help have respondents received from municipalities? [Table 8](#)

- **Do respondents participate at the municipality assemblies?**

To this question, "yes" was answered by 74% of the respondents from Khachmaz, 59% from Masalli and 10% from Baku.

Table 8

**Concrete help received by respondents from municipalities
(In percentage to number of interrogated)**

Variants of answers	Baku	Khachmaz	Masalli
Received material aid	12	22	33
Received the help in the decision of household problems	24	12	17
Received the help in the decision of municipal problems	19	13	8
Received the help in the decision of other problems	34	53	30
Other answers	11	0	12

- **These results show that the strength of social ties in a city, and especially in the capital, is lower, than in a village. Generally, in city municipalities, work with citizens is constructed poorly.**
- **People apply to municipalities when they are interested with a certain problem. Many people even do not know where the municipality is situated.**
- **In a district centre and villages people know each other better than in the capital: they have lived closely together for a long time, and knowledge of the events occurring in their municipality several times lightens the situation.**

- Inside Azerbaijani culture, there are some traditional forms of a civil society.
- It is possible to relate to them. For example, city (*mahalla*) or rural (council of elders or councils of *aksakkals*) communities represent unorganized structures of mutual support. In these communal associations people gather to solve the common social problems and to provide informal services.
- According to The Law on the Status of Municipalities and Model Provision on Local Committees in the municipality territories for the decision of problems of the population can be created voluntary associations - ***mahalla* committees.**

- The *mahalla* committees are able to carry out their responsibilities due to voluntary donations which are not forbidden by the Azerbaijan legislation.
- In the territory of Yasamal municipality of capital, there are more than 60 *mahalla* committees. In Baladjari there are about 10 *mahalla* committees.

Table 9

**Knowledge of respondents about *mahalla* committees or Council of elders in their territory
(In percentage to number of interrogated)**

Variants of answers	Baku	Khachmaz	Masalli
Yes	12	46	67
No	88	54	33

- **How do respondents assess the activity of the municipality?**
- It is highly estimated by the respondents of Masalli (“so-so” - 15 %, “high” - 59 % and “very high” - 22 %) and Khachmaz districts (“so-so” - 14 %, “high” - 49 % and “very high” - 27 %). Unfortunately, respondents did feel the same in the capital (“very low” - 77% and “low” - 7%).

- **We asked the respondents about the practical role the population can play in the affairs of local municipality.**
- Answers were distributed as follows: provide physical help by 36% of respondents from Baku, 61% from Khachmaz and 48 % from Masalli; help from their own means by 20% of respondents of Baku, 14 % in Khachmaz and 40% in Masalli. At last, 44% of respondents from Baku, 25% from Khachmaz and 12% from Masalli said they can participate in public discussions.

- **What prevents respondents to participate closely in the work of the local municipality?**

In Baku, the main obstacles respondents see are insufficient information about activity of local municipalities (38%) and mistrust to any changes (18%).
In Khachmaz and Masalli the majority of respondents do not see any obstacles in the way of their participation in the affairs of their municipality (74% and 54%, respectively). The second most common answers in these districts were insufficient knowledge of respondents of activity of local municipalities at 10% and 12%, respectively.

THE CONCLUSION

- **Holding fair elections, realization of correct personnel selection and the improvement of financial opportunities of municipalities are the major problems in reforming municipalities.**
- **Weak civil traditions, accompanied with the undermining of all forms of horizontal connections during Soviet times, have led to a loss of social trust within the civil society. Building of the social capital and reform of the government of local self-government in these conditions demands big efforts from both the government and citizens.**
- **In city municipalities, work with citizens in general is done more poorly than in district centers or villages where people know each other better, than in the capital, Baku. This is due to the fact that they have lived for a long time in close neighborhoods and have knowledge of the events occurring in their municipality.**
- **The social capital which is situated in a space of family-relative relations is the reason of low trust which is tested by respondents with the survey we conducted studying the respondents' relations to others.**

- **The level of involvement of citizens in various sorts of associations and participation in joint projects of municipalities with NGO remains low.**
- **Relative isolation in the world (individual and family) negatively influences valuable expectations of citizens. Also due to their relative isolation, people do not see essential shifts in the spiritual relations.**
- **There is a necessity for regulation, legalization and encouragement of charities for communities and informing the communities of these affairs. Both, state bodies, and municipalities should be involved in these activities.**

- **Despite of the existing problems, last year appeals in Azerbaijan from citizens to their municipalities have increased. *However, as a whole, in city municipalities work with citizens is conducted more poorly than in rural municipalities.* One of the main reasons is low density and strength of social ties in city in comparison with the districts.**
- **In order for municipalities to effectively work with the population, our study has found that it is necessary to report on a regular basis to the population about the work that has been completed, to carry out frequent meetings with the population, to react operatively to appeals of the population to achieve a transparency of budgetary charges of municipality and to raise a level of competence of the staff among other tasks.**

- **It is also necessary to gradually replace the still prevailing vertical networks of civil participation with the horizontal form of interaction in communities. Any practice, deeply inveterate on the local level, (for example, award of a rank of “honorable citizen”, etc.) should be closely investigated and integrated into the democratic process.**
- **This study has shown that it is necessary for Azerbaijan, as one of the post-Soviet countries and part of the third world, to develop and strengthen the social capital to create last changes in economic, social and political aspects of daily life.**

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