



LIMITS AND PROMISES OF PARTICIPATORY URBAN PLANNING: EXPERIENCE FROM CIVIC ADVISORY BOARDS AND URBAN ACTIVISTS IN TBILISI

COBISS 1.01

DOI: 10.4312/RYOY9078

Abstract

Despite efforts to decentralize governance and establish civic advisory boards (CABs) as a mandatory participatory mechanism in Tbilisi, CAB members and urban activists remain dissatisfied with governance and urban planning processes. This study employs qualitative methods, including 34 semi-structured interviews, analysis of administrative data, and a review of legislation and planning documents. It examines participatory urban experiences, assessing the effectiveness of CABs and the role of urban movements. The findings reveal challenges in communication, low public awareness, and limited influence on decision-making. CAB members and activists report weak engagement with the mayor's office and a consistent disregard for civic input, resulting in ongoing protests that are dismissed by authorities. Strengthening CABs is crucial to ensuring meaningful citizen participation, bridging the gap between the public and policymakers, and addressing the influence of political and economic elites in urban decision-making.

Keywords: participatory planning, urban governance, civic advisory board, urban movements, Tbilisi, Georgia

⋮ *Department of Human Geography, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi University, Tchavtchavadze Avenue 8, 0179 Tbilisi, Georgia (PhD student in Human Geography)
⋮ e-mail: natia.kekenadze@tsu.ge

OMEJITVE IN OBLJUBE PARTICIPATIVNEGA URBANISTIČNEGA NAČRTOVANJA: IZKUŠNJE CIVILNIH SVETOVALNIH ODBOROV IN MESTNIH AKTIVISTOV V TBILISIJU

Izvleček

Kljub prizadevanjem za decentralizacijo upravljanja in vzpostavitev civilnih svetovalnih odborov (CSO) kot obveznega participativnega mehanizma v Tbilisiju so člani CSO-jev in urbani aktivisti še vedno nezadovoljni s procesi upravljanja in urbanističnega načrtovanja. Študija s pomočjo kvalitativnih metod, vključno s 34 polstrukturiranimi intervjuji, analizo upravnih podatkov ter pregledom zakonodaje in dokumentov o načrtovanju, raziskuje participativne urbane izkušnje, ocenjuje učinkovitost CSO-jev in vlogo urbanih gibanj. Ugotovitve razkrivajo izzive pri komuniciranju, omejeno ozaveščenost javnosti in minimalen vpliv na sprejemanje odločitev. Člani CSO-jev in aktivisti poročajo o šibkem sodelovanju z županovim uradom in neupoštevanju njihovega prispevka, kar vodi v nenehne proteste, ki jih oblasti zavračajo. Krepitev CSO-jev je ključna za zagotavljanje udeležbe državljanov in premostitev vrzeli med javnostjo in oblikovalci politik ter za zmanjšanje vpliva politične in gospodarske elite na sprejemanje odločitev v mestih.

Gljučne besede: participativno načrtovanje, mestno upravljanje, civilni svetovalni odbori, urbana gibanja, Tbilisi, Gruzija

1 INTRODUCTION

Public participation in urban planning is a cornerstone of democratic governance, enabling citizens to shape the future of their neighborhoods and cities. In Georgia, various mechanisms have been introduced to enhance public participation, with civic advisory boards (CABs) serving as a formalized tool for participatory engagement. CABs became a mandatory component of decentralization reforms with the amendment of the law on local self-government (Organic Law of Georgia: Local Self-Government Code, 2014), which aims to strengthen participatory democracy at the local level. Unlike informal or voluntary initiatives, CABs, as an advisory body to the mayor, provide a structured approach to participatory planning, making them a valuable case study for examining the broader dynamics of citizen participation in urban governance. Despite its institutionalization, the influence of CABs on urban decision-making remains ambiguous.

Tbilisi, the capital and largest city in Georgia, has undergone a profound urban transformation since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. As a post-socialist city, it has struggled with rapid privatization, unregulated urban development, and

shifting governance structures (Van Assche & Salukvadze, 2011). Georgia's changing political landscape has had a significant impact on the urban planning process. In contrast to the centralized planning of the Soviet era, contemporary urban planning in Tbilisi is characterized by market-driven policies, a weak institutional framework, and a changing relationship between the state and private entities (Salukvadze & Golubchikov, 2016).

These governance dynamics have contributed to the erosion of public spaces, a decline in participatory planning mechanisms, and growing civic discontent. In response, civil society organizations and urban activists have mobilized to advocate for more inclusive urban governance (Rekhviashvili et al., 2020). Over the past decade, Tbilisi has seen large-scale protests over controversial urban developments, including Gudiashvili Square (2012), Budapest Hotel in Vake Park (2014), Panorama Tbilisi (2015), Dighomi Forest (2019), Dighomi Meadows (2020), and the former Hippodrome (2021). The latter two protests are still ongoing (2025).

Various aspects of urban planning in Tbilisi have been examined in the academic literature, including planning documents such as the Tbilisi Master Plan (Linkous, 2024), planning strategies (Salukvadze & Van Assche, 2022), and urban movements (Dundua et al., 2022; Gogishvili & Harris-Brands, 2019; Rekhviashvili et al., 2020). However, there is still a gap in understanding the interplay between institutional participatory mechanisms and urban activism. To address this, the 2021–2023 study investigates participatory urban planning practices, focusing on the institutional frameworks and experiences of the urban movement in Tbilisi.

This study examines how institutional participatory mechanisms, in particular CABs, function in Tbilisi. It also explores why urban protests have occurred despite mandatory participatory mechanisms and identifies the key actors influencing urban decision-making. This research contributes to a broader understanding of citizen participation in post-socialist urban governance by systematically analyzing the interaction between formal participatory mechanisms and urban activism. It contributes to a broader discussion on civic engagement in urban governance. The study has three main objectives; 1) It analyzes the institutional framework governing participatory urban planning in Tbilisi, including the relevant legislation and administrative mechanisms; 2) it assesses the experiences and perspectives of civic advisory board members, urban activists, and key stakeholders involved in participatory planning processes; 3) it identifies the main challenges and limitations in the implementation of participatory urban planning in Tbilisi.

The paper is organized into four sections, that are aligned with the research objectives and contribute to the overall goal of examining participatory urban planning practices in Tbilisi. The first section describes the research methodology and explains the data collection and analysis techniques used to investigate the participatory planning mechanisms. The second section provides an overview of the existing literature on participatory urban governance and urban transformation in post-socialist cities,

thus establishing the theoretical basis for the study. The third section examines urban transformation and urban planning in post-socialist Georgia, focusing on the institutional structure of participatory mechanisms such as the CAB. By contextualizing the legal and administrative framework governing participatory planning, this section contributes to the study's goal of analyzing the institutional environment that shapes urban governance in Tbilisi. The final section presents the empirical findings, discussing urban movements and CAB practices based on the collected data. This section directly addresses the research goal of identifying main challenges and limitations of participatory urban planning by presenting the insights from CAB members, urban activists, and other stakeholders. The findings contribute to a broader discussion on citizen engagement and its impact on urban governance, and emphasize the relevance of the study within the global discourse on participatory planning.

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative research approach to explore participatory planning experiences in Tbilisi. It incorporates in-depth interviews and document analysis to fully understand the mechanisms, challenges, and effectiveness of participatory urban governance.

The study is based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 34 informants involved in the urban planning processes in Tbilisi. The interview sample included 15 members of Tbilisi's CABs (selected through purposive sampling), 13 urban activists (selected using snowball sampling based on two criteria: at least ten years of experience as activists and active participation in the Tbilisi's urban movements) and seven key informants, including two urban planners, two representatives of the city administration, and two developers. Interviews were conducted between October 2021 and December 2023 and lasted between one and two and a half hours. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed. In addition to the interviews, biographical information was collected from urban activists who shared narratives about their civil activism backgrounds, motivations, and involvement in urban movements.

The interview transcripts were analyzed using a thematic analysis that followed a structured coding framework based on the research questions. The process began with an initial coding, where key themes were identified based on the informants' narratives. These themes were later categorized into broader topics such as participation, institutional mechanisms, and challenges. MAXQDA software was used to organize and systematically analyze the qualitative data to ensure methodological rigor and consistency.

The research adhered to strict ethical guidelines to ensure participant confidentiality and compliance with legal frameworks. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews, and personal data were anonymized under the Law of Georgia on Personal Data Protection.

Secondary data sources included legislative and policy documents, such as the Organic Law of Georgia: Local Self-Government Code, the Code of Spatial Planning, Architectural, and Construction Activities of Georgia, and the 2019 Tbilisi Master Plan. Minutes from CAB meetings were also analyzed. Official reports and statistical data on participatory planning from Tbilisi City Hall provided further contextual information.

3 PARTICIPATORY URBAN PLANNING WITHIN THE URBAN TRANSFORMATION

A crucial aspect of contemporary urban governance is participatory planning, which integrates local stakeholders into the decision-making process. However, as the literature suggests, participatory planning is often hindered by institutional constraints, power imbalances, and varying level of civic engagement (Lazega & Pattison, 2001; Mansuri & Rao, 2013; White, 1996). This section outlines key theoretical frameworks related to participatory urban governance, the role of civil society organizations, and urban movements in fostering inclusive decision-making.

Participation is an umbrella term that refers to the involvement of citizens in governmental decision-making processes. Glass (1979, 180–187) defines citizen participation as “providing citizens with opportunities to take part in governmental decisions or planning processes” and emphasizes participation as an engagement that enhances well-being, security, and self-esteem. More recent scholars emphasize that participation is not only about providing input but also about asserting influence and power. Pickvance (2003) notes that contemporary participation has evolved beyond formal rights of objection to become a mechanism for conflict resolution and active engagement in shaping urban development.

Participatory urban planning extends the above principles to urban governance. Arnstein’s (1969) classic “ladder of participation” framework categorizes different levels of citizen involvement, from manipulation to complete citizen control. Participatory urban planning empowers communities by involving them in decision-making processes. Swyngedouw (2010) emphasizes that participation prevents top-down urban planning failures. Similarly, Sassen (1996) criticizes large-scale corporate takeovers that endanger democratic planning by prioritizing private interests over community needs.

Furthermore, *participatory urban planning* is crucial for tackling inequalities in urban governance. Anand (2012) notes that exclusion from decision-making processes leads to “abjection”, where marginalized communities are denied access to urban benefits. Mansuri and Rao (2013) argue that participatory mechanisms must address power imbalances in order to be effective and ensure that all stakeholders – especially vulnerable groups – are included in the planning process.

The concept of the “*right to the city*”, introduced by Henri Lefebvre (1968) and further developed by David Harvey (2003), argues that democratic control of urban

resources is crucial for equitable development. Harvey emphasizes that participatory mechanisms should go beyond a purely consultative function and give citizens decision-making powers in urban planning. This aligns with White's (1996) argument that participatory planning falls short when political institutions lack a sincere commitment to democratic governance. He contends that participatory mechanisms or legal frameworks alone are inadequate when the broader political system is not open to participatory democracy. In such context, participation tends to be nominal (on paper) or at best instrumental (White, 1996).

Urban movements usually campaign for the preservation of public spaces, historical heritage, and housing rights. Civil society organizations (CSOs) and urban movements play an important role in participatory urban planning by advocating for inclusive governance and the protection of urban spaces. These movements often emerge in response to top-down urban development processes that exclude public participation. Shuib et al. (2015) argue that the lack of transparency in urban planning leads to a mobilization of civil society, as communities demand greater involvement in shaping their urban environments.

3.1 Urban transformation in post-socialist contexts

Urban transformation in post-socialist countries is characterized by political, economic, and social changes that influence governance structures, planning mechanisms, and civic engagement. The transition from socialism to market economies in post-socialist countries has had a significant impact on urban governance. The period from 1989 to 1992, which was marked by political and economic changes, led to different approaches to privatization and urban planning (Hirt, 2015; Sykora & Bouzarovski, 2011).

Sykora and Bouzarovski (2011) introduce the theory of “multiple transformations”, which identifies three key aspects of post-socialist urban transitions: 1) *Institutional transformations* – The restructuring of government institutions following democratization and decentralization. 2) *Changes in social practices* – The shift in civic engagement and participatory governance following political liberalization. 3) *Urban spatial transformations* – The impact of privatization, land-use changes, and emerging urban inequalities. Sykora and Bouzarovski's theory underlines that while institutional reforms have been carried out in parallel with democratic elections and the development of a market economy through privatization, the adjustments in urban planning remain ongoing.

Van Asche and Salukvadze (2011) highlight weaknesses of governance in the post-socialist countries, in particular the lack of planning professionals and ineffective participatory mechanisms. They argue that although participatory frameworks exist, they are often only nominal and have minimal influence on decision-making.

Although participation is in theory a central element of democratic urban governance, it remains constrained by institutional and power-related obstacles. In

post-socialist cities, urban governance structures must address these challenges in order to move beyond formal participation toward meaningful civic engagement. The following sections of this study examine the case of Tbilisi and explore how participatory mechanisms work in practice within its urban governance framework.

3.2 Urban transformation in post-socialist Tbilisi

Tbilisi is the capital of Georgia and has over one million inhabitants (Geostat, 2014). The foundations of the city's current urban planning context were laid in the early years following independence. Salukvadze and Van Assche (2022) describe the 1990s as a period marked by “weak institutions” and “poor governance.” After this turbulent decade – often referred to as the “dark nineties” – president Mikheil Saakashvili initiated a wave of neoliberal reforms after the “Rose Revolution” in 2003. These reforms promoted a model of “investor urbanism,” characterized by pro-business policies that favored certain interest groups. His government prioritized economic and urban development reforms, focusing on foreign investment and large-scale infrastructure projects over participatory planning. The post-2003 period saw extensive neoliberal urban restructuring, often at the expense of local communities' interests, as exemplified by projects such as the redevelopment of Old Tbilisi (Gentile, 2015). This approach led to growing public discontent and the emergence of urban protests. In contrast to the prevailing top-down and exclusionary practices, these protests represent grassroots resistance to the dominance of “big capital” in the urban development process. Political changes after 2012 did not dramatically shift these trends (Rekhvishvili et al., 2020). Continued neoliberal policies kept urban activists mobilized.

Salukvadze and Van Assche (2022) adapted the theory of multiple transformations to describe the complex urban development of Tbilisi through four distinct phases, each reflecting shift in governance, policy, and urban development priorities. 1) *Do-It-Yourself Urbanism* – a key feature of this period is informal construction and unregulated modifications by residents, especially the widespread extension of residential buildings. This phenomenon reflects the lack of adequate urban planning mechanisms and citizens' responses to housing shortages and inadequate infrastructure. 2) *Investor Urbanism* – As neoliberal urban policies took hold, private sector interests dominated urban development. New zoning laws enabled large-scale construction projects with minimal regulation, often disregarding historical context, architectural heritage, and citizen participation. 3) *Politicized Urbanism* – Large, symbolic projects featuring modern “glass and steel” architecture emerged, often used to project a vision of progress and modernization. These projects were frequently prioritized over more pressing urban needs, further marginalizing public participation in decision-making. 4) *Revisionist Urbanism* – The current phase is characterized by a reassessment of past urban policies and a growing recognition of the need for more sustainable, historically conscious, and participatory approaches to urban planning.

This framework helps to explain the evolution of Tbilisi’s urban landscape, shedding light on the tensions between deregulation, investment-driven development, political influence, and ongoing efforts to create a more inclusive and sustainable city. Linkous (2024) notes that the current phase reflects a response to a growing public discontent and argues that the adoption of Revised Land Use Master Plan in 2019 demonstrates a “pragmatic right to the city” approach.

4 CITIZEN PARTICIPATION FORMS IN GEORGIA AND POST-SOCIALIST COUNTRIES

The Constitution of Georgia addresses fundamental political rights and forms of indirect citizen participation, such as referendums and access to public information. However, these provisions do not provide a sufficient guarantee or basis for effective citizen participation.

Georgia aligned with the European Charter of Local Self-Government in 2004, committing itself to mechanisms of citizen participation. The Charter defines citizen participation as “the right of citizens to engage in the decision-making process”. A significant development occurred in July 2015 when the Georgian Parliament reviewed and adopted a legislative package defining various forms of citizen participation in local self-government. According to Georgian legislation, municipal bodies and officials must create organizational and material-technical conditions that allow citizens to participate fully in the activities of local self-government (Organic Law of Georgia: Local Self-Government Code, 2014). The legislation delineates the following mechanisms of citizen participation (Organic Law of Georgia: Local Self-Government Code, 2014):

- **Petition:** The right to submit a petition is granted to at least 1% of registered voters in the municipality, as well as to the people’s assembly and the chairman of the municipal council. A petition may propose a draft normative administrative-legal act or raise a specific demand or issue of public importance for the municipality and/or settlement. The petition may be rejected if it is not related to the functions of the municipality.
- **Civic advisory board (CAB):** The CAB was not mandatory for all municipalities until the Local Self-Government Code was amended in 2015, after which all municipalities were required to establish such boards. CABs consist of a small group of citizens, with a minimum of 10 members, and are intended to facilitate public consultation and input.
- **Participation in municipal council and commission meetings:** Special seating areas must be allocated for citizens in the meeting hall. If the number of attendees exceeds the number of available seats, the meeting should be broadcast live, or other technical means should be provided to allow people to follow the proceedings.
- **Public hearings:** Georgian legislation requires mayors and municipal council members to hold at least one public meeting per year with local residents to present

an annual activity report. Citizens may ask questions directly, and all registered voters in the municipality have the right to attend without restriction. The municipal body is also required to publicly disclose these reports.

- **General assembly of the settlement:** In settlements with fewer than 2,000 residents, community meetings can be convened to raise local concerns with municipal authorities. At the meeting, a representative is elected to lead the process and deliver the community's decisions to the municipality. These decisions can address any issue relevant to the settlement. The municipality is obliged to consider the meeting's decisions and respond to them

While other participatory mechanisms (such as petitions, general assemblies, and public hearings) give citizens the opportunity to voice their concerns, CABs provide a structured and continuous platform for citizen engagement in local governance. Unlike one-off consultations or petitions, CABs enable an ongoing dialog between local authorities and residents, ensuring that urban planning decisions reflect community interests over time.

CABs are consultative in discussions about land use, urban development projects, transportation systems, and infrastructure investments. In contrast, other participatory mechanisms, such as the General Assembly of the settlement, are limited to smaller rural areas with less than 2,000 inhabitants. However, CABs function at the municipal level, which makes them more relevant to the broader urban planning processes.

CABs facilitate the involvement of individual citizens, CSOs, and urban experts by creating a space where technical knowledge, policy expertise, and the insights of the local community can come together. This is particularly important for urban planning, where complex land-use, environmental, and socio-economic considerations require expert advice and citizen input.

Despite the formal establishment of CABs, their effectiveness in Georgian municipalities varies. According to the Local Self-Government Index 2019 (IDFI, 2019), 11 cities have not established a CAB, although the establishment of a CAB is required by law. However, the index also shows that the effectiveness of CABs is increasing in larger cities as Batumi, Kutaisi, and Rustavi, as evidenced by the increasing number of legal issues submitted to these boards. The proportion of citizen participation in the boards has also increased. The research findings from the Local Self-Government Index 2021 show that implemented CABs can bridge the gap between citizens and municipalities. Initiatives submitted by the boards to the mayor have increased by 6% compared to the 2017 assessment and by 4% compared to the 2019 evaluation. There is a 3% increase compared to 2017 and a 6% decrease compared to 2019 in the indicators for issues presented to the board by the mayor. This data is based only on the municipalities where board meetings were held (IDFI, 2021). While these quantitative metrics suggest progress, there is limited research that directly assesses the effectiveness of CABs, including the evaluations and expectations of their members.

In other post-Soviet cities, similar advisory boards operate under different conditions. In Lithuania, for example participatory mechanisms were strengthened after accession to the European Union, allowing municipalities to integrate citizens' advisory bodies into the local governance (Bardauskienė, 2018). In Ukraine, decentralization reforms have strengthened citizen engagement through advisory councils, especially in cities such as Lviv and Kyiv, where participatory mechanisms are institutionalized in urban governance (Zheltovskyy, 2019). Similarly, in Estonia, participatory budgeting and advisory councils in Tallinn and Tartu have been instrumental in involving citizens in urban development projects and their decisions must be implemented by the mayors (Kattel et al., 2018).

Organizations such as Urbanlab Yerevan have been instrumental in promoting participatory urban planning in Armenia. They engage in research, consultation and citizen participation to improve the built environment and serve as a bridge between citizens and municipal authorities. Such initiatives highlight the potential for advisory boards to positively influence urban development if they are effectively integrated into the planning system (Urbanlab, 2021).

5 CIVIC ADVISORY BOARDS IN TBILISI

Following the 2015 amendments to the Local Self-Government Code, the establishment of CABs became mandatory for all Georgian municipalities. These amendments required each municipality to form a board of at least 10 members.

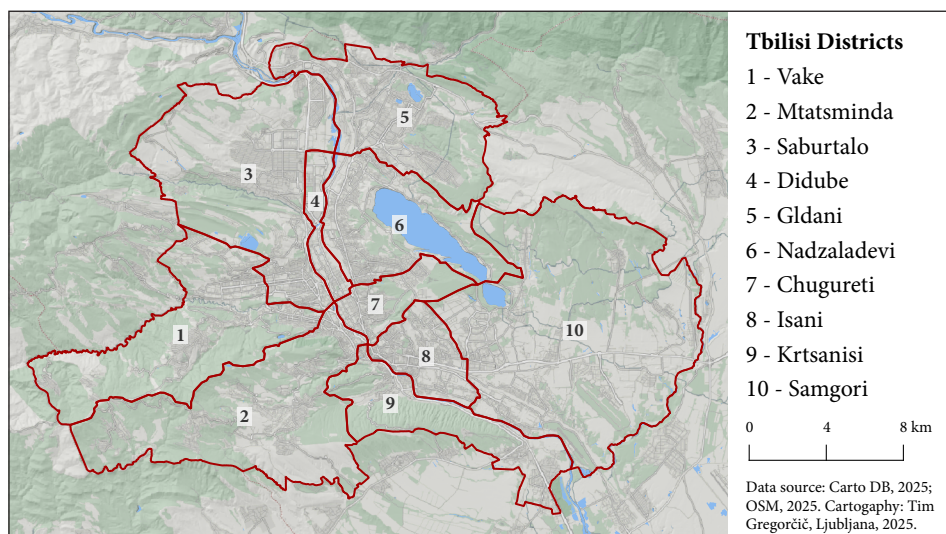
Tbilisi is divided into ten districts: Mtatsminda, Vake, Saburtalo, Krtsanisi, Isani, Samgori, Chugureti, Didube, Nadzaladevi, and Gldani (Figure 1). Accordingly, ten CABs are expected to operate within the city. CABs function under the authority of the district administration and are required to meet at least once every three months. Their meetings must be documented in official minutes, which must be made public within ten days, as stipulated in Article 86 of the Local Self-Government Code (Organic Law of Georgia: Local Self-Government Code, 2014).

The CAB serves as an advisory body to the mayor of municipality. Its primary role is to facilitate citizen participation in local governance and ensure that the diverse community voices are considered in municipal decision-making processes. While the establishment of CABs is legally mandated, the decisions made by their members—comprising citizens, experts, and representatives of civil society organizations—are advisory in nature. The mayor is not legally required to implement its recommendations but is obliged to attend the meetings and cooperate with citizens as part of the governance process.

All major planning initiatives for Tbilisi, including the Green City Action Plan (2017), Tbilisi 2030: From Stability to Sustainability (2019), Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan (2019), Green City Initiatives (2021), and Fair Share City: Guidelines for Socially Inclusive and Gender-Responsive Residential Development (2022), initiated by the city hall in 2017, incorporate participatory urban planning procedures.

The establishment of CABs in Tbilisi and other post-Soviet cities marks a significant step toward participatory governance. However, their effectiveness largely depends on political will, institutional support, and active engagement of civil society. Comparative experiences suggest that, when effectively implemented, CAB can serve as vital platforms for citizen involvement in urban development.

Figure 1: Map of districts in Tbilisi.



The case of Tbilisi will provide further insights into how such advisory mechanisms can be strengthened to promote democratic urban governance. Over the past decade, urban movements in Tbilisi have gained experience in what may be termed “*street participatory planning*”, evolving from street protests and physical occupations of public spaces to legal actions that influenced urban planning and governance decisions. The growing number of citizen-led protests against controversial development projects highlights the limitations of mandatory participatory mechanisms, raising critical questions about the effectiveness of initiatives such as CAB.

In addition, the Tbilisi municipality has occasionally introduced new participatory tools. In 2023, Tbilisi City Hall launched a “Fix Tbilisi” mobile application as a platform for interaction between citizens and the municipality. The app allows users to report issues across four categories: roads, trees and plants, lighting, and parks. Citizens can submit information about damaged infrastructure by uploading photos, descriptions, and addresses. The municipality has emphasized its commitment to responding to citizen submissions, stating:

“Tbilisi City Hall will have an obligation to respond in compliance with the setup procedures to the fixed problem in the relevant time frame.” (Municipal Government of the City of Tbilisi, 2018)

Following the app’s launch, City Mayor Kakha Kaladze stated:

“There is quite a lot of activity; there are already over 180 messages [...] With your support and participation, it will be possible to fix everything. It is an exciting program, and I am sure it will function successfully.” (Georgian News Agency, 2023)

The app shows how important it is to involve citizens in urban governance. It builds upon earlier initiative, “Your Idea to the City Mayor” (2018), which functioned as an online platform for participatory decision-making. However, this initiative was phased out by 2020 due to low citizen engagement and the limited implementation of submitted proposals (Chitishvili, 2018). While these platforms demonstrate a desire to involve citizens in urban governance, research indicates that they frequently fail to deliver results. Given these limitations, this study analyzes ongoing structured participatory institutional mechanisms, such as CABs, and experiences in urban activism.

6 FROM PARTICIPATORY URBAN PLANNING MECHANISMS TO STREET PROTEST

CABs in Tbilisi were established at the district administration level, with their functioning procedures defined by regulations approved by each district head. In other Georgian cities, CABs are direct consultative bodies within the mayor’s office. This arrangement enables direct communication with the mayor and allows the boards to engage in discussions on large-scale urban development projects. By contrast, in Tbilisi CABs operate under district administrations, which have limited authority over large-scale urban projects. As a result, citizens’ ability to influence urban development at the neighborhood level is significantly constrained. When citizens’ needs and concerns extend beyond the competence of district administrations, the district head becomes the primary voice representing citizens’ concerns and is responsible for conveying this information to the mayor of Tbilisi.

All ten districts of the city have their own specific regulations governing CAB operations. Before the call for applications is announced, a selection commission is formed to choose board members. The district head appoints the members of the commission, which, according to survey interviews, poses a key challenge to the CAB process by risking reduced transparency and lack of competition. Once the application process begins, citizens who wish to become CAB members must submit the required documentation and gather signatures from at least 50 supporters

residing in their respective district. Following this, candidates are interviewed by the selection commission.

The CAB meetings typically begin with the presentation of the agenda, followed by opinions and discussions from board members. The opinions are then summarized and detailed recommendations are made to the district head. For example, minutes from Saburtalo, Gldani, and Didube districts show that district heads share information about budgets, legal acts, and other projects with the board. However, in some cases, the minutes lack specific details about the discussions or the opinions expressed by members.

Despite this inconsistency, the minutes of CAB meetings offer valuable insights into members' views and concerns on urban issues as well as challenges they face in getting their recommendations implemented. For example, minutes from Saburtalo and Isani districts highlight several pressing concerns, such as housing problems, threats to protected green areas, and the need for neighborhood infrastructure improvements. These records illustrate citizens' efforts to participate in urban planning processes and express their priorities. Minutes indicate that civic advisory board members are also concerned that their recommendations were not being adequately addressed or followed up on.

To raise public awareness of CABs, Tbilisi's district administrations use a variety of outreach methods, including updates on official websites and social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. However, these communication channels do not meet the standards of Georgian legislation regarding transparency and informativeness. The websites are not regularly updated and frequently lack information about the activities and structure of the CABs.

Many district administrations post photos of board meetings on their official Facebook pages, but these posts provide limited information about the urban issues discussed at the meetings. In addition to posting information on websites and Facebook, district administrations sometimes use other strategies to communicate with the public. For example, Saburtalo district administration has created a short informational video to promote CABs to residents. The need to raise awareness about CABs is also reflected in the minutes of board meetings:

“It was suggested that to increase the awareness and functions of the civic advisory board, more information about its members should be provided to the public.”
(Minutes 19, May 24, 2022)

This initiative shows the desire and, to some extent, the expectation of members that the board will operate successfully and increase its accountability through improved awareness. The district heads also do not systematize the completed projects made by CABs. The study informants indicate that better dissemination of CAB activities would help generate public interest and motivation to engage in these processes.

It would also increase trust in this mechanism and in participatory practices more broadly.

“Our neighborhood is quite active, and we communicate frequently with the district heads. There are many ideas. I remember learning about the advisory boards from a citizen, not our district head; I saw a post in a Facebook group. I was looking for ways to solve neighborhood problems and thus joined the board with great enthusiasm.” (Female, 56 years old)

6.1 CABs in practice

Next, the in-depth survey results are presented. The first section analyzes the functioning of CABs, while the second examines the consequences of their limitations, focusing on the role of urban activists, their motivation, and their reasons for mobilizing around urban issues.

It is not clear from the minutes whether the district head or the city mayor takes CAB decisions into consideration. Surveyed respondents note that opinions or complaints raised during meetings are often ignored or left unanswered. Most expert informants emphasize that low public interest in CABs is not solely the result of limited public awareness. Rather, negative experiences with CAB participation often lead to distrust and disengagement from participatory planning:

“Members of the CAB sat as listeners and spectators. No one was interested in our opinions; the head [district head] and a few officials did all the talking. I didn’t attend the last meeting because I felt it was pointless.” (Female, 39 years old)

“CAB meetings were not functional; we mostly listened to the head’s budget report. Meetings should have involved discussions and working groups. I had ideas, but unfortunately, nothing came of them.” (Male, 51 years old)

Interviews with CAB members reveal that their primary motivation for joining was to address neighborhood issues and engage directly with district heads. Citizens with prior experience in grassroots initiatives or submitting official statements to the district administration were particularly motivated to participate, believing that CABs provided a stronger institutional platform than individual petitions:

“I used to contact district administrators, but it required weekly visits or multiple calls. When I learned about CABs, I thought it would allow me to speak directly with the district head about new constructions. My first reaction was that it was a great initiative.” (Female, 40 years old)

An analysis of informants' narratives indicates that board meetings with the district head are largely informational rather than consultative. One CAB member reported that, out of six meetings attended, only one allowed for open discussion. In remaining meetings, board members merely listened to presentations delivered by the district head and other officials:

"[...] During and after the presentations, the format did not allow discussion. After one session, I asked to meet him directly to discuss the need for a sports stadium; I had the signatures of school teachers. As a sports teacher, he promised me, and soon, they started building a new stadium. However, that dialogue was informal and occurred outside the CAB." (Male, 48 years old)

Informants frequently highlight that the implementation of recommendations and initiatives submitted by the boards remains unclear. Moreover, there is no established practice of proactively publishing meeting minutes.

Expert informants emphasize that one of the main goals and outcomes of participatory urban planning is conflict prevention. Some respondents support this view. For instance, one respondent noted that after she raised concerns about infrastructure problems during the CAB meeting, the district head partially addressed her suggestions. She added that if no action had been taken, she and other activists would have resorted to public protest.

Current CAB regulations do not specify how implementation processes should unfold, which suggestions the district head considers, or whether citizens receive explanations when proposals are dismissed. These shortcomings are frequently echoed by respondents and documented in the CAB meeting minutes, reflecting widespread frustration and a lack of transparency:

"We CAB members believe district administrations do not adequately utilize our resources. The board should have real opportunities to function effectively." (Male, 42 years old)

In early 2020 and 2021, citizens proposed initiative working groups to address various urban issues. However, over time, their enthusiasm and motivation have declined. Interviews reveal that many citizens feel their influence on urban matters—particularly in large-scale decision-making—is limited and often disregarded.

Respondents identified several pressing community needs: the development of green and recreational spaces, improvements to transport mobility policies, repairs of damaged roads and sewer system, oversight of problematic construction projects, the creation of accessible environments for people with disabilities, and rehabilitating cultural centers:

“However, when I voiced it out loud, the head [district] said, ‘Why is she always arguing with me?’ To them, disagreement is perceived as arguing. They genuinely believe that what they decide is the best. [...] The park was eventually created [...], but it was done as the head liked it, not as the people wanted.” (Female, 45 years old)

In conclusion, practical experience with CABs in Tbilisi reveals several limitations in fostering democratic urban planning:

- *Low Public Awareness:* Public awareness about CABs remains limited, and their decisions lack sufficient legitimacy.
- *Communication Issues:* Meeting minutes reflect ongoing communication gaps between district heads and CABs.
- *Lack of Transparency:* Public information campaigns about CAB roles and activities are inconsistent, while district administration websites are poorly maintained and rarely updated.
- *Limited Influence:* CAB members often lack opportunities to present and discuss their initiatives during meetings. Citizen influence over key urban planning issues remains restricted.
- *Unclear Implementation Process:* It is not transparent which CAB recommendations are reviewed or acted upon by district leadership, contributing to public frustration and disengagement.

6.2 “Street participatory planning”

When legislation and institutional mechanisms fail, citizens take to the streets to reclaim their right to the city. The emergence of “street participatory planning” in Tbilisi highlights the limits of institutionalized citizen participation, particularly through CABs. While CABs were designed as formal mechanisms for public engagement in decision-making, their ineffectiveness has led many citizens to pursue alternative forms of action. Urban protests arise as a response to institutional failure, when formal participation channels do not provide real influence, citizens turn to the streets to assert their voice and agency.

The participants surveyed have different experiences. The analysis of CAB practices illustrates how citizens’ concerns transition from institutional participatory mechanisms to street protests. They may start with activism and later join CABs as a mandatory body to achieve participation in decision-making. However, when this also fails, they return to street activism:

“We realized that discussions within the board yielded no results, so several of us, independently of the board, wrote official letters and submitted petitions. However, the building was still constructed, and our efforts amounted to nothing. Following this, we started protesting, and only after that did our district head begin meeting with us.” (Female, 42 years old)

The activists we interviewed indicate that urban protests in Tbilisi typically emerge under one of two “street participatory planning” scenarios:

In the first scenario (*Institutional Participation Attempts*), citizens attempt to use institutional participatory mechanisms such as petitions, official letters addressed to the mayor or district heads, and meetings with responsible officials. Despite these efforts, such approaches often prove ineffective. In the second scenario (*Post-factum Awareness*), citizens become aware of construction projects or large-scale urban developments only after City Hall has made decisions. Due to a lack of public information, these projects proceed without citizen involvement. In these cases, the failure of institutional mechanisms or the absence of prior information compels citizens to resort to street protests to make their voices heard and influence urban development decisions.

The study reveals that Tbilisi’s citizens mobilize to protest issues related to public and green spaces, historical and cultural heritage conservation, and urban development regulations. Activists characterize the city mayor’s and district administration’s communication as “hostile”, “non-collaborative”, “uncooperative”, and “dismissive”. Respondents involved in urban protests suggest that municipalities make decisions regarding urban spaces without considering the interests of residents.

One respondent emphasized that corruption has become a central issue in Georgia, driving many of the recent urban protests. Nearly all survey respondents reported having engaged in discussions with local businesses about construction projects. Many noted that “behind-the-door” agreements have become a common practice in Tbilisi:

“The city mayor makes all major decisions without citizen input; one phone call and everything is settled with money.” (Male, 41 years old)

“We met with representatives of Tbilisi City Hall, then with our district heads, and we also used Tbilisi’s online platform ‘Your Idea to the Mayor.’ However, no one was interested in our concerns—we wanted to protect our public space.” (Female, 34 years old)

“As an activist, I was deeply disappointed in my communication with the mayor. Our protest did not spark interest at either the municipal or local level. [...] They assume that we protesters represent only a small group, while the majority of citizens supposedly agree with them. Neoliberal policies in the country favor developers, and there is no common ground for dialogue.” (Male, 41 years old)

On April 10, 2021, the civic group “*The Hippodrome – Area Without Concrete*” organized its first protest, demanding a halt to construction work on the former Hippodrome site and calling for public involvement in the planning process. The protest followed a controversial decision made months earlier: on October 5, 2020, the Kartu Foundation – affiliated with billionaire and Georgian Dream party founder

Bidzina Ivanishvili – donated the Hippodrome area to Tbilisi City Hall. In turn, the municipality announced plans to transform the site into a new central park spanning 36 hectares.

City Hall commissioned a Dutch company to design the project, but did not hold any open competition for the selection process, raising concerns about transparency. The proposed project featured three parking zones, paved walking paths, a café-restaurant, an educational center, a stadium, decorative gardens, and a ropes park. However, many activists and citizens opposed the project, arguing it failed to incorporate public participation. One of the study’s interviewees, an organizer of the protest, explained what compelled her to act:

“I became an activist suddenly. When news about the Central Park project spread, I gathered friends and experts from various disciplines to unite against the development of the former Hippodrome.” (Female, 31 years old)

Respondents’ narratives indicate that citizens often develop strong emotional connections and expectations regarding specific neighborhoods, regardless of whether they reside there. These sentiments are often accompanied by anxiety:

“For years, I looked at the Hippodrome with fear. I always expected something would happen to it.” (Female, 46 years old)

The Hippodrome case illustrates how citizens anticipated urban transformation well before the project began. Years of distrust and fear can quickly escalate into urban resistance. Protesters from “*The Hippodrome – Area Without Concrete*” actively collaborated with other urban activist groups, such as “*Digomi Meadows*” and “*Ana’s Garden*”. According to respondents, these alliances offered critical support and helped shape campaign strategies through the sharing of knowledge and experience.

The survey also examined how activists perceive their rights to urban spaces and how these perceptions have evolved and intensified over time:

“Unfortunately, people don’t know their rights. We distributed cards where residents wrote their preferences for the Hippodrome’s future. It was clear that people wanted simple, natural landscapes—open fields, more trees, water, and basic infrastructure. No one wanted excessive decoration, concrete paths, or parking areas.” (Female, 31 years old)

Additionally, in April 2024, it was announced that a multifunctional skyscraper complex would be built near Hippodrome Central Park. An expert interviewed in the study noted that the project’s site is so vaguely defined that the building could be constructed within the central park area. The proposed project includes a high-rise

residential and commercial complex within the Hippodrome Forest, comprising seven buildings ranging from 21 to 79 stories. This announcement has triggered a new wave of protests, with activists calling for increased public participation in urban planning decisions.

7 CONCLUSION

This study examined the role and effectiveness of institutional participatory mechanisms in Tbilisi, Georgia, in particular the civic advisory boards (CABs). It examined key actors shaping urban decision-making. The study contributes to a broader understanding of citizen engagement in post-socialist urban governance by exploring the interplay between formal participatory structures and grassroots activism. The study aimed to 1) assess the institutional framework governing participatory urban planning in Tbilisi, 2) evaluate the experiences and perspectives of CAB members, urban activists, and key stakeholders, and 3) identify the main challenges and limitations associated with participatory urban planning.

The findings reveal that the political system and governance structure in Tbilisi significantly shape urban planning, especially in terms of power dynamics between stakeholders and their financial or social capital. Influential actors such as investors, private sector owners, and political elites are often involved in important urban planning decisions.

Findings indicate significant challenges in CABs' functioning as effective participatory institutions. The selection process for CAB members lacks transparency and competitiveness, raising concerns about their independence. Although CABs provide a formal platform for community engagement, their impact on urban decision-making remains minimal. Meeting minutes often show that discussions lack substantive deliberation and recommendations by board members are rarely implemented by district heads. Limited public awareness and insufficient dissemination of CAB activities further hinder meaningful participation. As a result, many citizens perceive CABs as ineffective and shift their engagement from institutions to urban activism.

Respondents describe CAB meetings as predominantly informative rather than consultative, which reinforces public skepticism. Many citizens initially engage with CABs in an effort to influence urban policies but frequently resort to street activism when their concerns are disregarded. The study identifies two primary patterns of what we call "street participatory planning": 1) citizens attempt to use institutional mechanisms such as petitions and official requests but receive no response, and 2) citizens become aware of large-scale urban projects only after decisions have been made, prompting them to organize protests in response.

CABs provide a formalized mechanism for citizen involvement in urban governance. Unlike spontaneous street activism, which authorities can more easily

dismiss or delegitimize, CABs provide citizens with an official platform to voice their concerns and propose solutions. Despite ongoing communication challenges, CABs still offer structured engagement with local government representatives. While political implementation remains uncertain, CABs have the legal authority to make recommendations, that can lead to policy adjustments that meet the needs of the community. Compared to informal activism, CABs are recognized within the municipal system. Even if they are not heeded, it is more difficult to ignore or delegitimize their decisions and recommendations than spontaneous protests. CABs bring together different stakeholders, including experts, activists, and residents, and thus promote collaboration and knowledge exchange. This strengthens the community's understanding and knowledge of urban policies and governance mechanisms.

An important limitation of this study is its focus on Tbilisi, which limits the transferability of the results to other cities in Georgia. In addition, the study relies primarily on qualitative data from interviews, which, while valuable in capturing personal experiences, can also lead to subjective biases. Research should extend beyond Tbilisi to examine CABs in other Georgian cities, such as Batumi and Kutaisi, within the framework of “investor urbanism.” A comparative analysis of participatory mechanisms in these cities could provide a more comprehensive understanding of citizen participation across Georgia. Further studies could also explore the factors that drive urban movements towards activism, assessing whether similar patterns exist in other post-socialist cities.

The current political processes in Georgia continue to shape urban policies. Notably, Tbilisi's urban policy has long been driven by so-called “kitsch projects” and investor-driven urbanization, with no evident shift in approach. The disregard for the Tbilisi Master Plan is particularly evident in approving large-scale construction projects in central areas (e.g., the former Ippodromi and Laguna Vera) without meaningful public participation, leading to ongoing urban protests.

Even though CABs are not a perfect solution, and many activists return to street protests due to their ineffectiveness, they remain an essential institutional tool for citizen participation in urban planning. Strengthening and reforming CABs could enhance effectiveness and bridge the gap between activism and governance.

Acknowledgments

The Shota Rustaveli National Fund, grant number PHDF-21-6607, supported this work. Special thanks are due to the informants who provided us with valuable information.

References

- Anand, N. (2012). Municipal disconnect: On abject water and its urban infrastructures. *Ethnography*, 13(4), 487–509. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138111435743>
- Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35(4), 216–224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225>
- Bardauskienė, D. (2007). Miesto bendrasis planas ir ekspertiniai vertinimai. *Town Planning and Architecture*, 31(3), 119–130. <https://doi.org/10.3846/13921630.2007.10697098>
- Chitishvili, E. (2018). The impact of smart city tools on citizens' participation (Tbilisi and Amsterdam). Tbilisi [Master thesis, Ivane Javakishvili Tbilisi State University, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences]. Open Science Georgia Repository. <https://openscience.ge/entities/publication/f45c64b1-cbaa-4a2d-a7c2-cc3a2638791f>
- Dundua, S., Karaia, T., & Tabatadze, S. (2022). Tbilisi urban social movements: On the verge of success/failure. *European Journal of Transformation Studies*, 10(2), 21–39. <https://czasopisma.bg.ug.edu.pl/index.php/journal-transformation/article/view/8206>
- Gentile, M. (2015). The post-Soviet urban poor and where they live: Khrushchev-era blocks, “bad” areas, and the vertical dimension in Luhansk, Ukraine. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 105(3), 583–603. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0045608.2015.1018783>
- Georgian News Agency. (2023, May 17). *Fix Tbilisi's application reports over 180 complaints – Kakha Kaladze*. <https://ghn.ge/news/296386-fix-tbilisi-s-aplikatsiashi-ukve-180-ze-meti-shetqobinebaa-shemosuli-kakha-kaladze>
- Geostat [National Statistics Office of Georgia]. (2014). *2014 general population census*. <https://www.geostat.ge/en>
- Glass, J. J. (1979). Citizen participation in Planning: The relationship between objectives and techniques. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 45(2), 180–189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944367908976956>
- Gogishvili, D., & Harris-Brandts, S. (2019). Coinciding practices of exception in urban development: Mega-events and special economic zones in Tbilisi, Georgia. *European Planning Studies*, 28(10), 1999–2019. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2019.1701995>
- Harvey, D. (2003). The right to the city. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 27(4), 939–941. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0309-1317.2003.00492.x>
- Hirt, S. A. (2015). Planning during Post-Socialism. In *International Encyclopedia of Social and Behavioral Sciences (2nd Edition)*. (pp. 187–192). Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-08-097086-8.74028-1>
- IDFI [Institute for Development of Freedom of Information]. (2019). *Local governance index 2019*. <http://www.lsgindex.org/>
- IDFI. (2021). *Local governance index 2021*. <http://www.lsgindex.org/ge/analysis/>

- Kattel, R., Cepilovs, A., Lember, V., & Tönurist, P. (2018). Indicators for public sector innovations: Theoretical frameworks and practical applications. *Halduskultuur: The Estonian Journal of Administrative Culture and Digital Governance*, 19(1), 77–104. <https://doi.org/10.32994/ac.v19i1.208>
- Lazega, E., & Pattison, P. E. (2001). Social capital as social mechanisms and collective assets: The example of status auctions among colleagues. In N. Lin, K. S. Cook, R. S. Burt et al (Eds.), *Social capital: Theory and research* (pp. 185–208). Aldine de Gruyter.
- Lefebvre, H. (1996). The right to the city. In E. Kofman & E. Lebas (Trans.), *Writings on cities* (pp. 147–159). Blackwell. [Original work published 1968]
- Linkous, E. (2024). From chaotic construction to coevolution: Tbilisi's 2019 master plan and the right to the city. *Journal of Urbanism International Research on Place-making and Urban Sustainability*, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17549175.2024.2324804>
- Mansuri, G., & Rao, V. (2013). *Localizing development: Does participation work?* World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-0-8213-8256-1>
- Municipal Government of the City of Tbilisi. (2018). *Tbilisi Municipal Development Strategy and Governance Report*. Tbilisi City Hall.
- Organic Law of Georgia: Local Self-Government Code. (2014). *Legislative Herald of Georgia*. <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/2244429?publication=40>
- Pickvance, C. (2003). From urban social movements to urban movements: A review and introduction to a symposium on urban movements. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 27(1), 102–109. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.00434>
- Rekhviashvili, L., Sichinava, D., & Berikishvili, E. (2020). Urban protest movements in Tbilisi: Social movements are strong, but big capital is stronger. In T. Dariyeva & C. S. Neugebauer (Eds.), *Urban Activism in Eastern Europe and Eurasia*, (pp. 89–97). DOM Publishers. https://www.sichinava.ge/papers/rekhviashvili_et_al_2020.pdf
- Salukvadze, J., & Golubchikov, O. (2016). City as a geopolitics: Tbilisi, Georgia — A globalizing metropolis in a turbulent region. *Cities*, 52, 39–54. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2015.11.013>
- Salukvadze, J., & Van Assche, K. (2022). Multiple transformations, coordination and public goods. Tbilisi and the search for planning as collective strategy. *European Planning Studies*, 31(4), 719–737. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2022.2065878>
- Sassen, S. (1996). Whose city is it? Globalization and the formation of new claims. *Public Culture*, 8(2), 205–223. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-8-2-205>
- Shuib, K. B., Hashim, H., & Nasir, N. A. M. (2015). Community participation strategies in planning for urban parks. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 168, 311–320. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.10.236>
- Swyngedouw, E. (2010). Impossible sustainability and the post-political condition. In M. Cerreta, G. Concilio, V. Monno (Eds.), *Making Strategies in Spatial Planning*. (pp. 185–205). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-3106-8_11

- Sýkora, L., & Bouzarovski, S. (2011). Multiple transformations. *Urban Studies*, 49(1), 43–60. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098010397402>
- Urbanlab. (2021). *Alt_urban: Urban research publication*. Urbanlab. https://www.urbanlab.am/file_manager/Alt_urban_research_publication.pdf
- Van Assche, K., & Salukvadze, J. (2011). Tbilisi reinvented: Planning, development and the unfinished project of democracy in Georgia. *Planning Perspectives*, 27(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2011.601611>
- White, S. C. (1996). Depoliticising development: The uses and abuses of participation. *Development in Practice*, 6(1), 6–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0961452961000157564>
- Zheltovsyy, V. (2019). Civil society as an actor in the political processes of local governance reform in Ukraine. *Środkowoeuropejskie Studia Polityczne*, 2, 83–104. <https://doi.org/10.14746/ssp.2019.2.5>

OMEJITVE IN OBLJUBE PARTICIPATIVNEGA URBANISTIČNEGA NAČRTOVANJA: IZKUŠNJE CIVILNIH SVETOVALNIH ODBOROV IN MESTNIH AKTIVISTOV V TBILISIJU

Povzetek

Članek proučuje institucionalne in praktične okoliščine participativnega urbanističnega načrtovanja v Tbilisiju v Gruziji, s posebnim poudarkom na civilnih svetovalnih odborih (ang. *Civic Advisory Boards*) in vlogi samoniklega urbanega aktivizma. Civilni svetovalni odbori (CSO) so bili uvedeni kot obvezni participativni organi v Gruziji leta 2014. Prebivalcem naj bi omogočili sodelovanje v odločevalskem procesu. Vendar pa CSO-ji pogosto ne izpolnijo demokratičnih obljub. Prispevek na podlagi kvalitativne raziskave, izvedene med letoma 2021 in 2023 – vključno s 34 poglobljenimi intervjuji s člani CSO-jev, urbanih aktivisti, načrtovalci in občinskimi uradniki ter analizo zakonodaje, načrtovalnih dokumentov in zapisnikov sej – ugotavlja, da se CSO-ji v Tbilisiju soočajo s strukturnimi, postopkovnimi in političnimi pomanjkljivostmi.

Raziskava izpostavlja več ključnih težav. Prvič, CSO-ji večinoma delujejo kot simbolne strukture in ne kot učinkovite platforme za odločanje. Sestanke običajno vodijo predstavniki okrožnih oblasti, ki ne upoštevajo priporočil in predlogov članov. Poleg tega anketiranci opozarjajo na nizko javno prepoznavnost CSO-jev ter nezadostne komunikacijske poti. Obveščanje je večinoma omejeno na slabo vzdrževana spletna mesta in družbena omrežja, številni prebivalci pa za CSO-je izvedo naključno ali prepozno, da bi se lahko vključili vanje. Tretjič, izbira članov CSO-jev je netransparentna in podvržena političnemu vplivu, kar spodkopava zaupanje javnosti.

Zaradi omejitev se številni prebivalci in aktivisti zatekajo k alternativnim pristopom, vključno z uporabo pravnih sredstev ter predvsem javnimi protesti. V prispevku izpostavljam t. i. »ulično participativno načrtovanje« kot obliko državljanske mobilizacije, ki se pojavi, ko institucionalni kanali odpovejo. Aktivisti sicer poskušajo sodelovati preko CSO-jev, peticij in javnih razprav, a ko so ti poskusi zavrnjeni ali prezrti, se zatečejo k protestu, da bi vplivali na urbani razvoj. Takšna oblika mobilizacije se pojavlja pri vseh večjih spornih projektih v mestu – najbolj odmevna sta bila projekt preureditve parka Hipodrom in pozidava travnikov Digomi.

Prispevek umešča Tbilisi v širši postsocialistični kontekst, kjer prevladujejo neoliberalne urbane politike, šibke upravne institucije in načrtovanje, ki ga vodijo interesi vlagateljev. Kljub formalni zavezanosti participativnemu upravljanju urbani razvoj v Tbilisiju v veliki meri oblikujejo elitni interesi, pri čemer so potrebe skupnosti in mnenja javnosti pogosto zapostavljena. Ugotovitve kažejo na vztrajno razhajanje med institucionalnimi mehanizmi participacije in vsakdanjimi izkušnjami ter pričakovanji prebivalcev.

Čeprav imajo CSO-ji potencial kot orodje za demokratično urbano načrtovanje, njihova trenutna struktura in izvedba tega ne uresničujeta. Pogosto so dojeti zgolj kot predstava, ne pa kot resnična sprememba. Kljub temu študija ugotavlja, da bi okrepitev in reforma CSO-jev – skozi večjo transparentnost, pristni dialog in politično voljo – lahko pripomogla k premoščanju razkoraka med odločevalci in aktivisti. To bi ne le okrepilo demokratično odgovornost, temveč tudi zagotovilo bolj vključujoč, pravičen in na potrebe javnosti usmerjen urbani razvoj v Tbilisiju.