ROADMAP TO YOUTH EMPOWERMENT IN THE KUTAISI MUNICIPALITY

Research Insights and Youth Engagement Strategies for Community Stakeholders

INTRODUCTION

Understanding and addressing the interests and needs of young people is vital for the socio-economic advancement of the country. In today's world, there are many challenges that impact personal growth, career development, and civic participation of the emerging generation. If neglected, these challenges can have negative repercussions on all aspects of public life, both in the short and long term.

While many of these challenges are common among youth, specific issues in Tbilisi and the regions, as well as urban and rural settlements, vary in their scale and nature.

Although our research primarily focuses on Kutaisi, the subjects explored are largely pertinent to other geographic regions. Systemic issues affect everyone, and through an analysis of the interviews we conducted and existing studies, a plethora of problems affecting nearly all aspects of young people's lives have emerged. These issues include:

- **Professional Development**: Scarcity of jobs, insufficient internships and other developmental programs, shortage of part-time jobs.

- **Education**: Lack of informal access to education, inadequate access to diverse learning resources, outdated teaching methodologies and materials.

- **Personal Life**: Absence of informal gathering spaces, recreational areas, entertainment services, health-promoting services and programs, limited access to quality health services.

- **Civic Involvement**: Low awareness of participation mechanisms, nihilistic attitudes, improper incentives from the municipality.

The exacerbation of these problems is influenced by individual choices, policies enacted at both local and central levels, and societal trends. Thus, in order to make improvements, it is crucial to understand the existing connections between these elements and to actively work at all levels to create change.

YOUTH NEEDS RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

ENGAGEMENT AND EMPOWERMENT

INFORMATION AND SKILL-BUILDING

AWARENESS AND PERCEPTION

INFRASTRUCTURE AND ACCESSIBILITY

YOUTH NEEDS RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Our research is designed to identify and analyze the needs of young people in the Kutaisi municipality, though the findings can be readily extended to other similar settlements. The study is based on existing secondary sources, surveys, and 12 interviews conducted with young people (10) and youth workers (2). The young adults were chosen through random sampling, and the youth workers were selected via personal contacts.

Understanding and addressing youth issues in Kutaisi requires a comprehensive and nuanced approach that considers the varying layers of needs experienced by the youth. These layers, ranging from basic structural necessities to engagement and empowerment, each play a pivotal role in shaping a youth's journey towards successful entrepreneurship, civic engagement, and community development.

"Infrastructure and Accessibility" sets the foundation, focusing on providing the essentials such as accessible social spaces, work opportunities, and transportation. **"Awareness and Perception"** builds on this, aiming to correct societal misconceptions and raise awareness of diverse skills and career paths. The third layer, **"Information and Skill Building,"** aims to equip the youth with the necessary tools and knowledge to navigate their personal and professional lives. Finally, **"Engagement and Empowerment"** encapsulates the ultimate goal of fostering active youth participation in decision-making and community activities.
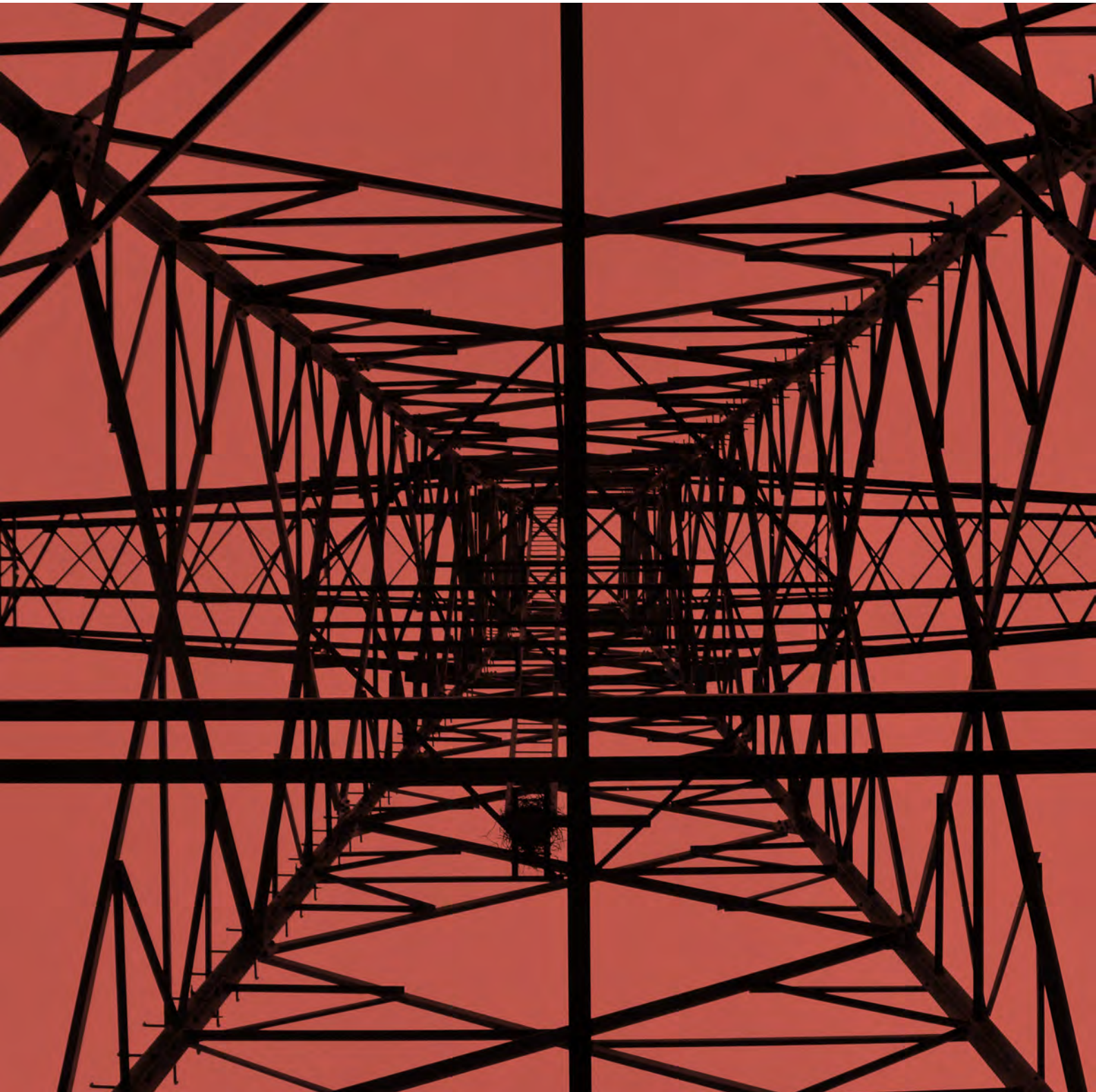
When taken together, these layers create a comprehensive understanding of youth needs that serves as a roadmap for addressing their challenges and unlocking their potential. Future initiatives that effectively align with these needs hold the promise of not only enhancing individual lives but also contributing to a more resilient, engaged, and prosperous community.

While it's helpful to break the framework down into these individual layers, each part does not exist in isolation. Every component interacts with the others in complex ways, creating a system where change in one area can trigger changes in another. For instance, raising awareness about diverse skills might emphasize the need for certain facilities, thereby indirectly enhancing infrastructure. Similarly, increased youth engagement can stimulate a feedback loop that improves information sharing and skill-building efforts.

This framework aims to serve as a guide that helps understanding youth needs in relation to the community, while offering a framework of considerations while developing initiatives to address these needs. While it provides a structured approach, there is room for adaptation and flexibility, ensuring that the framework remains resilient and responsive to the evolving needs of Kutaisi's youth.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND ACCESSIBILITY

Youth development thrives when the foundational infrastructure is robust and resources are easily accessible. Efforts should focus on removing these structural barriers to help youth navigate their path towards entrepreneurship, employment, and meaningful community contribution.

Enhancing Accessibility and Sustainability of Existing Infrastructure

Inadequate and unpredictable infrastructure, including independent transportation and sustainable community spaces, hinders equitable access to beneficial services, particularly for rural and lower-income youth.

The lack of independent and accessible transportation impedes access to urban-centric beneficial services.

The transportation problem is particularly acute for youth from surrounding municipalities who can't shoulder the costs themselves, thus leading to missed opportunities.

"We sometimes offer alternatives and encourage them to join other programs. Another reason could be financial limitations, particularly for young people from municipalities around Kutaisi. They often can't afford the transportation costs and, unfortunately, we are unable to cover these expenses."

(Youth Worker)

The sustainability of quality youth-oriented spaces provided by CSOs is often uncertain due to reliance on grant funding.

The cyclical reliance on grant-based funding results in inconsistency of services, leading to an unpredictable environment for youth-focused initiatives.

"There are barely any other youth spaces in Kutaisi. Youth services are mostly tied to grants, so when there's no grant, the services cease."

(Youth Worker)

"Sustainability is absent in most organizations; it's only active in the case of specific projects' existence. In other words, if I win a competition, tender, or receive a grant, my organization operates, but it doesn't mean we work on a daily basis and accomplish our activities this way. This is the case with most youth organizations."

(Youth Worker from The Situation of Youth Organizations in Georgia, Youth Agency and National Council of Youth Organizations of Georgia, 2021)

Developing Opportunities for Networking and Collaborative Learning

Limited spaces exist to facilitate larger groups of youth interaction, networking, and collaboration, contributing to siloed community groups and impeding holistic growth.

Results from a quantitative study reveal a clear gap in infrastructure for youth organizations as well: the study found that a significant portion (66%) of the organizations do not have a stable office area, and only a third (34%) actually possess office space.
(The Situation of Youth Organizations in Georgia, Youth Agency and National Council of Youth Organizations of Georgia, 2021)

There is a pressing need for spaces and opportunities that promote interaction, networking, and community collaboration among youth.

"In Italy, I saw places where cafés and small bars were situated together in one space accommodating 200-300 people. We lack such spaces in Kutaisi. The nightlife here is not very developed."

(Youth)

"They also need more opportunities in terms of education and recreation. Maybe some have formed a group and go to these activities and trainings, but it's very important to have recreational activities and trainings, games, youth spaces, which are practically present in Europe, along with board games, musical instruments. But all this should be free and accessible."

(Youth)

One youth was surprised to discuss how youth engagement manifests in other countries:

"In one of my projects, I made a presentation on youth spaces abroad. I cited Estonia as an example where there are spaces where any young person can come and engage in various activities. These youngsters also discussed local governance issues and were involved in more spiritual life."

(Youth)

Creating Inclusive Community Spaces for Youth Interaction and Growth

Lack of nonformal gathering spaces and no/low-cost recreational options in Kutaisi inhibit youth interaction, creativity, and self-expression, which are all crucial in individual personal and professional development, civic engagement, and community development.

Based on the findings of a local survey, the most common activities pursued by young people in their free time are socializing with friends (68%), reading a book (44%), and listening to music (43%). However, when asked about their satisfaction with available entertainment and recreational opportunities, a significant portion (44%) expressed dissatisfaction. A neutral stance was taken by 35%, and only 21% were satisfied or completely satisfied. This highlights a clear need for more diverse, engaging, and accessible recreational options.

(Research of Needs, Challenges, Interests and Resources for Youth in the Kutaisi Municipality, State Youth Agency, 2020)

In the community, current recreational and social options often fall short, being either too expensive, sparse, inconvenient, or unengaging, propelling youth towards less productive pastimes. The limited quality and accessibility of social services and spaces make free alternatives such as hanging out in the streets or engaging with content on TV or the phone, the default options for youth. These options, while cost-effective and easy to access, do not foster productive engagement, leading to a cycle of underutilization of youth potential and creativity.

One youth discussed the need in Kutaisi for inclusive and accessible spaces that cater to different interests, from gaming to group activities:

"A separate space for young people, where not only entertainment but also gathering and socializing can take place, is important to me. For example, I have friends who play games, but it's not always possible for us to gather and play together. eSports and similar platforms that are based on reality, as well as alternative computers with gaming access, would be another good option."

(Youth)

An absence of safe, nonformal gathering spaces hampers youth development, which contributes to negative behavioral patterns, such as substance abuse and violence, especially for vulnerable groups.

One youth expressed his concern of how youth misuse their free time:

"I'd say the lack of alternative options to spend their free time productively. This leads to them misusing their time, which ultimately affects their mental development."

(Youth)

Improving the Quality of Existing Infrastructure to Support Comprehensive Skills Development

There's a disconnect between the supply of nonformal education services and youth demand, compounded by the limited acknowledgment of nonformal education's benefits. Existing financial resources and infrastructure, which are currently channeled into less impactful projects, could be reoriented to address the real needs of youth.

Outdated educational resources and teaching methods in certain institutions hinder the career advancement of young people, as they fail to align with the dynamic and evolving skill requirements of the modern workplace.

"Personally, the lack of literature creates a problem for me. We often have to print them out because there are no books. And even when there are books in the library, they're often outdated and not very useful."

(Youth)

There's a notable gap in the service landscape for programs that effectively connect creative, hobby-based activities to personal development and skills essential for future readiness. Appropriate allocation of funds can significantly enhance the quality and relevance of these programs for the youth.

One youth worker observed how lack of development around soft skills like critical thinking and creativity negatively affects young people's ability to utilize more technical skills:

"We often have to teach them how to draw conclusions and how to write a thesis. Regarding writing skills, we sometimes struggle with cover letters that are either illegible or very vague. Lack of creativity and innovation is also a common issue."

(Youth Worker)

The Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA) 2018 results reflect the challenging educational landscape in Georgia. With the average Georgian 15-year-old scoring only 380 points in reading literacy against the surveyed countries' average of 489 points, there is a stark indication of the quality gap in education. Notably, Georgia ranked 7th from the bottom in a survey of 79 countries, underscoring the urgent need for educational reforms. The data also indicates a decline in student performance in key areas (reading, mathematics, and science) since 2015, highlighting the pressing need for better resources and teaching methods. *(PISA, 2018)*

There is a lack of integrated learning opportunities that bridge theoretical knowledge with practical application tailored to youth's needs.

One youth, who had studied graphic design, was interested in gaining practical experience in the local market, although he had no information about such opportunities.

Limited structured internship and apprenticeship programs and the lack of part-time jobs delay work exposure, professional preparedness, and hinder potential income and mentorship opportunities.

"I consider finances to be the main challenge. Finding a job is difficult, especially when you're also studying. For instance, I know that in Germany, there's a limit to how much a student can work to ensure it doesn't interfere with their studies."
(Youth)

Youth financial independence is a significant concern in Georgia, with the vast majority (62%) relying on parental support. The situation is more dire in certain age groups, with 96% of the 14-18 age group, 64% of the 19-24 age group, and 35% of the 25-29 age group being financially dependent on their parents. This data underscores the importance of providing structured work opportunities for the youth to achieve financial independence.
(Generation in Transition: Youth Study in Georgia by Friedrich-Ebert-Siftung, 2016)

AWARENESS AND PERCEPTION

To foster an environment where youth can make informed choices about their career paths and civic duties, a societal shift in perception and an increase in awareness of diverse opportunities is essential. Breaking misconceptions can illuminate new paths for personal growth, professional development, and community engagement.

Elevating Awareness of the Relevance of Soft Skills Development in Youth

A lack of understanding about the importance of soft skills makes youth less likely to see new opportunities related to their personal growth, civic duties, and career development as important.

One youth worker's statement underlines the challenges youth face: unfamiliarity with the concept of nonformal education, inadequate information about such activities, and the discouragement they face within formal education settings.

"Firstly, they may not recognize the value of nonformal education because they've never had such an experience in school or university. Secondly, there is a lack of information; they simply don't know about such activities. Thirdly, based on my discussions with some students, they feel that nonformal education is not encouraged in the university. The professors often have a negative attitude toward nonformal education activities."

(Youth Worker)

Young people in Kutaisi exhibit a gap in civic engagement due to a twofold challenge: a lack of awareness about the impact and potential outcomes of active citizenship, and an absence of crucial skills such as problem-solving, decision-making, and critical thinking. This combination hinders their ability to mobilize at the grassroots level to address shared community issues.

"Another important point [for youth to understand] is the competency of active citizenship. Young people sometimes express a nihilistic attitude - a feeling that it's not their responsibility or that they can't change anything."

(Youth Worker)

"When we conducted a SWOT analysis with municipality youth councils, they identified many problems. However, when asked what they were doing to solve these problems, no one had an answer; they had not tied these issues to self-government."

(Youth Worker)

Highlighting the Benefits of Nonformal Education in Youth Development

Due to the unrecognized value in nonformal education and nontraditional opportunities, youth overlook extracurricular activities that could bolster both their personal and professional development.

A significant portion of the youth population remains unengaged in extracurricular activities. According to previous research, 67% of Kutaisi youth did not volunteer or participate in such activities.

(Research of Needs, Challenges, Interests and Resources for Youth in the Kutaisi Municipality, State Youth Agency, 2020)

"After the age of 18, nobody thinks about volunteering; they are focused on studying and employment. This is because the benefits of volunteering are not obvious to the youth. As [us youth workers] conduct more meetings [with youth about volunteering], they begin to realize the importance of volunteering, which is also exemplified by successful examples."

(Youth Worker)

One youth's experience volunteering with a CSO reveals the invaluable life skills that she gained through nonformal education, which she had been previously unaware of.

"The most important thing I've learned volunteering] is that I've learned about communication, assessment of resources, delegation, organizing meetings, and risk assessment.. I didn't know anything about nonformal education before joining [the organization]."

(Youth)

Young people's misconceptions about nonformal educational activities, often erroneously associating them with traditional, formal educational methods, diminish the appeal of these dynamic learning opportunities. This perception barrier deters youth engagement, particularly among those yet to experience such programs firsthand.

When one youth worker tried to start a reading club, he realized that the youth were unaware of how an informal reading club would operate as their only reference point was to reading in classroom environments:

"When we had a reading club, the youth told me they had assumed that we would be sitting and reading books out loud. They don't know about nonformal education methods and therefore are not interested. Youth also do not try to develop themselves, and that's a problem."

(Youth Worker)

Young people's emphasis on building technical skills like resume writing and interview techniques often leads to an oversight of soft skills and holistic professional knowledge. Integrating soft skills development with desired technical training can significantly enhance the attractiveness and effectiveness of educational programs for youth.

According to a youth worker, engaging with university student groups is more challenging compared to adolescents. They participate less in nonformal educational activities, though they show some interest in activities that enhance their narrow technical knowledge.

Expanding Recognition of Knowledge Sources Beyond Formal Institutions

Youth view formal institutions as the primary source of knowledge, limiting their exploration of other learning opportunities. However, traditional institutions, often relying on outdated information and resources, may hinder youth from acquiring and applying contemporary knowledge in today's digital age.

Increasing societal awareness of diverse learning sources can enhance adaptability and foster thriving youth.

Formal institutions and societal norms that devalue non-traditional career paths and nonformal education create barriers for youth trying to participate in new opportunities, inhibiting the transformation of youth's perceptions about their futures.

One youth worker discussed the challenges in a recent project of conveying the viability of a career working as a personal assistant service provider for people with disabilities, a more non-traditional career:

"It became clear to us from the outset that working with people with disabilities (PWD) can be very challenging, and this type of work is not popular in general. Therefore, there wasn't much interest from young people despite the fact that we spread the information. In the end, we

still managed to recruit 18 young people, although it was difficult… [Individuals in this field] will have a fairly high chance of getting a job because the local self-government is obliged to offer personal assistant services to people with disabilities."

(Youth Worker)

One youth worker discussed the impacts of formal learning institutions that don't recognize nonformal education opportunities:

"Young people from schools are active, typically between 13 to 16 years old. After the age of 16, it is difficult to get students to [participate in nonformal education programs] because their teachers don't let them."

(Youth Worker)

One youth worker shared his experience working with more traditionally-minded school systems:

"There are some school principals with whom it's fruitless to communicate with unless the project is funded by large donors like the European Union, or has the approval of the Ministry of Education. These individuals often fail to understand that schools are self-governing bodies capable of making independent decisions."

(Youth Worker)

> **A perceived lack of mutual values and cooperation between private sector organizations, educational institutions, and the youth population impedes even the most motivated and productive youth from carving their own path in the job market.**

"We can't choose our lecture timings, which makes it challenging to balance work and study."

(Youth)

"In addition to a problem with the pay at work, working part-time is also a bit difficult -- it is challenging to agree on the dates [with employers]. Furthermore, staff at the university will not help you in anything. The lecturers often miss class and don't even warn us."

(Youth)

> **The Georgian cultural emphasis on familial approval and codependence makes it challenging for ambitious youth to pursue personal growth opportunities that lie beyond their immediate community, such as volunteering abroad.**

"[For youth,] living independently is a significant challenge. Often, family members don't even ask the young person about their food or clothing preferences, which can lead to the young person not realizing that they have the right to express their opinion and to participate in decision-making processes… As for parents, they sometimes call 30-year-olds children, and from this perspective, it is hard for them to agree to the decision of going abroad."

(Youth Worker)

> **When exposed to alternative careers, diverse perspectives, and new opportunities, youth begin to see paths for growth beyond societal norms.**

"We have an excellent [vocational] college in our municipality that is renowned for its winemaking courses, but many do not apply, possibly due to lack of awareness… Graduates in winemaking are often employed in local wineries. Stylists find work as well. Professional education generally leads to good employment opportunities."

(Youth Worker)

INFORMATION AND SKILL-BUILDING

The key to youth empowerment lies in readily available information and comprehensive skill development. By creating a culture of learning, we equip youth with the tools to unlock their potential, contribute to the job market, and build a more resilient community.

The World Bank's 2020 assessment illustrates the current state of human capital development in Georgia: a child born today will only achieve 57% of their productive potential by adulthood given the existing education and health provisions.
(Human Capital Index, World Bank, 2020)

Centralizing Resources to Bridge Information Gaps

The fragmentation of information sources in Georgia leads to uneven access and distribution of resources. This situation leaves youth unsure about their available resources and infrastructure, and they become overly reliant on their immediate communities for information.

Research from the Youth Agency revealed that the most effective way to disseminate information, according to the organizations surveyed in their study, is through personal contacts and through the organization's beneficiaries. Youth organizations primarily disseminate information through social media, posting on their Facebook pages and groups. Collaborations with schools, education resource centers, and municipalities also play a role in information distribution.
(The Situation of Youth Organizations in Georgia, Youth Agency and National Council of Youth Organizations of Georgia, 2021)

Information trickles down primarily through word of mouth within local communities and acquaintances. If a community gets missed, certain youth miss out on essential information.

When discussing how they came to participate in various projects and activities, respondents in our study predominantly named friends as their source of information.

NEET (not in employment, education or training) youth in particular face a significant information gap regarding nonformal education opportunities, hindering their personal and career development prospects.

One youth worker interviewed shared his difficulties engaging with NEET youth, noting that contacting them and providing them with information is especially difficult.

There is limited awareness of free state-funded programs due to the lack of publicity and awareness around these services. This leaves young individuals, who could benefit from these resources, disconnected from potentially transformative employment skills and knowledge already in existence.

"There is a lack of promotion and unless the college comes to the school itself or organizes some event, no one visits the college website. The college is well-equipped with computers, a library, and a meeting hall, but young people are unaware of these facilities."
(Youth Worker)

The absence of a centralized platform for youth-focused initiatives results in organizations primarily promoting on their own platforms. This fragmentation creates a challenging landscape for youth to navigate and engage, except for the most determined.

"Information platforms do not exist in Georgia. The Youth Agency tried to create one, but that platform does not work. Young people do not have a single platform where they can see information; every organization has its own platform and this information is scattered, and young people no longer understand where to find information of interest to them."
(Youth Worker)

A centralized platform could reduce barriers to accessing information about programs for young individuals, particularly those who may not yet have developed the information sourcing skills needed to navigate the existing fragmented information landscape.

Throughout our interviews, youth workers emphasized the need to create a unified platform. The consequences of fragmented information sources were especially apparent in interviews with youth; respondents were not equally informed about the existence of certain recreational spaces in Kutaisi (like the existence of a board game space), despite such services being of specific interest to them

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Enhancing Independent Learning Skills to Facilitate Self-Development

Without an understanding of how to develop independent learning skills, particularly online, youth do not take full advantage of the available resources around them.

"[At our organization,] we also pay great attention to developing the competency of independent learning. A large portion of young people do not do this, and when we teach them all of this, they then independently create plans."

(Youth Worker)

> **Digital literacy is essential in this age, though youth primarily employ internet utilities for social media, limiting their self-learning opportunities. Furthermore, a lack of understanding about the diverse learning possibilities available online further impedes the youth's proactive exploration of information and skill-building.**

According to statistical information, among the reasons for internet usage, social networks lead (99.2%), followed by making video calls (93%), email usage (56.8%), searching for services and products (55.5%), following news pages (51.3%), and searching for health-related information (45.4%).

(Information and Communication Technologies Usage in Households, National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2022)

Revamping Learning Experiences to Boost Engagement and Productivity

Current learning opportunities often lack engagement and creativity, leading young people to perceive these as unproductive and uninteresting, which demotivates participation and impedes information absorption.

One youth's critique of the lecture-based and non-interactive activities during a project in Batumi points to the lack of practical application in the existing learning approach, further emphasizing the need for a balance between theoretical knowledge and hands-on experience.

"During our project in Batumi, the activities were mostly lecture-based, non-interactive, and quite dull."

(Youth)

Nonformal, creative activities are essential for young people to develop not only the specific knowledge needed for employment but also the soft skills that are crucial for effective performance in the labor market.

"I believe that if key life competencies are fully developed, it forms a very effective workforce. However, certain personal characteristics are equally important, some of which are more related to professional attributes rather than personal ones, for instance, punctuality. I would also particularly emphasize the knowledge of digital technologies."

(Youth Worker)

Amplifying entrepreneurial knowledge and skills among youth is pivotal for their economic empowerment, enabling them to imagine themselves as employers and address societal issues independently.

The current state of entrepreneurship in Georgia further highlights the need for more engaging and productive learning opportunities. With only 1% of employees taking the entrepreneurial path compared to 5% in countries with similar GDP per capita, it's evident that entrepreneurship is often seen as a forced step rather than a career choice. This leads to a higher failure rate of startup companies and a smaller share of individuals who willingly choose to be self-employed.

(Georgia at Work: Assessing the Jobs Landscape, World Bank Group, 2018)

It is noteworthy that for many, entrepreneurship is a forced choice rather than a career decision. The proportion of young people who wish to start a business is 13%, while 42% prefer employment in the public sector.

(State Youth Strategy Document 2023-2026, Government of Georgia)

ENGAGEMENT AND EMPOWERMENT

Encouraging active youth participation is more than a call for engagement – it's an invitation to empowerment. By fostering youth involvement in decision-making and community activities, we pave the way for a vibrant civic life and robust community development.

In response to how they would rate their own civic engagement, slightly more than a third (37%) of young people in Kutaisi describe themselves as active (very active or active). About 38% consider themselves moderately active, while 25% believe they are not active. Among 14-17-year-olds, 37% consider themselves not active, as do 17% of 18-24-year-olds and 12% of 25-29-year-olds.

(Research of Needs, Challenges, Interests and Resources for Youth in the Kutaisi Municipality, State Youth Agency, 2020)

Youth primarily engage in activism through information acquisition and sharing, along with voicing opinions on social media and other media channels. This trend is a vital step towards more tangible forms of participation. 34% of young respondents partake in decision-making largely by exchanging information and ideas. However, a smaller portion, just 13%, feel they successfully impact decision-making processes. This distinction underscores the need for strategies that not only foster youth participation in exchanging information, but also amplify their influence on concrete decision outcomes. *(Research of Needs, Challenges, Interests and Resources for Youth in the Kutaisi Municipality, State Youth Agency, 2020)*

Fostering Youth Decision-Making and Civic Engagement Skills

Guiding youth to develop decision-making, problem-solving, and civic engagement skills in supportive and inclusive spaces gives them the confidence and knowledge needed to effectively engage with less responsive local self-government systems.

Engaging young people in expressing their concerns and seeking solutions from local authorities fosters a more robust relationship between citizens and municipal governance, leading to an empowered youth population and a more responsive local administration.

One youth worker observed how mutual interaction is a powerful tool for empowering youth:

"When engaging with youth, one method involves organizing public outings and presentations, and researching various issues. Over time, we observe their skill development in these areas. They also learn to articulate their challenges effectively.

Initially, they may struggle to be heard, but eventually, their voices become too strong to be ignored by city hall representatives. They

gain an understanding of the available resources at the municipal level, identify the right contacts for specific issues, and enhance their communication with the municipality, becoming more aware of their rights.

When a young individual identifies a problem, brings it to the local government's attention, and sees it resolved, it motivates others to follow suit."

(Youth Worker)

Encouraging Youth-Led Initiatives and Feedback Integration

Empowerment extends beyond engagement - it involves feeling heard and valued. By encouraging youth-led initiatives and integrating youth feedback into program design, we can create offerings that resonate with the realities of youth, thereby enhancing participation and impact.

Municipal apathy towards youth engagement in decision-making contributes to a growing sense of nihilism among young citizens, and fosters disengagement when their inputs are disregarded or when barriers for engagement are too high.

In the Kutaisi municipality, there is a competition for youth initiatives, which the city hall announces periodically. However, co-financing is required for the initiative groups, which, according to one youth worker, is a significant challenge for interested parties.

The lack of perceived consideration for youth interests in local government policy is further emphasized in the research conducted by the Youth Agency in Kutaisi. The study reveals that 47% of young people believe their interests are not reflected in the municipality's policy, while another 27% are uncertain. This substantial lack of confidence in local government's responsiveness could fuel a sense of disillusionment among the youth, thereby reducing their participation in civic life.

(Research of Needs, Challenges, Interests and Resources for Youth in the Kutaisi Municipality, State Youth Agency, 2020)

Empowering Youth Stakeholders and Encouraging Supportive Adult Engagement

The absence of visible role models and impact narratives within formal institutions and decision-making bodies hampers youth's potential growth and stifles their involvement in nonformal education and developmental opportunities. Genuine support and active involvement from these institutions are vital to motivate the youth, fostering their engagement, and creating a platform for them to voice their otherwise unaddressed issues.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union's 2018 report reveals that only 0.67% of Georgian MPs are under the age of 30. Given that almost a quarter of Georgia's population are youth, this underrepresentation in politics limits youth aspiration and civic engagement. This data underscores the need to boost youth representation in politics, which could in turn act as a powerful motivator for greater youth participation in civic activities.

(Georgia Youth Index Report, United Nations Population Fund, 2020)

Empowering formal institutions is equally crucial in the process of empowering youth, as these are the institutions that youth primarily engage with and can serve as role models.

Active involvement and genuine support from decision-making bodies and community adults are essential to inspire and motivate youth to engage and voice their issues, which might otherwise remain unaddressed.

Through both our qualitative research and research conducted by the Youth Agency, it is evident that youth primarily expect municipalities to take the initiative.

The Kutaisi municipality has its own website with actively updated information. However, there is no specific section for youth, detailing relevant information and engagement mechanisms, which is a missed opportunity considering youth mainly use the internet to access information.

Increasing Coordination Across Youth-Oriented Organizations

Improved coordination among different bodies dealing with youth development can leverage their unique strengths, creating more comprehensive and effective strategies to empower youth.

A more balanced distribution of skills and resources between state entities and civil society organizations could enhance both the effectiveness and efficiency of youth-oriented programs.

One youth worker highlights how combined efforts can mitigate the weaknesses of individual entities trying to implement youth activities:

"Addressing youth challenges requires a united effort. The state often lacks the technical resources, experience, and competence to work with youth, and it struggles when implementing youth-oriented initiatives. Conversely, the non-governmental sector lacks the resources to provide sustainable services."

(Youth Worker)

Results-oriented partnerships between youth organizations, the private sector, municipalities, coupled with transparency and effective public communication, can help alleviate NGOs' concerns about potential impacts on their public image and perceived political biases when collaborating with local government.

The 'Rockaia' musical festival implemented in Kutaisi, a collaboration among the municipality, private sector, and youth organizations, exemplifies how multi-sectoral partnerships can effectively align with and amplify youth interests, fostering deeper intersectoral engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Infrastructure and Accessibility

In order to strengthen infrastructure and accessibility, programs and initiatives should prioritize:

1. Enhancing Accessibility and Sustainability of Infrastructure

2. Developing Opportunities for Networking and Collaborative Learning

3. Creating Inclusive Community Spaces for Youth Interaction and Growth

4. Improving the Quality of Existing Infrastructure to Support Comprehensive Skills Development

» **Direct funding** towards nonformal educational services for vulnerable groups. These services should aim to distance youth from harmful environments affecting their behavioral traits, physical health, and mental well-being. This action will provide alternative paths away from harmful environments, protecting their physical and mental health, and promoting positive behavioral traits.

» **Remove participation barriers** in youth initiatives. Identify and eliminate barriers hindering youth participation in various initiatives. For instance, revisiting the co-financing requirement for youth initiative groups in competitions can open more opportunities for interested parties, fostering greater involvement and innovation.

» **Establish partnerships** with state agencies, private sector organizations, and local citizens to **design and create dynamic, youth-centric spaces**. These spaces should be safe, appealing, and stimulating for youth to develop and employ their entrepreneurial skills. These spaces, in turn, will promote networking and collaborative learning.

» **Allocate robust financial and material resources** to youth service providers. Invest in the direct financing of programs, secure dedicated workspaces, and provide essential resources for their effective operation. Doing so will enhance the sustainability and result-orientedness of these services, enabling them to effectively support youth in their path towards entrepreneurship and employment.

» **Formulate collaborative platforms** involving youth organizations, the state, and the private sector. Use these platforms to develop internship and employment programs that address the gap between job market demand and supply. These platforms will foster the development of meaningful internship and employment programs, addressing the mismatch between demand and supply in the job market and enabling youth to acquire necessary competencies.

» **Reallocate resources to match youth needs** by auditing existing resource allocation and, if needed, redirect funds and infrastructure towards areas of higher impact. Specifically, invest in nonformal education services to bridge the disconnect between supply and demand. By acknowledging and championing the benefits of nonformal education, more youth will have the opportunity for comprehensive skills development.

» **Support multipurpose youth initiatives**. Prioritize and support youth-led initiatives that simultaneously tackle multiple social challenges. An example to emulate is the social enterprise "Megobari" in Zugdidi, which serves as a multifunctional hub for young people. During the day, youth can come completely free of charge and participate in or organize informal educational activities, while it becomes an entertainment and relaxation space and bar in the evening.

Awareness and Perception

In order to change awareness and perceptions, programs and initiatives should prioritize:

1. **Elevating Awareness of the Relevance of Soft Skills Development in Youth**

2. **Highlighting the Benefits of Nonformal Education in Youth Development**

3. **Expanding Recognition of Knowledge Sources Beyond Formal Institutions**

» **Share success stories in nonformal education campaigns**. Design information campaigns that tell stories bout young people's experiences with nonformal education. Ensure these stories include both the benefits and the process of engaging in these programs, both in Georgia and abroad. This approach can inspire and motivate young people who might lack self-confidence or feel overwhelmed by the criteria, helping them visualize their own successful participation.

» **Integrate soft skills development into civic engagement projects**. When planning youth-oriented civic engagement projects, consider incorporating components that develop critical skills like critical thinking, decision-making, problem-solving, and leadership. This strategy can empower young people to effectively use their opportunities to solve community problems.

» **Recognize nonformal education in decision-making processes**. Advocate for the recognition of nonformal education and its incorporation into various decision-making processes, such as granting state scholarships, enrolling in professional or higher education institutions, and accepting public service. This recognition will elevate the status of nonformal education and increase youth interest in engaging in relevant activities.

» Promote nonformal education within formal institutions by **working with administrators of formal education institutions** to highlight the **importance and benefits of nonformal education**. This awareness can encourage collaboration with youth service providers and foster policies that support students' participation in nonformal educational activities. By doing so, we can bridge the gap between formal and nonformal education, enhancing the overall educational landscape for our youth.

» Engage with formal institutions to **discuss and challenge the traditional norms around career paths and education**. This could include roundtable discussions, policy reviews, and awareness campaigns. Addressing these norms creates an environment that is more supportive of diverse pathways. The ripple effect of such shifts could lead to an increased acceptance of non-traditional career paths and a renewed interest in nonformal education among youth.

» Focus on soft skills development in the private sector and **encourage private sector representatives to prioritize not just professional competencies, but also soft skills development**. These skills are key to effective and productive activity among staff, fostering a more adaptable and capable workforce.

» Address youth needs in the private sector by **encouraging the private sector to consider youth needs** by offering part-time work, flexible job scheduling, and introducing paid internship programs. This would not only foster youth financial independence and professional development but also solve key issues in the business sector, like personnel shortages and underqualification.

» **Highlight online learning resources** and incorporate information about available digital resources in the activities of youth service providers. Encouraging young people to utilize these resources can enhance their independent learning competence and digital skills, preparing them for the modern digital world while also potentially helping alleviate unproductive pastimes.

» **Increase the visibility and accessibility of state-sponsored programs that aid in career planning and employment** for young people. This ensures that youth are well-informed about these programs and understand how to leverage them for their career development and job readiness.

Information and Skill-Building

In order to sharpen information consumption and skill-building, programs and initiatives should prioritize:

1. Centralizing Resources to Bridge Information Gaps

2. Enhancing Independent Learning Skills to Facilitate Self-Development

3. Revamping Learning Experiences to Boost Engagement and Productivity

» **Implement information literacy training programs**. These initiatives empowersyouth with the necessary skills to effectively assess and utilize different information sources. As a result, they become more self-reliant and less dependent on their immediate communities for information, leading to a more informed and resourceful youth demographic.

» **Develop a unified information platform**. This platform should feature programs and projects from various sources, making it easier for youth, especially NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), to find opportunities of interest. It is also essential that when developing this platform is designed for easy access for both youth AND organizations engaging youth. This unified platform can bridge information gaps and make resources more accessible.

» **Develop an inclusive outreach strategy for the unified information platform**. This strategy, specifically tailored to penetrate different communities considering their unique characteristics, will ensure a wider reach. As a result, more young people will be aware of and can make full use of the consolidated resources available to them, bridging information gaps.

» **Introduce digital literacy and online learning modules in the curriculum**. By teaching young people effective internet use for educational purposes, they'll be better equipped to navigate online resources. This step facilitates their personal and career development by enabling them to respond to the evolving demands of the job market independently.

» **Offer workshops on self-directed learning strategies**. By providing practical techniques for self-guided study, time management, and critical thinking, young people will develop robust independent learning skills. Consequently, they'll be more empowered to drive their own development and effectively take advantage of available resources.

» **Invest in programs that reinforce both professional and soft skills**. Employers often highlight the lack of soft skills among youth. Financing programs that build these alongside professional skills can equip young people with competencies vital for career development.

» **Promote vocational education programs through broad-reaching information campaigns**. Showcasing successful examples and disseminating this information with the involvement of all potential stakeholders (youth organizations, schools, universities, community leaders, etc.) can increase youth interest in vocational education programs.

» **Increase the number of programs related to entrepreneurship**. Initiatives from the state, civil society, and private sector can significantly enhance youth economic engagement.

» **Upgrade educational institutions' resources**. Modern equipment and literature can improve youth access to contemporary and relevant knowledge. However, to achieve rapid quality improvements in education, fundamental changes in the education system are necessary.

» **Promote experiential learning methodologies**. Shifting from traditional, lecture-based models to more engaging, hands-on approaches such as project-based learning, simulations, or learning games will result in a more involved learning experience. This change will motivate young people to actively participate and, thus, improve their understanding and application of knowledge.

» **Introduce mobile youth workers within formal educational institutions** to bridge the gap between formal and informal education. This aims to enhance the availability and integration of both educational approaches, thereby enriching the learning experience and increasing accessibility for students.

» **Emulate successful digital literacy initiatives** like Rwanda's "Digital Ambassadors Program." This program focuses on increasing the digital literacy level of youth ambassadors, ensuring they acquire advanced technical skills. These ambassadors can then disseminate their knowledge among peers, promoting widespread digital competence. An important aspect of this program is its commitment to maintaining gender balance, ensuring equitable access and representation in digital literacy efforts.
(Global Youth Development Report, The Commonwealth, 2020)

Engagement and Empowerment

In order to bolster youth engagement and empowerment, programs and initiatives should prioritize:

1. Fostering Youth Decision-Making and Civic Engagement Skills

2. Encouraging Youth-Led Initiatives and Feedback Integration

3. Empowering Youth Stakeholders and Encouraging Supportive Adult Engagement

4. Increasing Coordination Across Youth-Oriented Organizations

» **Promote success stories** demonstrating the positive impacts of youth involvement. Sharing tangible outcomes achieved through youth engagement and their unique problem-solving perspectives will inspire other young people to participate and bolster public trust in municipal bodies. As a result, this will foster an environment of mutual trust, respect, and collaboration, conducive to sustained youth engagement

» Extend youth empowerment efforts to **include not only those who are already active and successful but also the more passive and indifferent segments of the youth population**. This inclusive approach aims to engage a wider spectrum of young people, ensuring that empowerment activities are as encompassing and productive as possible. By reaching out to and supporting these diverse groups, the initiatives can tap into a broader range of perspectives and ideas, fostering a more vibrant and inclusive youth community.

» **Incorporate youth perspectives on local issues** to increase youth motivation for civic participation. Actively seeking and integrating youth opinions on matters that directly affect them will motivate more young people in the community to engage in the decision-making process and propose their own initiatives. In effect, this will cultivate a more active, responsive, and dynamic youth community.

» **Encourage and involve adolescents in the decision-making processes of public institutions**. By including their perspectives, you can make the services more attuned to youth interests and needs, ensuring efficient use of funds. This inclusivity will not only ensure that services are better adapted to their interests and needs, but also improve the efficient use of budget-allocated funds.

» **Cultivate a feedback-centric culture where youth input is prioritized** and integrated into program development. Encourage youth to spearhead initiatives and give their honest feedback on existing programs. By doing so, programs and initiatives become more attuned to the realities and needs of the youth, thereby increasing the impact and resonance of these offerings.

» **Demonstrate the value of youth involvement** by creating a dedicated section on municipal websites specifically for youth. This section should provide comprehensive information on various ways youth can engage, highlighting opportunities and mechanisms for their active participation. Complement this digital platform with engaging multimedia content, which aim to inform, inspire, and encourage young people, and make civic participation more accessible and appealing. By taking these steps, the municipality can vividly convey its commitment to youth engagement and its readiness to support and value their contributions.

» **Involve youth organizations in policy discussions related to youth.** Their inclusion ensures that youth-specific needs and the intricacies of their situations are considered during decision-making processes. This practice will result in more youth-friendly policies and a greater sense of belonging and validation among young people.

» **Enhance coordination between the municipality and youth organizations** to fortify community development efforts. Encourage the municipality to fund youth organization projects, provide material and technical support, while the youth organizations can contribute their knowledge and actively participate in implementing municipal youth programs. This synergy will result in more effective and impactful youth work, benefiting the broader community.