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# INDEX OF PARTICIPATION OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN DECISION-MAKING

ARMENIA, GEORGIA AND MOLDOVA

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# FOREWORD

Participation in civic and political developments ongoing in the country is a fundamental human right. In essence, it is the opportunity to participate in the political life of the country that gives an individual the title of a citizen and ensures the survival of the democratic society. Participation enables the person to influence not only her own development, but also that of the overall society. Participation ensures an active civil position, effective governance and social accountability.

Participation is based on the international human rights framework. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to take part in the government of their country, directly or through freely chosen representatives, as well as through equal access to public service in their country (Article 21). The principle of equal participation through involvement in state governance, electing and being elected is enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Participation is recognized as a fundamental human right in a number of other international and regional treaties, including the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which has been ratified by Armenia, Georgia and Moldova.

Participation is enshrined in the CRPD as a cross-sector issue: it is covered in the purpose statement of the Convention (Article 1), adopted as a main principle (Article 3) and recognized as a key right (Article 29). Furthermore, the right to participation is mentioned in the context of Independent Living (Article 19), Inclusive Education (Article 29), Rehabilitation (Article 26) and Participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport (Article 30). Participation is also covered in Articles on children's rights and those stipulating the necessary conditions for equal participation in relation to accessibility (Article 9) and Freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information (Article 21). The importance of participation is also highlighted in articles on Monitoring and International Cooperation (Articles 4, 33, 34 and 35).

In addition to being enshrined in international covenants, the right to participation in decision-making is also guaranteed in domestic legislations and relevant policy/strategic documents of Armenia, Georgia and Moldova. However, despite the formal guarantees, Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) remain largely excluded from decision-making processes at local, regional and national levels and are prohibited from realizing their right to participation. To address this issue and promote inclusive decision-making in the three countries, first the key factors, issues and challenges hindering PWDs' participation and undermining the inclusiveness of decision-making practices need to be identified.

The purpose of the Index of Participation research implemented within the frameworks of the "From Inclusion to Participation in Decision-Making" project is to assess the level of inclusiveness of decision-making processes in Armenia and evaluate the participation of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) in these processes.

To obtain maximally comprehensive information about the participation of PWDs in decision-making processes and the inclusiveness of these processes, interviews have been conducted with PWDs, leaders of DPOs (Disabled People's Organizations) and decision-makers at local, regional and national levels. Additionally, to objectively evaluate the physical accessibility of buildings of utmost importance in decision-making processes, monitoring of key buildings/facilities has been implemented.

This publication summarizes the research findings, key conclusions and recommendations.

# METHODOLOGY

The opportunity to participate in decision-making is of central importance to the effective development of the individual and the society. Based on the actuality of the topic, the following research *goal* was formulated: to identify the level and ways of participation of PWDs in decision-making processes and assess the accessibility of these processes. To achieve the research goal, the following *objectives* were to be realized:

1. Draw equivalent research samples in the three countries to ensure comparability of findings
2. Study the possible ways/channels of participation in decision-making in the three countries and develop questionnaires based on the findings
3. Develop an Accessibility Watch Card based on the standards of physical accessibility for PWDs
4. Conduct personal interviews and accessibility monitoring in selected regions
5. Implement quality assurance measures in parallel, as well as following the interviews and monitoring
6. Input, code and process the quantitative data and interview transcripts
7. Analyze the quantitative and qualitative information
8. Draw conclusions and develop recommendations based on the research findings
9. Analyze and compare the research findings and conclusions in the three countries
10. Develop the comparative 3-country report

In accordance with the specifics of the research, the in-depth interview was selected as a survey method. Such interviews are a qualitative method and enable establishing trust-based relationships with the respondent and obtain in-depth and detailed information.

To get thorough information about the participation of PWDs in decision-making processes, three groups were included in the research:

- PWDs (Group A): 15 persons with different types of disabilities in each country
- Leaders of DPOs (Group B): 5 persons leading/managing organizations advocating and working with PWDs in each country
- Decision-Makers (Group C): 10 representatives of state bodies at local, regional and national levels in each country

To assess the accessibility of state governance buildings, an Accessibility Watch Card comprised of the following sections was developed:

- The route from the street to the main entrance of the building
- The main entrance of the building
- The situation on the first floor
- The situation on the remaining floors
- The elevator

- The customer service window
- The public bathroom

Detailed information about physical barriers (stairs, curbs, doors, etc.) in each room and section of the buildings was recorded. The data was imputed and analyzed with MS Excel software. The following 4-level scale was developed and utilized for the assessment of physical accessibility:

**Accessible:** persons with limited mobility can enter, freely move around, enjoy all services and utilize all items completely independently, with no assistance.

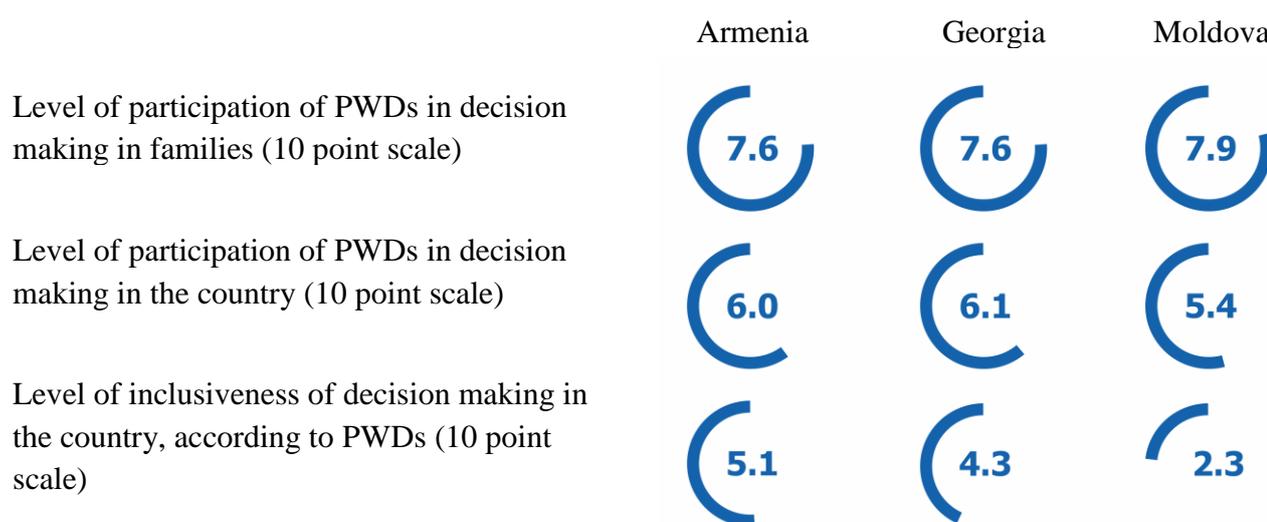
**Mostly Accessible:** persons with limited mobility can enter, freely move around, enjoy all services and utilize all items with little assistance.

**Hardly inaccessible:** persons with limited mobility can enter, freely move around, enjoy all services and utilize all items only with significant assistance.

**Inaccessible:** entering, moving around, enjoying all services and utilizing all items requires significant additional measures for persons with limited mobility and is practically impossible.

## GROUP A: PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

In-depth interviews with 45 PWDs (15 PWDs from each country) have been implemented. To comprehensively evaluate the level and means of participation of PWDs in decision-making processes in their respective countries, the involvement of PWDs in decision-making in their microenvironment, participation in elections, utilization of alternative means of participation, PWDs' motivation and readiness to participate and the effectiveness of their participation have been evaluated.



According to the research findings and PWDs' self-assessment, the level of involvement of PWDs in decision-making processes in their microenvironment (family-level) is almost identical and comparatively high in the three countries: 7.6 to 7.9 out of 10. Most respondents highlight that they feel like an integral part of decision-making processes at home.

Conversely, PWDs evaluate their level of participation in country level decision-making as comparatively lower: 5.4 to 6.1 out of 10, indicating that PWDs are more actively involved in decision-making at home than on the state or community levels. This result is very consistent with PWDs' evaluation of the level of inclusiveness of decision-making in the three countries, where the average indicators were considerably low: 2.3 to 5.1 out of 10, with Moldova exhibiting the lowest levels of inclusiveness.

The issues and challenges highlighted by representatives of the Disability Communities of Armenia, Georgia and Moldova are quite similar across the three countries: physical and informational inaccessibility, lack or low levels of trust in country governments and insufficient

motivation to participate among PWDs. However, there are some considerable differences in the levels of prevalence of the issues and their comparative significance for PWDs.

As to the means of participation, it is noteworthy that PWDs exhibit significantly high rates of participation in local, regional and national elections across Armenia, Georgia and Moldova. The 75-85% level of self-reported participation of PWDs in elections is higher than the average turnout of citizens during elections in the three countries. Respondents report about active participation in electoral processes both through voting in polling stations and mobile ballot boxes. However, interviewed PWDs also highlight incidences of violations of their rights and issues such as lack of accessibility or reasonable accommodation for voters with disabilities.

Another important means of participating in or influencing decision-making is the involvement and membership in DPOs and Political Parties, therefore the level of involvement in such bodies and the perceived effectiveness of such involvement was researched and evaluated.

<b>Involvement of PWDs in DPOs and Political Parties</b>	<b>Armenia</b>	<b>Georgia</b>	<b>Moldova</b>
Are members of DPOs	<b>53%</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>20%</b>
Consider membership in DPOs as an effective mechanism for participation in decision making	<b>60%</b>	<b>53%</b>	<b>20%</b>
Are members of Political Parties	<b>13%</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>0%</b>
Consider membership in Political Parties as an effective mechanism for participation in decision making	<b>13%</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>40%</b>

*Table 1: Involvement of PWDs in DPOs and Political Parties*

It is evident that PWDs in Armenia and Georgia consider involvement and membership in DPOs as a highly effective means of participation in decision-making. Majority of PWDs in the two countries view DPO membership as an opportunity to become a part of a larger, more influential organization, a means of getting informed and addressing important issues. Meanwhile, involvement in DPOs is largely considered ineffective by PWDs in Moldova and the rate of DPO membership is accordingly rather low.

PWDs' evaluation of the effectiveness of involvement in political parties is quite unfavorable in Armenia and Georgia, with correspondingly low levels of membership. Many of the respondents express concerns that the voice of an ordinary party member would not reach the party leadership, thus having minimal effect.

The findings about party membership in Moldova are quite interesting and contradictory: while the rate of membership in political parties is at a nil level (none of interviewed PWDs were or had been a member of a political party), PWDs' evaluate the effectiveness of membership in political parties is the highest of the three countries. It can be concluded that there is a large divide between political parties and citizens with disabilities in this country, an issue that requires further research.

The level of participation in civic movements, protests and public actions is rather low in the three countries, often as a result of security concerns. The internet is largely considered an effective means and platform of political participation in Armenia and Georgia, however the involvement of PWDs in online discussions and platforms is rather low.

## **GROUP B: DISABLED PEOPLE'S ORGANIZATIONS**

In-depth interviews have been conducted with 5 representatives/leaders of DPOs in each country. Organizations targeting persons with different types of disabilities (mental, intellectual, hearing, vision, etc.) and working in different fields (education, employment, culture, etc.) have been included in the sample.

In general, representatives of DPOs unanimously report about high levels of inaccessible and non-inclusive decision-making processes in the three countries. As the key underlying reason of such non-inclusiveness DPOs highlight the incomplete and limited understanding of PWDs' issues among decision-makers. DPOs consider the involvement of PWDs in the staff of state bodies as the potentially the most effective means of addressing the non-inclusiveness of relevant processes and promoting participatory decision-making for PWDs.

On the other hand, the low levels of motivation of PWDs to participate in or influence decision-making is also underlined by DPOs as a key barrier to participatory decision-making. As to the causes of PWDs' lack of motivation, DPOs mention disappointment in the government, inadequate education and lack of awareness.

Inclusive decision-making requires a reciprocal process: while on one hand it is important that PWDs exhibit readiness and motivation to participate in decision-making, state bodies and DPOs

should ensure that the voices of PWDs are heard by decision-makers. The cooperation of CSOs with the latter is in place in the three countries; however the effectiveness of this cooperation is uncertain, as indicated by the comparative table below.

<b>The level of effectiveness of cooperation between DPOs and Decision-Makers</b>	<b>Armenia</b>	<b>Georgia</b>	<b>Moldova</b>
According to DPOs	Average	Average	Low
According to Decision-Makers	High	High	High

*Table 2: The perceived level of effectiveness of cooperation between DPOs and Decision-Makers*

DPOs report difficulties with in terms of raising priority issues and getting timely responses from state bodies. Moreover, a significant part of DPOs perceive this cooperation as a mere formality.

Taking into account the prevalence of double/multiple discrimination against PWDs in the three countries (e.g. elderly women with disabilities can be discriminated on three grounds: age, gender and disability), the perceptions and understanding of DPOs about multiple discrimination as a barrier to participation in decision-making has been studied. The interviews showed that DPOs have difficulties in recognizing and identifying cases/forms of multiple discrimination, which can be an indication of narrow orientation and restricted focus on disability issues among DPOs, which may undermine their capacity to promote inclusiveness.

## **GROUP C: DECISION-MAKERS**

30 interviews have been implemented with individuals directly involved in decision-making processes on the local, regional and national levels in the three countries. Special agencies/commissions dealing exclusively with the rights and issues of PWDs have been established and operate in the three countries. The involvement of PWDs in these bodies is considered compulsory.

At the same time, however, decision-makers exhibit discriminatory attitudes and stereotypical perceptions about the potential and abilities of PWDs in regards to participating and influencing decision-making. Interesting is the fact that representatives of state bodies in all three countries consider the low levels of motivation of PWDs and their lack of trust in the government as the key issues hindering their participation in decision-making, further explaining that the lack of trust and motivation is due to insufficient awareness and information. In Armenia and Moldova decision-

makers also draw attention to lack of funding as a key barrier to enhancing inclusiveness and ensuring equal conditions for PWDs' participation.

On the other hand, it is evident that the existing mechanisms aimed at ensuring citizens' participation in decision-making are either ineffective in general or inaccessible/non-inclusive for PWDs.

As indicated in Table 2, representatives of government bodies in the three countries consider the cooperation with DPOs rather effective, which is in contrast to the evaluation by DPOs. This contradiction can be an indication of inconsistent expectations from the cooperation by DPOs and decision-makers, which needs to be addressed to ensure more resourceful cooperation.

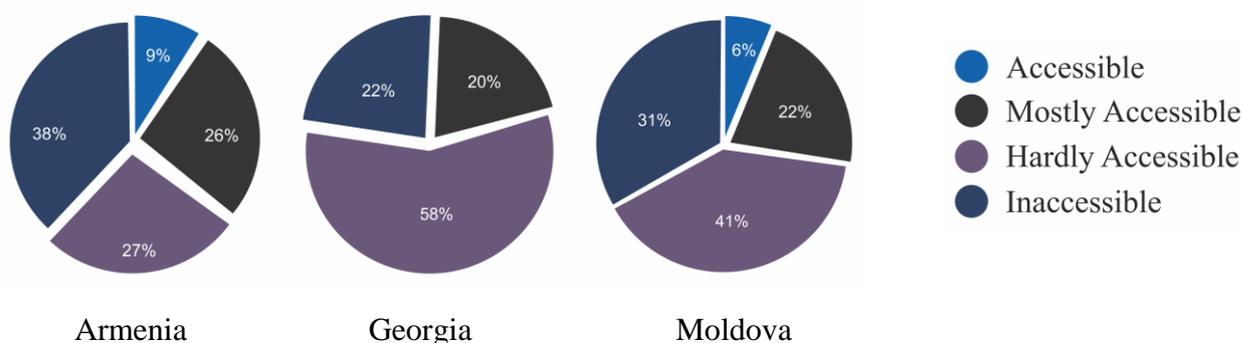
## PHYSICAL ACCESSIBILITY

The accessibility of the physical environment of key buildings/facilities in terms of ensuring citizens' participation in decision-making processes has been monitored and evaluated in the frameworks of the Index of Participation research.

Government and Ministry buildings, polling stations, passport offices, buildings of regional governments, municipalities and district municipalities and other similar buildings have been included in the monitoring.

The overall comparative overview of the accessibility situation in the three countries is summarized below.

### Physical Accessibility of Key Buildings and Facilities



It is evident that the share of accessible buildings is rather low in the three countries, while hardly accessible and inaccessible buildings comprise the significant majority (65-80%), thus

effectively hindering the participation of PWDs in decision-making. Especially challenging is the situation in Moldova, where none of the monitored buildings were accessible for persons with limited mobility.

Thus, the reports of PWDs, leaders of DPOs and representatives of state bodies about accessibility being a key barrier to ensuring participatory decision-making processes for PWDs is corroborated with the findings of the monitoring and objective evaluation of the physical accessibility of key buildings.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although numerous similarities in terms of the existing situation, key issues and underlying causes have been identified across the three countries, separate conclusions and recommendations have been developed for Armenia, Georgia and Moldova, to better inform the governments and other stakeholders in each country about country-specific issues and priorities. Nevertheless, the key barriers hindering PWDs’ participation in decision-making in the three countries are summarized in the comparative table below.

<b>Key Barriers Hindering PWDs' participation</b>	<b>Armenia</b>	<b>Georgia</b>	<b>Moldova</b>
According to PWDs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Inaccessibility</li> <li>- Lack of motivation among PWDs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Inaccessibility</li> <li>- Indifference of the Government</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of trust</li> <li>- Inaccessibility</li> </ul>
According to DPOs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Inaccessibility</li> <li>- Lack of awareness among Decision-Makers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of motivation among PWDs</li> <li>- Indifference of the Government</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of motivation among PWDs</li> <li>- Low awareness of Decision-Makers</li> </ul>
According to Decision-Makers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of motivation among PWDs</li> <li>- Lack of funding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of motivation among PWDs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of motivation among PWDs</li> <li>- Lack of funding</li> </ul>

# ARMENIA: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## Conclusions

Neither decision-makers nor representatives of DPOs have a clear understanding of what inclusive decision-making means and entails. The inclusiveness of decision-making processes is often merely equated to the accessibility of the physical environment and a "supportive" attitude towards PWDs.

Despite the fact that certain mechanisms (commissions, public boards, discussions, etc.) of participation in decision-making are in place, these mechanisms are either ineffective or non-inclusive for PWDs.

Key barriers hindering PWDs' participation in decision-making in Armenia are: the inaccessibility of the physical environment, the stereotypical attitudes towards PWDs and limited perceptions of PWDs' needs and potential among decision-makers, the lack of motivation among PWDs, the insufficient level of awareness about discrimination on the grounds of disability among decision-makers and the low level of involvement of PWDs as members/employees of decision-making bodies.

Decision-makers, representatives of NGOs and PWDs express willingness to participate in trainings and discussions on inclusive decision-making.

## Recommendations

Clearly define the term "inclusive decision-making" and develop concrete standards and indicators of inclusiveness of decision-making processes.

In cooperation with DPOs, PWDs and relevant experts, review the current mechanisms of citizens' participation with a view of making them more inclusive.

To ensure a systematic approach towards increasing the involvement of PWDs in decision-making, develop and implement a National Plan of Action aimed at addressing the above-mentioned issues in a reasonable timeframe. Define concrete deadlines and establish a clear framework of accountability.

Ensure the participation of DPOs, PWDs and relevant expert in all stages of the development and implementation of the National Plan of Action.

Develop and implement a training and awareness-raising program aimed at addressing stereotypical approaches and discriminatory attitudes among state bodies in cooperation with DPOs, PWDs and relevant experts.

# GEORGIA: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## Conclusions

In general, all participants agree that the community participation level is low. So is the awareness on this topic both in the society and in the disability community itself.

According to PWDs and DPOs, in order to enhance inclusion active and direct involvement of PWDs is necessary. Moreover, the involvement should be ensured from the initial planning stage throughout the whole process of implementation of a project.

Participants from all three categories agree that non-formal education is an essential prerequisite for increasing the level of participation of PWDs in public life.

Participants from all three groups agree that the situation regarding PWDs' involvement in decision-making processes has considerably improved since 2012.

## Recommendations

Ensure the active involvement of PWDs in the initial stages of planning through systematic and coordinated communication with PWDs and DPOs as opposed to only receiving recommendations and leaving them unrealized.

Actively employ PWDs in the staff of state bodies and improve the involvement of PWDs in state governance through appointment or election of PWDs in decision-making roles.

Provide opportunities for non-formal education, including trainings, seminars, and, especially, camps – where PWDs will be able to raise their awareness about their rights and master basic skills required for independent living.

Enhance the level of public awareness, thus helping community members learn more about their own rights on one hand, and reducing discrimination against PWDs on the other hand.

# MOLDOVA: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## Conclusions

Key issues hindering PWDs' participation in decision-making are societal attitudes, the prevalent inaccessibility and the lack of trust in the government among PWDs.

Participation in elections at local, regional and national levels is considered the key means of involvement in decision-making for PWDs.

The cooperation between DPOs and decision-makers is insufficient and largely ineffective. Overall, a lack of consistent communication between PWDs, DPOs and decision-makers can be observed.

Stereotypes, negative attitudes and misconceptions about PWDs, as well as discrimination on the grounds of disability are prevalent and significantly hinder PWDs' participation in decision-making.

## Recommendations

Develop a clearly structured program aimed at increasing the general awareness of PWDs, improving their knowledge about their rights and opportunities to participate in decision-making processes in the country.

Develop and implement a realistic plan for the technical adaptation of buildings associated with the decision-making process, taking into account standards, ensuring physical accessibility for people with disabilities.

Review the current mechanisms of citizens' participation with a view of making them more effective, participatory and inclusive for PWDs. Ensure that PWDs are well-informed about such mechanisms.

Develop and implement a plan for seminars and communication training to improve communication between authorities and non-governmental organizations. Ensure the participation of DPOs and PWDs in the development of the plan.

Develop and implement a systematic strategy aimed at eliminating stereotypical attitudes towards people with disabilities by the officials and citizens of the country.

Through its Re-granting Scheme, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum supports projects of EaP CSF members with a regional dimension that will contribute to achieving the mission and objectives of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum. The donors of the re-granting scheme are the European Union, National Endowment for Democracy and Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The overall amount for the 2016 call for proposals is 307.500 EUR. Grants are available for CSOs from the Eastern Partnership and EU countries. Key areas of support are democracy and human rights, eco-nomic integration, environment and energy, contacts between people, social and labour policies.

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