DRIVE: Digital Research and Impact for Vulnerable E-citizens Project

Qualitative research, stakeholder interviews and recommendations of Digitally Vulnerable Groups in Georgia

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DRIVE: Digital Research and Impact for Vulnerable E-citizens Project

is led by e-Governance Academy (eGA) in partnership with the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI) (Georgia) and 2030: Tech for Public Good (Ukraine).

The vision is the **vulnerable citizen groups in Ukraine and Georgia** to have a **changed quality of life** by being **digitally engaged in political decision-making** (advanced policy development) and **services**, and to have **necessary conditions, awareness and skills** for that.

Though a large number of different elements can contribute to a changed quality of life and digital engagement, **the DRIVE project aims** at two outcomes: **public authorities (PAs)** and **civil society organisations (CSOs)** are **(1) aware of the digitally vulnerable groups**, their needs and gaps in their digital literacy and access (tools and skills), and (2) they are able **to work together** and have **improved skills** to design smart responses to address these needs and overcome the gaps, and implement transparent, accountable and participatory e-governance (e.g. a new tools, platform, etc.) to **prevent the digital divide** (further).

In the DRIVE context, we define the **Digitally Vulnerable Groups** as those whose **digital engagement in political decision-making** and **e-services** is hindered by their **lack of awareness** of digital issues, **access** to technological benefits, and/or **digital literacy and skills**. Irrespective of the causes (e.g. demographic, socioeconomic and/or health status, living conditions or social position, etc.), these barriers prevent the people from reaping the **benefits of digital transformation** and as such, have a negative impact on their **rights, interests, and everyday life**.

The main activities by the partners to reach the project aim and contribute to the ultimate vision include:

1. an ecosystem building research in Ukraine and Georgia to (1) identify two digitally vulnerable groups in Ukraine and Georgia (per country); (2) map previous activities and research carried out for and with these DVG and key stakeholders involved in the activities; (3) provide a comprehensive view of the key problems and needs of these DVG to plan further activities in the project (actions proposals, trainings, pilot projects); and (4) identify the gaps and needs of the PAs and CSOs;

2. based on the research, prepare and share **recommendations** to CSO and PA stakeholders with hands-on activities on how to improve the situation and work with different digitally vulnerable groups and avoid widening the digital divide, and highlight the best practices;

3. based on the recommendations, create a **training curriculum** and implement (1) two online **trainings for CSOs** and (2) four **seminars for PAs and CSOs**, and (3) prepare a set of **action proposals** for both countries;

4. based on the trainings and the action proposals, facilitate the process of designing one **pilot project** per country and supervise their implementation.

In addition, eGA and local partners work together as competence centres **facilitating communicating and disseminating** the aims and activities in the region, and collaborate to bring more capital to the region for the digital and data rights ecosystem.

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Introduction

Under the evermoving force of digital transformation, technology advances and so do devices and their relevant use cases. Such dynamic push carries a direct impact on people's lives, as the ultimate users and subjects of technological progress. Societies, in the multiplicity of stakeholders that compose them, must take stock of *where it all leads*, who and how benefits from digital transformation, and who and how remains left behind.

Governments and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) cover a major role in assessing the changing conditions that generate vulnerability for specific social groups. As countries around the world face the opportunities and challenges that come with digital transformation, these stakeholders are tasked also with evaluating the effectiveness of the changes at play in terms of 1) social exclusion; 2) the participation in the wider national economy of at-risk groups; and 3) the prevention from worsening of existing inequalities.

Digitally Vulnerable Groups (DVGs) are those who, due to the technological divide, may potentially be exposed to deeper new social and economic risks from the digital transformation. Broadly defined in this project,

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Digitally Vulnerable Groups are those whose digital engagement in political decision-making and e-services is hindered by their lack of awareness of digital issues, access to technological benefits, and/or digital literacy and skills. Irrespective of the causes (e.g., demographic, socioeconomic and/or health status, living conditions or social position, etc.), these barriers prevent the people from reaping the benefits of digital transformation and as such, have a negative impact on their rights, interests, and everyday life.

In this Country Report, we present the research activities aimed at surveying the causes of vulnerability in the experience of Georgian DVGs. First, a preliminary specification of DVGs in Georgia is presented on the basis of desk research. Secondly, findings from qualitative interviewing with a sample of Georgian subject experts contribute to unravel how different factors interplay to deepen people's vulnerability – in the face of increased technological uptake for learning and accessing e-services. Lastly, recommendations to relevant stakeholders are provided, as emerging from the subject experts' input and the authors' own analysis.

DVGs in Georgia, explained: Who and why?

Digital vulnerability is a phenomenon determined equally by existing and new conditions of exclusion or vulnerability in society. While digital transformation pertains predominantly to service delivery in a digital form (from a strictly public administration-related viewpoint), the scope of change and its effects widen when society and the economy as a whole are taken into account.

For reference, as defined by the European Commission in the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) methodology, measuring the degree of communities' effectiveness in keeping up with digital transformation must look into 1) connectivity; 2) use of internet and digital tools; 3) a population's digital skills (European Commission, 2021). With such focus, we can assess their degree of access to digital public services, and how well they may reap the market and socialization opportunities that technology enables.

While individuals who might not have previously found themselves at a position of vulnerability may face new setbacks – although for some groups their general situation may improve – previously at-risk groups could see their socioeconomic standing in society fall back even more, under the pressure of digital transformation.

Access to internet and connectivity

In Georgia, 86% of households country-wide enjoyed internet access as of 2021. However, disparities by geographical unit run across the nation, with a net distinction between cities and rural areas – 91% and 78.9% respectively (Geostat, 2022). An inter-regional divide comes into play to deepen such inequalities, with the lowest scoring areas reporting 60% of households with internet access (Geostat 2022).

In the words of the report by the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI), "*there currently is a sharp digital divide in Georgia, mainly due to geographical and economic factors.*" (IDFI, 2020). An issue reiterated by the United Nations (UN, 2020), according to which "*Georgia is among the countries where, despite high human capital, progress has stalled somehow due to its relatively weak telecommunication infrastructure.*"

Internet use by age groups, as it stands today

The lack of a widespread and generally equal distribution of connectivity across the country hampers opportunities for the local people to unlock human development and business opportunities that come with internet and the use of digital tools. As the intuitive consequence of such missed contact with technology – or *efficient* technology, such as fast broadband – digital skills are assumed to lag disproportionately between rural areas, and the more buzzing city and town-sized municipalities. One of the most salient divides can be found within the age group spectrum, given the diversity in needs of younger and elder individuals when using technology and the internet (Caucasus Research Resource Centers, 2020).

According to data from Georgia's National Statistics Office (Geostat, 2022), up to **9% of children aged 6–14** had either never used the internet or used it over 3 months ago – a *red flag*, in light of the shift to remote learning of most public schools caused by the pandemic. As per the same dataset, **58.4% of people aged 60+** had never used the internet at the time of the survey. The most common use of the internet among the latter group revolves around social networks, reading online news sites, and making internet calls/video calls. Meanwhile **young people aged 15–29** have a more diverse distribution of uses, including finding information about goods and services, looking for employment, and internet banking.

Overall, the older generation is more interested in learning online about farming and connecting with relatives abroad, while the youth is more interested in various online platforms.

Case study: use of internet and digital skills in the Ozurgeti area

These results are consistent with what emerges from the survey conducted in Ozurgeti for the Communications Commission (ACT Georgia, 2021) within the framework of the "Log-in Georgia" project (shared with IDFI and eGA). According to the survey, **a large majority (79%) of respondents aged 65+** do not use Internet at all. Qualitative insight suggests that pensioners and vulnerable families are the two main groups that may not have internet access. The determining factors include:

- Lack of access to essential technology and/or devices;
- Lack of digital skills;
- Absence of financial resources to cover the internet fee;
- Lack of interest.

Concerning digital skills, survey participants in Ozurgeti indicated the following as the most required digital skills (in descending order of priority):

- "Finding required information fast online" – highlighted by almost all groups regardless of their age, gender, economic state, disabilities, or internet use;
- "Identifying fraud online" – highlighted by almost all groups;
- "Knowledge of useful applications" – highlighted by almost all groups regardless of their age, gender, economic state, disabilities, or the internet usage practice.

Double vulnerabilities refocus DVGs along the age spectrum

As the findings show, inequality in connectivity and availability of infrastructure is intimately related to not only access to public services, but also to economic opportunities and established basic social rights – such as education. To serve as an example, being a minor in a rural area incidentally created a condition of double vulnerability, with IDFI estimates totalling 35,000 minors in summer 2020 who had never used internet and/or did not have access to distant-learning tools. The negative effects have been deepened by the COVID-19 pandemic, with the forced reliance on remote and digital tools it triggered.

In Georgia, existing research on the determinants of digital vulnerability and what to do about it is quite limited – aside from the works mentioned in this report and a few other reports yet under processing or release. However, the review compiled within the scope of this project and in this Country Report does indicate age groups as a good place to start to survey DVGs.

Methodology

To delve deeper into the experiences of DVGs in Georgia, in *tandem* with the local consortium partners, we have conducted 17 semi-structured qualitative interviews with Georgian experts from the public sector, research institutions, unions, and CSOs active in the relevant subject areas.

Semi-structured interviews prove to be particularly beneficial when it comes to keeping a research agenda open-ended. They give respondents the possibility to hint at areas of inquiry not previously formulated, but are eventually fundamental in the deeper understanding of a certain phenomenon (Fedyuk and Zentai, 2018). If the *age group continuum* hypothesis falls short in surveying DVGs' experience of vulnerability, we are also open to plausible, new theory-generating answers. In our case, indeed, the nuances of the method applied effectively.

Interviewees were selected based on the initial mapping and identification of DVGs stemming from desk research. Once the target groups became clear, so did the ecosystem of public sector actors and CSOs directly dealing with the target groups and/or the digital transformation and the relevant social groups in the country.

Interviews were carried out in the span of 10 days during the month of January 2022, partly on-site in Georgia and partly via Microsoft Teams. The duration of each session ranged from ~30 minutes to ~50 minutes. The software application Otter.ai was used to generate transcripts from the full interview recordings in all but one instance, where this was done manually. All transcripts were then checked with their respective original recordings to ensure accuracy of reporting. Direct quotes included in this report have been edited for the purpose of clarity, where needed, and are indicated in an *italic* font format.

The only limitations to report pertained to the interviewees´ availability – only those who consented to participating are present in this qualitative study – and language spoken, as English speakers have been largely preferred to reduce the *lost in translation* factor as much as possible.

Findings from qualitative interviewing

From the 17 interviews carried out, the Georgian subject experts mentioned a total of nine relevant topics that contribute to understanding the diverse instances of vulnerability that DVGs face in Georgia. While all of these apply to the general population, the degree to which they affect young people and the elderly vary. This holds true not only in relation to the two extreme ends of the variable chosen as the starting point of this analysis (age groups), but for its full spectrum – people of different ages require access to different digital opportunities and e-services, based on their needs. Consequently, the skills they might need to do that differ along the age continuum, as do the intended outcomes.

Here we categorize our findings from the qualitative interviewing sessions according to the nine relevant themes highlighted by the subject experts, delving deeper – where applicable – into the age group specifications of the vulnerabilities experienced by DVGs. The topics are presented in order from the most relevant to the least (but still spontaneously) mentioned, per number of occurrences on the total of the session carried out.

Main issues

1. Geographical location (9 mentions)

The urban/rural divide cuts across the country and seems to establish a net distinction in infrastructure availability, connectivity, digital skills, and access to opportunities. While somewhat this is in line with issues of the same kind that can be found in other countries too, such as in the European Union (European Commission, 2021), Georgia is specifically challenged by the morphology of its territory. As one telecommunications expert points out, "*Challenges for DVGs are mostly concentrated in the highlands and mountainous regions.*"

Despite the "*increasing access to internet connection via mobile networks*", the lack of a solid infrastructure to grant broadband connection keeps several villages in different regions isolated from *the web*. The issue prevents young adults from being able to unlock the opportunities offered by e-commerce, to bring up an example related to businesses. But unsurprisingly, the biggest problems came in relation to schools and distance and/or remote learning – and affected minors in rural areas, disproportionately more in comparison to their city peers.

"*When we are talking about suburbs, or villages, or outside cities anyway, we have two big problems. First, these places don't have appropriate internet connection.*" Secondly, even if families may have an internet connection, they might not dispose of the necessary number of devices to allow kids to follow classes or do homework when they need to. "*When the education system shifted to remote learning due to the pandemic, various problems were immediately apparent. […] There are still villages in Georgia where internet is not accessible in any form.* [And] *schools having internet does not imply, anyway, that the student has access to it all day long*," especially in the forced condition of remote learning, one respondent says. Moreover, even if "*the schools are provided with internet through the Ministry's internal system, the quality is questionable.*"

Consequently, initiatives aimed at raising awareness of the use of digital tools or online media literacy fall short in gathering the interest hoped for. "*It's a matter of lack of skills too, especially in the mountainous areas,*" one respondent points out. Projects have focused on increasing interest, skills, and digital literacy – both among the younger generations and the elderly, it is highlighted – but these are still relatively "*new topics in Georgia, though very important; because we really have quite a big gap between rural and urban areas, and I think there's huge potential in Georgia right now to somehow close this gap,*" one interviewee hopefully says.

2. Skills, access and awareness to use digital tools (9 mentions)

The good news, here, is that Georgia and the World Bank have an active project with ambitious goals – Log-in Georgia – whose focus, aside from infrastructure, entails digital literacy too. The development plans cover a broad scope of objectives falling under the umbrella of "increasing access to affordable broadband internet, and to promote its use by individuals and enterprises in selected rural settlements" (The World Bank, 2020). Moreover, the project has specific subcomponents aimed at boosting digital inclusion for vulnerable groups, with a focus both on material tools and engagement mechanisms (The World Bank, 2020).

Today, however, the lack of digital skills constitutes "a *barrier towards reaping the benefits of e-commerce, e-taxation, e-democracy,*" and even just access to basic online services, as many respondents highlight. Also, "*some services are quite successful, but lots* [many] *of them are a disaster,*" one respondent says, citing many and varied issues of accessibility and usability. While the elderly might have primarily issues of access to connectivity, they also just display low interest in using the internet for accessing services – only 1 in every 5 inhabitants aged 65+ do, as it emerged from a local regional survey. Reasons for interest peak when it comes to getting informed about the weather, or communicating with relatives.

Comparatively, one respondent points out how younger generations "*are not really vulnerable at all*" in that respect. "*Young people have much greater access to technology than older people. And this is something that shows up consistently in almost any survey that you look at. If we're talking about being able to use*

technology, I don't think that young people inherently have a problem with access to technology," the respondent says. Data from another survey project carried out by a different respondent back such a claim – in the villages sampled, almost everyone among the youth is an internet user, with about 97% of them using mobile phones or smartphones for connectivity. However, despite the fact that *comparatively*, as in the words of a few respondents, teenagers and young adults might be among the most digitally savvy demographic groups in the country, this does not exempt them from risks. It could actually be the exact increased use of internet and online tools that exposes them – or their children, in the case of young parents – to common cyber hygiene threats.

The issue becomes more complicated, then, when the focus shifts to minors and schools. In respondents' view, pupils seem to experience the internet and digital tools mostly *by themselves* – meaning that parents are the first who lack digital skills useful to provide guidance, be these related to safe internet use or knowledge of its opportunities. Teachers also had to rush to learn how to use remote schooling tools in order to adapt to the *emergency mode* normality triggered by the pandemic. And even if (some) schools might be equipped with computer labs, thanks to a UNICEF sponsored project, these "*lock the doors*" to preserve computers. "*So they ended up being used only by IT teachers for their own classes, but that was it. While instead there is a whole series of other activities schools can foster to put these tools to good use*" beyond those few IT classes, several respondents highlight.

3. Language barriers (7 mentions)

Another strictly demographic and cultural vulnerability is represented by language barriers and diversity. For the Azerbaijani and Armenian speaking minorities, it is hard to access public services online that are only in Georgian – "*including* [only to an extent] *that on vaccination for COVID, for example.*" "*Most government organizations cannot afford to translate all pages of all services into multiple languages,*" one respondent says. "*So, there might be the* [paradoxical] *situation where these people have access to internet and skills, but do not hold the language proficiency to access e-services, or even just information in Georgian.*"

Although the e-services government portal My.gov.ge does present the possibility to switch languages to Azeri or Armenian, only the general description of some services is displayed in the corresponding translation. A worsening factor in this sense could be the lack of information and awareness about the website, tapping into *supply-side* shortcomings – i.e. information about such services and their existence might not be properly communicated towards and among minority groups, due to the same linguistic issue.

Continuing, another respondent pairs the linguistic issues in accessing content in Georgian to those of doing it in English. Beyond public services and government websites in the national language, the web offers of course a whole lot of other information in English which might be useful to residents for self-development, e-commerce, being informed, etc. Linguistic barriers do apply then also to "*those who speak no English. There are very few Georgian sites, so the info available in Georgian online is the 0.000 something per cent,*" one respondent notes. Consequently, to the naturally limited scope of information available in Georgian, we shall also add the lack of language skills to access other information that might be available in English.

In terms of media literacy, this presents reasons for concern too, as such non-Georgian speaking minorities might be more prone to consume foreign language media. To this, it is worth adding the additional factor of personal preference: members of minority groups might simply prefer to access information in their own native language, driving them away from information and knowledge about the country, its current affairs, and its services that are mainly presented in Georgian.

4. Media literacy (7 mentions)

Navigating through the *mare magnum* of diverse media sources and information is already quite complicated nowadays. Adding to it the fact that DVGs might not be individuals fully equipped with the tools to do so, expose them even more to potential misinformation or manipulation. However, on this topic, views differ quite a lot among our respondents.

One interviewee argues that there is a widespread "*lack of knowledge on how to verify information. So manipulating is easy, with any age audience,*" citing *troll factories* and the likes. The same respondent

highlights that it is hard to pinpoint age difference across groups, because there has been no adequately comprehensive study yet on media consumption. Somewhat (but not that closely) in line with this, another interviewee says that there is a general awareness among Georgians in sampled villages on the need for activities that would raise their own media literacy.

Most interviewees argue that the elderly are more easily influenced by misinformation or media manipulation – although that hardly happens online, if uptake of digital tools and use in that age group is allegedly so low. As for what regards younger people, instead, another respondent is sure that there is no reason for concern. "*Data* [quantitative, from 60,000 interviews] *shows overwhelmingly the opposite. Young people are the least vulnerable. They have strong pro-Western views, and they're the least likely to be uncertain about those views. […] I know a lot of people like to talk about young people. But 'the kids are okay' would be my key message for people thinking about this sort of policy spaces that you don't see in maths,*" the respondent concludes.

Residual issues

1. Socioeconomic situation (4 mentions)

According to three of our respondents, access to technology for younger generations is an issue pertaining mostly to poverty or deprivation. One interesting point on awareness and willingness to improve one's own situation in terms of digital skills was brought up by a fourth respondent, who highlights how breaking dynamics of prolonged, intergenerational poverty is necessary for economically deprived young people to take that opportunity into consideration.

2. Cybersecurity (4 mentions)

While three out of four respondents answering on the topic highlight that cybersecurity and cyber hygiene are issues to pay attention to across age groups with almost no distinction – if not in the problems at hand (from phishing to online behaviour etc.) – one respondent believes that young people aged 18 to 29, or 18 to 35, are the safest. "[They are] *definitely the highest skilled, highest access, least vulnerable groups in Georgia when it comes to digital things*" implying, as a statement falling within the sub-topic discussed, that they are already sheltered enough from cyber risks.

It is important, though, to highlight here an interpretative specification. Issues regarding both media literacy (in light of pressure actions from international actors) and the integrity of national communication and digital services also fall within the scope of a definition of cybersecurity. However, through their answers, respondents re-directed this particular matter towards eventual problems pertaining to cyberhygiene. While media literacy has been addressed separately as an issue *per se* (see above), data protection, or the risks coming from extensive internet use and behaviour of activists, CSOs, or journalists, should also be taken into account.

3. Disability (3 mentions)

The most digitally vulnerable group, in the eyes of our three respondents, are those individuals with special needs. They face some of the biggest – and least *socioeconomic,* so to say – challenges in accessing and using technology.

4. Gender (2 mentions)

Considered very marginal in distinguishing situations of vulnerability in Georgia, compared to other more prominent categories as those described. Gender disparities, however, are another example of how the interplay between two demographic variables – such as this and geographic location – could, in the end, generate a situation of vulnerability.

A few respondents mentioned how insufficient digital skills could affect disproportionately women and men in rural areas, due to family-labour roles distribution within the household, or lifestyle. Though the underlining, horizontal issue seems to be geographical location also in this case (see above), it is worth paying attention to gender as the source of an additional condition of vulnerability in given areas of the country.

Stakeholder relations

Somewhat unsurprisingly, a whole other topic is represented by stakeholder relations. As brought up by the interviewees, the stakeholders involved in addressing the digital vulnerabilities of the groups identified result to be the following:

- The national government;
- Local government administrations;
- Civil Society Organizations and NGOs;
- Local community leaders.

The role of national and local governments appears to be more salient with regard to education and public services related issues. While specialized government agencies on communications and digital government are actively working on the issues highlighted, some interviewees believe more could be done if cooperation is established with other public sector agencies too.

This would be mainly, to expand the reach – and the actors involved – in raising awareness about e-services. But also, to equip in a more pervasive way teachers and education operators, in their relevant sector, with the skills necessary to 1) enter remote learning mode when needed, and 2) start addressing the use of ICT from a conscious perspective already in schools. On this topic, it is believed indeed that it is largely on the school system to more effectively give pupils an introduction to the use of digital tools.

Local governments come into play with regard to the distribution of responsibilities and tasks in this sense, as the management of the education sector differs across levels of education (kindergarten, primary, secondary) across levels of administration. But these may play a role also in terms of tapping into funding available for trainings and awareness-raising activities to be carried out locally.

CSOs are thought instead to be the ones to bridge the gap between the government and the people others may not manage to reach. However, there appears to be poor awareness across the sector of the activities carried out by different organizations locally. While these are happening, and may find an ally in local community leaders particularly in more rural and remote areas, the current lack of higher-level coordination of these activities generates a situation where – unknowingly – *everyone is for themselves*. The fact that this is highlighted by interviewees across the spectrum raises a point though: the need for a mechanism (e.g. a steering committee) to better organize and orchestrate these activities is apparent, matched by the warning of *"not repeating what other organizations are already doing,"* pointed out by most interviewees across the stakeholder spectrum.

Research note: When vulnerabilities add up

The sessions of qualitative interviewing in Georgia shed a light on a phenomenon that, too often, is overlooked by researchers seeking to explore the dynamics of vulnerability. In society, these do not determine and influence people's experiences in and for themselves, taken singularly and individually. They often interact with other traits and characteristics of an individual, be these pertaining to a group identity or their sole own experience (Simien, 2007; Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach, 2008). In order to develop and

provide recommendations to bring together different parts of society (governments, CSOs), it is necessary to take into account that vulnerabilities can – and do – add up.

To serve as an example, let us consider the case of education.

- ***1st factor of vulnerability***: Distance and/or remote learning has disrupted the regular school course and life of minors across the globe.
- ***2nd factor of vulnerability***: Those who did not have adequate availability of digital devices at home to follow school and do homework, for socioeconomic reasons, have been penalized even more.
- ***3rd factor of vulnerability***: Those who in addition were located in otherwise remote areas with poor or inexistent internet connection, faced an even harsher situation.
- ***4th factor of vulnerability****:* Those who, on top of everything, are socially vulnerable for additional reasons, may be affected by digital vulnerability even more, e.g., LGBTQIA+ youth, victims of domestic violence, and those lacking opportunities and privacy to access their support groups and/or dedicated services online.

Such framework is applied here to education and minors – but it can be repeated for young adults seeking human development or business opportunities, or the elderly searching for information and means to connect via the internet with dear ones.

It is essential, when developing programme recommendations and suggesting lines of action, to consider and delve deeper into how inequalities can and do generate cumulative vulnerability for people whose needs – when concentrating instead on a single demographic variable – might remain unheard, despite the noblest of intentions.

Recommendations

From the analysis of the expert input received from both public sector interviewees and members of CSOs, recommended activities should cover two highlighted macro-aspects – 1) the salient, topical issues DVGs face in their use and experience of digital opportunities, and 2) the coordination and task-distribution hurdles emerging from the lack of an encompassing strategy on how to address digital vulnerabilities.

Recommendations are presented here with a general formulation, to allow and give input for further discussion and planning with Georgian public authorities and CSOs during the capacity-building events and subsequent action plans and projects.

The ultimate objective of developing these recommendations is to improve the quality of life of the groups of vulnerable citizens identified in Georgia, by increasing their digital engagement in political decision-making (advanced policy development) and services usage, while enjoying the necessary conditions, awareness and skills for that.

Specifically, these recommendations contribute to the project objective in a way so that Public Authorities (PAs) and CSOs are aware of digitally vulnerable groups and their needs, and have improved skills to engage these groups and to prevent the prevalence or deepening of the digital divide. They are presented here in the form of desired outcomes, for which specific action lines will emerge during dedicated workshop activities.

Awareness of digital vulnerability and DVGs

PAs and CSOs should be aware of what digital vulnerability is, and who digitally vulnerable groups are,

as well as their unmet needs and salient issues in reaping the benefits of an increased digital economy and society. As shown, issues may pertain to geographical location, access and digital skills, language barriers, and more.

When planning new policies, services and projects, PAs, CSOs, donors and businesses should scan and scrutinize the policies, services and projects envisioned. The goal is to evaluate the impact – positive, neutral, negative – these could have on DVGs.

Capacity to plan and implement projects strategically while monitoring and considering the digital divide

On the supply-side of financial help and support to innovative projects, funding organizations and donors active in Georgia should keep in mind and be aware of issues of digital vulnerability when planning, launching, and implementing grant opportunities and calls.

CSOs, by their part, should consider digital vulnerability in order to not worsen, but ideally decrease, the digital divide within their projects, particular service provision, and advocacy activities. It is suggested to increase local governments' capacity and awareness towards accessing available funding, particularly when projects aimed at tackling digital vulnerability may fall under their own level of decision-making and jurisdiction.

Capacity to cooperate across and within sectors and organizations

In terms of stakeholder relations, PAs and CSOs should be able to co-design effective responses to address unmet needs and gaps in access to digital opportunities of DVGs. Transparency, accountability, and active participation should be the pillars of inclusive e-governance initiatives.

This is possible where PAs, CSOs, and other stakeholders involved have a common understanding of the value of engagement and multilevel cooperation when it comes to planning, developing, and implementing projects and activities collaborating across organizations within the same sector, as well as bridging to others in different ones.

Examples could be collaborations between CSOs and local governments, or PAs and private sector entities, and so on. In this line of thought, it is important to highlight the role public-private partnerships (PPPs) could play towards adopting new approaches and management processes, as well as to unlocking funding opportunities. Together, the public and private sectors can better map out citizens' needs, as well as share the burden of addressing issues large in scope such as digital skills development.

Improved communication and awareness of relevant active projects

Overlapping feedback on stakeholder relations and salient, specific needs of DVGs highlighted in this report show a tendency towards the risk of duplicating activities and outcomes across organizations involved in assisting vulnerable groups. The issue emerges as the consequence of lack of awareness and mapping of what projects are active to tackle a specific issue. Moreover, awareness is also required of the conditions *on the ground,* gaining trusted and accurate knowledge about facts, data and statistics pertaining to digital services, accessibility, skills in the population, and such.

It is necessary to dispose of up-to-date overviews of the initiatives, projects, and services implemented or under implementation that focus on digital vulnerability and DVGs. The scope of such mapping spans across sectors and levels of governance: local administrations, the national government, CSOs, PPPs donors. Interviewees' feedback points at the need for an encompassing repository of all this information, ready-to-check, that enumerate surveys and reports of funding opportunities, organizations involved in relevant projects, as well as completed, ongoing and planned activities to tackle digital vulnerability – or that take it into account.

General understanding of salient issues and skills necessary to engage and design policies, develop and offer services

Capitalizing on the interviewees' feedback in this survey, it emerges how targeting digital vulnerabilities

and training digital skills are activities requiring a high level of specification. From the salient issues highlighted in our Findings, some directions for addressing the unmet needs of DVGs are:

- Paying increased attention to the geographical divides, be these between urban and rural areas, or flatlands and mountainous regions. Infrastructure and connectivity development should remain in focus for watchdog and lobbying activities, as well as the mobilization of further aid sources for comparatively more economically deprived regions;
- Focusing on increasing the access, connectivity, and devices availability in schools, to arrange for students the possibility to freely access such tools even after class. This could prove effective for pupils in the first place, but also to then enable more ambitious programs of awareness-raising and basic skills training in the general population by opening the schools to other digitally vulnerable social groups too;
- Developing critical approaches and lenses towards information consumption, as it has emerged to be a sensitive issue particularly in countries that might experience external geopolitical pressure, or have significant communities with linguistic minorities within their own borders;
- Focusing on presenting users with so-called low-hanging fruits, practical examples where the benefits of digitalization become immediate and easier to grasp. Likely, this will entail creating or enhancing digital solutions that address people's most pressing and salient needs.

Appendix 1

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Main projects mentioned

Log-In Georgia
Approval date: August 2020 | Closing date: December 2025
Implementing agencies: Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development, Communications Commission, Open Net NNLE, Ministry of Finance

The project aims to increase access to high-speed broadband connectivity for populations in rural areas, promote the use of select digitally enabled services (including digital public services) among connected populations, and improve the affordability of broadband services across the country.

Appendix 2

List of interviewees

Name	Position	Institution
Irakli Gvenetadze	E-Government Expert; Former Director of the Data Exchange Agency	N/A
Mariam Sulaberidze	Director	Open Net
Tamar Kintsurashvili	Executive Director	Media Development Foundation
Maya Kurtsikidze	Communications Officer	UNICEF
Mariam Tsitsikashvili	Project Manager	GRASS
Megi Kavtuashvili	Executive Director	Parents for Education
Dustin Gilbreath	Deputy Research Director	CRRC
Eka Gordadze	Chief Manager of Strategic Development of Cybersecurity and Digital Governance	Digital Governance Agency
Ucha Seturi	Director	Small and Medium Telecom Operators Association of Georgia
Eka Kubusidze	Head of Communications, Information and Modern Technologies Department	Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development
Sopio Tvalavadze	Head of Division, Communications, Information and Modern Technologies Department	Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development
Anna Gvetadze & Tiniko Abuladze	Media Literacy Department Representative	COMCOM/Log-in Georgia
Giorgi Amilakhvari	Chairperson of the Committee on Education and Science	Parliament of Georgia
Marika Alugishvili	Vice President	Educators and Scientists Free Trade Union of Georgia
Merab Labadze	e-Governance, Education, Innovation and Technology Policy Consultant	Ilia State University