



Citizen involvement in budgeting and self-governance in Northern Kazakhstan: Achievements and lessons learnt

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ABSTRACT

In Central Asia, participatory stakeholder approaches and citizen engagement in self-governance have been so far applied rather sporadically. This brief essay thematizes the lessons learnt from executing multiple projects in this field of participation in the Republic of Kazakhstan (RK) over more than two decades. Based on the experience of the Decenta Foundation, the author reflects upon participatory decision making involving ordinary citizens - ranging from participatory public budgeting to local-level urban planning under numerous initiatives. As the Decenta Foundation director, the author outlines his thoughts on how participatory methodology at the local and oblast levels can improve decision making in otherwise authoritarian settings. The article may excite other Kazakhstan constituencies, rural districts and municipalities to embark on similar efforts.

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1. Introduction

Based in Pavlodar City, capital of Pavlodar Region (Oblast) in northeastern Kazakhstan, the Decenta Foundation has been advancing local self-government and citizen involvement in territorial management on the local level since 2002. The corresponding actions comprise in particular, but not exclusively, engagement of citizenry in designing public infrastructure in several industrial centres in Northern and Central Kazakhstan, and participation of local communities in public budgeting. This short communication summarizes Decenta's efforts along these two avenues, as well as sketches out chances for and risks of broader citizen engagement in governance, based on the relevant experiences and lessons learnt.

2. Methodological background

In the course of more than 20 years of its operation, Decenta Foundation has partaken in and implemented several projects in the field of citizen participation. The Foundation's extensive real-life experience inter alia includes the application of participation tools in the course of devising the regulatory framework for local self-government in Kazakhstan since 2003 (draft laws on local self-government, recommendations for the Concept of Local Self-Government Development in the RK).

Participatory public budgeting

A large part of the Foundation's efforts since 2010 has focused on citizen involvement in local-level budgeting. Adapting international knowledge and practices to Kazakhstan's context, Decenta has elaborated a methodology to investigate the openness and transparency of budgeting procedures, and has been consequently holding regular targeted research as well as thematic trainings for civil society organizations (CSOs), students and faculty, and the media.

Fifteen years ago, several CSOs and Decenta Foundation, jointly established the National Budget Network of Kazakhstan (NBNK). The Network's specialists and experts reviewed the experience of the Open Budget Partnership - an international organization that had previously elaborated a methodology for comparing the openness of state budgets (also in [Khagram et al., 2013](#); [Jung 2022](#)). Based on this model, NBNK drafted its own methodology to collate the degree of regional budgets' openness. After piloting the tool in 2011, the Network launched a research initiative to weigh the levels of openness of constituency-level budgets every two years. This intriguing experience showed that despite the unitary government form and single legal framework for the entire country, a number of Kazakhstan's oblasts demon-

strated higher OLBI (Open Local Budget Index) indicators. For instance, for several years in a row Eastern Kazakhstan Region led the rating due to the availability of open-access reports on all stages of budgeting process, as well as the proactive stance of oblast maslikhat [local representative body (parliament) in Kazakhstan] that likewise published reports on its activities. Overall, the research pointed to a limited interest in local budgeting processes on behalf of general public (Gustafson & Hertting, 2016), echoing the international experiences, e.g., the extensive investigation on the participatory municipal budget of Porto Alegre in Brasil (1989-2004), one of the global forerunners in the field (Sintomer et al., 2008; Marquetti et al., 2011; Calisto Friand, 2019). To popularize knowledge about budget and budgeting, Decenta developed special business games (Everything I Want to Know About the Budget) for students that demonstrated higher knowledge-retention efficiency than regular information (awareness) campaigns.

The Public Participation Budget (PPB) Program has become a useful initiative of the RK government. The Decenta Foundation has been actively supporting and promoting the Program, that allowed thousands of citizens of Pavlodar, Northern Kazakhstan and Eastern Kazakhstan Oblasts contribute to urban public space improvement efforts, as well as design and execute dozens of projects instrumental to various territory enhancements since 2019.

Like most other government programs, PPB had a serious gap in terms of informing citizens about its existence and requirements (Ebdon & Franklin, 2006). Mobilizing resources from external sources, Decenta Foundation conducted an awareness-raising campaigns for apartment residents jointly with its trusted partners, i.e. chairpersons of apartment owner cooperatives, heads of service companies, etc. Thanks to personal meetings and consultations, the PPB Program captured the attention of multiple apartment residents, who eventually decided to design their own projects to enhance urban spaces, primarily courtyards. Decenta accompanied such citizen groups by rendering legal advice, making inquiries to land authorities, public utilities (e.g., regarding ownership of land plots, presence of underground utility networks, etc.). In addition, the Foundation engaged professional architects to assist in drafting necessary designs and blueprints; trained stakeholder residents on how to discuss their ideas with neighbors, as well as hold small-scale surveys, courtyard/neighborhood meetings; and moderated the corresponding events and processes. As the result, all projects supported by Decenta were recognized as winners, receiving the largest number of votes from city residents at the electronic voting stage.

The Tugan Qala Project - under implementation in several single-industry cities of Aktobe, Kostanai and Pavlodar Regions since 2021 - is of particular interest and relevancy for this article. Thus, in the city of Aksu (Pavlodar Oblast) at least 4,000 citizens annually participate in altering or improving urban spaces like courtyards,

roads, parks, beaches, etc. The Project is unique as it is sponsored by a private corporation - ERG. Also, Decenta Foundation possesses the experience of involving citizens in designing the Usolka Eco-Park (Pavlodar), Shakhtyor Park (Ekibastuz), as well as in renovating public libraries in several cities.

Participatory local governance

Since October 2023, Decenta has been implementing the Participatory Governance - Shared Responsibility Project supported by USAID Central Asia. This activity is based on over 20 years of the Foundation's experience of local- and national-level collaborations - with rural communities, local governments, city authorities, and CSOs. The Project's strategy is to be demand-driven, sensible to local needs and concerns, and pull together the efforts of various stakeholders to achieve common goals. The goal of the Project is to build the capacity of local governments, self-government and civil society organizations for effective interaction and joint resolution of local issues ([Moldogaziev & Witko, 2022](#)). Some of the anticipated results include ramping up the potential of rural communities; promoting civil society engagement in drafting local self-governance concepts; enhancing legislation and law enforcement practices pertaining to the aforementioned PPB Program.

A significant share of Project efforts in 2023-2024 were geared towards improving regulations (via liaising with central government agencies, i.e. Ministry of National Economy and Ministry of Finance of the RK), and upgrading the quality of operations of local administrations at the very grass-roots level - in rural districts. Thus, at the central (national) level, Decenta drafted recommendations regarding the new Concept of Local Self-Government Development in Kazakhstan planned for adoption in late 2025. In the absence of a full-fledged law on local self-government, it is this Concept that remains the core document regulating the sphere. Moreover, the Foundation's subject matter experts offered their recommendations to fine-tune the legislation regulating the Public Participation Budget Program.

In terms of engaging with rural districts in four project constituencies (Pavlodar, Western Kazakhstan, Zhetysay, and Ulytau Regions), the goal was to build local community capacities, promote better governance, and boost local budget revenues by 20%. In Kazakhstan, for a long time local communities of rural districts did not enjoy budget schemes at all. The 2019 national reform in the sphere of local self-government introduced the new - forth - budgeting tier specifically for rural districts ([Emrich-Bakenova, 2022](#)). In practice, local communities and akims [heads of local executive government bodies] had little budgeting experience; and own local funds were insufficient to cover even most basic costs. Therefore, within the framework of the Project, Decenta held participatory consultations with local communities in

20 rural districts to jointly assess specific local needs and requirements, as well as mastermind territorial development plans for the coming years. Local partners and financial consultants, contracted by Decenta, assisted in drafting the plans that were subsequently distributed among local citizens and akimats [local executive government bodies]. Memoranda of understanding were signed with several akimats thanks to this engagement as well.

The Decenta Foundation is currently planning to assist local communities in implementing the corresponding recommendations, as well as train local community representatives and akims. Several urgent knowledge and competency needs are related to strategic planning, tax administration, community communications, and local entrepreneurship. The Foundation's experience also proves the demand for additional information on state support measures for rural residents and entrepreneurs, farmers, etc. Our observations likewise indicate the lack of development plans in the majority of rural districts, or their elaboration with insufficiently thorough assessment of external and internal factors - making such plans not viable from the start.

The Decenta's working hypothesis for launching efforts in rural areas states that local communities jointly with akimats are capable of boosting local budget revenues by 15-20% with minimal effort and expenditure. It can be achieved via a transport tax on local residents going directly to local budget, as well as via competent land resource and real estate management. It is also important to clearly understand the needs of local businesses operating in rural areas to aid them with relevant informational, legal, and technical support. In turn, prospering local entrepreneurship will inevitably generate higher tax revenues hydrating local budgets. However, as it turned out in the course of executing the Project, local communities and akims lacked knowledge, experience, and often outside perspective allowing them to comprehensively and objectively evaluate specific local situations and make appropriate strategic decisions. On multiple occasions, the articulated requests circled around devising an effective model to boost local tourism (Tiberghien, 2018); as well as training on financial models for individual business areas. Responding to such requests, in a rural district in Western Kazakhstan Oblast the Project piloted an internship offered to local residents acquainting them with the experience of a bottled water production business.

3. Results and discussion: chances and challenges of participatory approaches in Kazakhstan

The Decenta Foundation believes that participatory approaches to territorial management (both rural and urban) possess several advantages, including:

- Sharing responsibility for decisions made - in most cases, government bodies are

eager to make decisions swiftly, so they do it on their own without proper citizen engagement and, consequently, cannot expect any sympathy or understanding on behalf of local populations;

- Value of changes made - when offered a ready-made solution people often do not comprehend its value, time and effort spent on its development, as well as technical, financial and other resources required for its implementation. Involving citizens in the planning process therefore gives them the opportunity to learn the true 'cost' of the decisions made;
- Moving away from paternalism and dependency - one of the common perceptions is that people are generally inert, indifferent, and lack initiative per se. Yet, the truth is that very often it happens because people do not believe that the government is truly interested in their opinion. Therefore, involving citizens in governance allows them a chance to demonstrate their pro-activeness, desire to contribute/make a difference, as well as implement corresponding actions positively and productively;
- Growing trust in government (one of core elements) - to regain people's trust, it is important for state agencies to demonstrate that they not only listen to common people, but seriously consider their complaints, suggestions, recommendations, and then act to implement them. It should be an honest and consistent process with a clear and tangible result, in which people see not just the administration's concern regarding their problems, but also a solution;
- Collecting additional opinions and possible solutions - involving citizens makes it possible to look at challenges/issues from different angles and, accordingly, evaluate a broader range of potential resolutions;
- Boosting civic engagement.

Real-life deployment of the approach illuminates certain not so obvious challenges and limitations, e.g.:

- Lack of widespread practice (culture) of utilizing participatory methods;
- Lack of knowledge, skills, and abilities in involvement;
- Deviation from the algorithms of involvement ("we need to do everything quickly");
- Lack of guarantees regarding the implementation of decisions made;
- Lack of a legal framework.

4. Conclusion

Despite the bottlenecks above, we believe it is the involvement of citizens in governance that should become a 'norm' for government agencies and local self-governments in Kazakhstan. Over the past two years, Decenta has gained experience

of operating in geographically diverse areas of the country. Each oblast (region) has its own economic, natural, social, and cultural peculiarities vital for consideration while planning and executing citizen involvement efforts. Our experience shows that the greatest effect can be achieved when a local administration accepts the offer of assistance and tries to create conditions for fruitful cooperation - constructive liaising and interactions with local administrations, and them vis-à-vis actual communities, manifests a key pre-condition for effectively addressing local issues. In recent years, the central government has proposed robust reforms to nurture local self-government, including by way of ensuring financial and economic sustainability of rural districts, vesting local communities with greater powers, electing local akims, etc. Yet, localities often lack explanatory and consultative support, which can be potentially offered by CSOs. Such concerted actions by all interested parties and stakeholders can forge a solid foundation for as well as guarantee effectiveness and efficacy of the declared reforms.

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