



**EURASIA  
PARTNERSHIP  
FOUNDATION**



## **Volunteerism in Georgia: Survey Summary and Recommendations**

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This report summarizes the findings of a survey on volunteering in Georgia and highlights a number of recommendations that flow from the collected data. It is intended to contribute to a broader discussion on volunteerism and inform parties that seek to mobilize volunteers.

Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF)/ Caucasus Research Resource Centre (CRRC) undertook this research in the summer of 2011 with a national survey “Volunteering and Civic Participation” to reveal Georgian citizens’ attitudes to volunteering. The nationwide survey was conducted July 26 – August 11, 2011 with sample size 2509 completed interviews. This survey builds off of the previous CRRC’s work on social capital in Georgia.

EPF is keen to hear your thoughts about the report and suggestions on how to promote the practice of volunteering in Georgia. Please direct your comments to Zaal Anjaparidze at [zanjaparidze@epfound.ge](mailto:zanjaparidze@epfound.ge)

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## Introduction

It is widely accepted that volunteerism plays an important role in vibrant democratic societies. By working and volunteering together citizens can address public issues, mobilize additional engagement, succeed where resources are scarce, and promote a sense of ownership, while offering opportunities for responsibility and learning. In the Georgian context, the impact of widespread volunteering could be transformative. By volunteering in their own communities, citizens could address some of the key gaps which the state is still struggling to fill. Moreover, as outlined above, volunteering helps to create the sense of local ownership and responsibility that, in turn, contribute to democratization.

The previous studies on social capital have demonstrated that while Georgian citizens possess high levels of ‘bonding’ social capital, which emphasises tight knit, close relationships between family and friends, levels of ‘bridging’ social capital—which promotes the development of broader networks of trust based on common interests, such as clubs or professional societies—are very low. Yet in spite of the significant work that has been carried out into the situation around social capital and civil society, it remains unclear how Georgian citizens themselves feel about participating in public life as active and engaged citizens, and how they feel about contributing to building strong and cohesive communities through volunteering and civic participation.

It is the aim of the present report to look at the attitudes and experiences of Georgian citizens with volunteering. Using data from the survey, the report shows that while formal, public volunteering and civic participation remains low, Georgia is a place where altruism is the norm. There is significant potential for a culture of participation to take root but organizations need to develop mechanisms for engaging volunteers systematically.

One such path to engagement might be to build on Georgian citizens’ strong sense of social altruism. There is a great deal of in-group solidarity—bonding social capital—in Georgia, with friends, neighbours and relatives helping one another through volunteering their time, labour and finances. The data shows that people in Georgia are highly sociable, getting together often with close friends. Most say there are plenty of people they feel close to, and plenty of people who would help them out without expecting compensation. Furthermore, while many respondents in Georgia are sceptical as to whether strangers can be trusted, in practice the study shows that Georgian citizens are happy to offer help to people, and do not expect anything in return—fertile ground for a culture of volunteerism to develop.

Significantly, the survey also shows that there is a good deal of respect for social entrepreneurs in Georgia, with most feeling positive about the people in their community who take the lead in solving problems.

Georgian citizens also appear willing to get involved in volunteering and civic participation, at least to a certain extent.<sup>1</sup> When confronted with specific issues that concern them, large majority of respondents in Georgia say they will sign petitions and

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<sup>1</sup> See also *Citizens’ Attitudes toward Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Civic Activism, 2011 Public Opinion Survey Results*, by Leslie Hough. This report, for the East-West Management Institute (EWMI)’s G-PAC program, was based on the same CRRC survey, with an emphasis on social engagement. <http://www.ewmi-gpac.org/index.php?count=4&v=236> (retrieved April 2012)

discuss the issue, while small but significant minorities say they are prepared to take more active roles. The data suggest that Georgian citizens might be open to state-supported volunteering programs. For example, according to the survey 32% of citizens are “very positive” to the state-supported “Shabatoba.” Nascent sense of public duty, coupled with social altruism and ‘private’ volunteerism has the potential to promote a vibrant public life and active civil society in Georgia.

### **Private Solidarity, Public Caution**

While formal volunteering is the exception, Georgian citizens regularly make efforts to support each other: 61% of respondents have helped a friend or neighbour with chores or childcare in the last six months

Emphasising the close, in-group solidarity in Georgia, 93% of respondents say they would turn to their family in a time of need, and 80% would turn to friends. When asked how they would pay for damage in a car accident, 30% (the most common response) said their family would pay, while 21% said they would borrow money from a friend or relative. Furthermore, Georgian citizens do not feel that providing help to their family is an imposition: 56% of respondents disagree that their family demand too much of them (39% strongly disagree), compared to 16% who agree. In addition, Georgian citizens who have jobs (39%) do not feel that the demands of their families get in the way of work; three-quarters (73%) say that their family *never* interferes with their job. This shows that, on a domestic level at least, Georgian citizens are only too willing to volunteer their time and effort.

Outside the family too, Georgian citizens often volunteer their support to people. Fifty-five per cent of respondents say they feel they are helpful to many people outside their family, compared with 7% who do not feel that way (35% more-or-less feel that way). Georgian citizens are also confident others will help them; 46% say there are plenty of people they can rely on when they have problems, compared to 13% who disagree. Significantly, the help Georgian citizens provide one another is seen by the bulk of population as true altruism, rather than “you scratch my back”: 41% disagree that when people help each other, they expect something in return, compared to 22% who agree.

In their private lives, a majority of respondents in Georgia appear to be active and social, rather than apathetic. More than half of respondents (54%) are never alone during the day and 92% report having close friends, friends who 57% of people get together with at least once a week. Coupled with this high level of sociability is an openness to meeting new people; two-thirds (66%) of Georgians enjoy meeting new people, and 63% would like to make new friends.

Furthermore, many Georgian citizens feel in control of their own economic destiny, in spite of difficult economic circumstances; 49% say they are in partial or full control of their economic situation, compared to 24% who say they are not in control. Two-thirds (64%) of Georgian citizens say they are not discouraged by setbacks, compared to only 7% who are. Thus, the concern that the widely observed public apathy may be so deeply ingrained as to be insurmountable, does not seem too plausible. Privately, many Georgian citizens are active and gregarious.

Indeed, Georgian citizens noted that they volunteer their time and effort communally, and informally, and most strongly in their neighbourhoods: 71% of people say that communal or adjoining space in their neighbourhood is taken care of, and of these

people, half (48%) say that the neighbours get together to clean it collectively (another 30% clean it on a rotating basis). Communal cleaning is more common in small towns and rural areas, while residents of the capital are more likely to organize a rota to clean their communal areas, perhaps suggesting that different living arrangements and neighbourhood profiles require distinct patterns of volunteering.

This neighbourly engagement thrives on close relationships, as 73% of Georgian citizens have lived in their neighbourhood for more than 16 years, and half say they know 'all' the families in the area. Furthermore, 78% of respondents say they talk to their neighbours every day.

Yet while Georgian citizens are ready to regularly volunteer their time and energy with friends, neighbours and family members, they remain significantly more wary when it comes to people who do not form part of their in-group. Forty-one per cent of respondents agree that "you can't be too careful" in dealing with strangers (25% strongly agree), while 24% said that in general, most people can be trusted. This suspicion of a generalized 'stranger' seems powerful, but when Georgian citizens are face-to-face with individuals in need of help, the altruistic behaviour noted among friends and family members appears to return. Two-thirds (65%) of respondents have given money to a beggar in the last six months, and half have helped a stranger on the side of the road—perhaps indicating that Georgian citizens' are more wary of strangers in abstraction than they are in most actual encounters.

However, while Georgia is characterized by the sort of altruistic, private volunteering on micro-level which could lead to increased civic participation, in practice the rates of social engagement are startlingly low. Just one percent of Georgians are members of any sort of NGO, club or sports union, and two percent are members of a political party.

One explanation is that trust in many institutions remains low, especially in those organizations that often thrive on citizen engagement. While the army and police are trusted by a large majority of Georgian citizens, just 18% partially or fully trust NGOs, while 23% partially or fully distrust them. The situation is even worse for political parties – who in principle should also be close to citizens, and offer them an opportunity to engage. Yet only 7% partially or fully trust them compared to 53% who distrust them.

Adding to this picture of distrust regarding NGOs, 35% of respondents said NGOs support the interests of people who are directly employed by such organizations (22% disagreed). The second most common answer was that NGOs support ordinary people (32%), yet here still 28% disagreed.

Another challenge is that cynicism about public life appears stronger than a sense of engagement: 41% of respondents say that politics is a dirty business, with 17% strongly agreeing, compared to 37% who say it is a civic duty, with just 9% strongly agreeing. This perception of politics as 'dirty' goes some way to explain why people seldom talk about politics with their relatives, friends and neighbours. While 45% of respondents say they 'always' discuss private problems with relatives, compared to 5% who never do, half (51%) never discuss politics, compared to 18% who often or always do. Numbers are similar when it comes to talking about politics with friends and neighbours.

This disconnect from public affairs, more broadly conceived, may present a significant obstacle to getting citizens engaged, and thus for volunteering. The data seems to suggest that Georgian citizens do not have a strong sense that public affairs, once they move beyond family, friends, neighbourhood and private encounter, are a positive thing, and in high regard.

Arguably this leaves public altruism, and volunteerism, as an effort with a questionable beneficiary. Volunteerism, in its most general abstract sense, contributes to a public good, rather than expecting reciprocity. Yet if there is little faith in a shared civic project, why make the effort? Especially if one's social networks can soak up any extra solidarity one can offer?

Underlying this is an important point: while the following section will show that volunteers can indeed be mobilized, and much can be learnt from international practice, the lessons need to be calibrated to a Georgian reality. Approaches that work well in countries with highly developed civic commitment may struggle to gain traction. The focus thus is back is on disciplined experimentation.

### **Engagement and Entrepreneurship**

As we have seen, Georgians enjoy close bonds between family and friends, and are willing to help others. However, there remains a disconnect between this small scale social action and engaging with anything broader, such as grassroots associations or clubs.

When it comes to local neighbourhoods, this problem is overcome by community organizers, or “social entrepreneurs”: individuals who get people together to collectively solve problems. Half (52%) of respondents say there is an individual in their neighbourhood who acts as an organizer in this way, and 56% of the time this individual is elected or chosen by the community—indicating that Georgian citizens are indeed willing and able to organize collective action to achieve common goals. Residents of Tbilisi are significantly more likely than people in rural areas to have such a community organizer in their neighbourhood (61% to 47%), which probably reflects the fact that the city has tried to organize residents' committees dedicated to solving local problems.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, rather than being seen as a busy-body or a nosy-parker, this individual is well regarded: 81% of those who have such an individual in their neighbourhood say they feel positively about them. Indeed, Georgian citizens are remarkably approving of what might be loosely termed ‘social entrepreneurs’ or ‘community organizers’. Even sensitive issues, such as collecting money to carry out communal work, are not regarded with suspicion: 77% of Georgians respect people who collect money in their neighbourhood.

Previous studies had tended to highlight a lingering suspicion around such community organizers. Using focus group material, for example, the 2010 study into social capital found that some community organizers faced credibility problems, their actions being regarded with distrust by others. The data from the current study suggests that social entrepreneurs can earn trust, and by working with such individuals it may be possible

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<sup>2</sup> See a broader discussion on this in CRRC's social capital reports, Final Report (p. 6, 17, 32) [[http://www.crrc.ge/store/downloads/projects/CRRC\\_Social\\_Capital\\_Briefing\\_Paper.pdf](http://www.crrc.ge/store/downloads/projects/CRRC_Social_Capital_Briefing_Paper.pdf)]

to foster a broader culture of engagement within society as a whole, and that these neighbourhood organizers are a group that most likely could be engaged more broadly.

One area of Georgian life where engagement is relatively common already is the church. 61% of Georgian citizens donated money to a church at least once during the last year (29% once a month or more), while 21% helped to collect clothes and food (however, only 5% of respondents say that they, a friend or a family member, have received a donation from the church). In addition, 20% of respondents helped to clean a church—more than those who went to the theatre, disco or cinema during the last six months (18%), and more than took part in team sport (6%).

The high levels of engagement with the church is at least in part accounted for by the extremely high levels of esteem and importance the church enjoys: two-thirds (65%) of Georgian citizens say religion is very important in their daily life, compared with just 4% who say it is not very important or not important at all. Furthermore, Georgian citizens report high levels of religiosity, with 37% saying they are very religious, another 29% saying they are rather religious and only 3% saying they are not religious at all. The engagement in churches shows that volunteering is already flourishing where it connects to institutions that people trust and believe in, and that offer a sense of community – suggesting that this could be a model that other efforts to engage volunteers can learn from.

One major puzzle with regards to encouraging broader volunteering is that a majority of Georgian citizens seem to want the state become involved when it comes to volunteering: 51% of Georgians have a positive attitude toward “shabatoba,” a Soviet practice where the authorities organised groups of people to contribute their Saturdays to take part in communal work such as tree-planting and civic beautification (32% are very positive, only 14% are negative).

Given the relatively high levels of distrust for politics that exist in Georgia, it might be counter-productive for authorities to become overly involved. Nevertheless, targeted support for volunteering, and selected programs, among schoolchildren or students, might help bring about the idea that volunteering is a ‘normal’ thing to do.<sup>3</sup>

Certainly, authorities can model a process that involves citizens, and this approach seems popular: 56% of people agree that the government should take into consideration people’s opinion, even if it takes more time, compared to just 11% who think the government should take decisions quickly in order to strengthen the state.

More broadly, the positive views that citizens have of “shabatoba” may suggest two critical features: citizens recognize the benefits that volunteering can bring, and they would prefer for volunteering to be brought to them, rather than insisting on a purely grassroots view. This conclusion again underlines the critical role of social entrepreneurship, of individuals and small organizations that actively pursue and expand local opportunities.

For those seeking to engage citizens, the research highlights workable approaches, even though of course such efforts remain contextual and the continued importance on neighbourhood suggests that action will remain very local. For example, while public

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<sup>3</sup> See also the CRRC report on social capital, on the possible role of the state, Final Report, p. 14.

trust in NGOs is low, people are more likely to be responsive when confronted with specific issues that NGOs tackle. Sixty percent of Georgians would sign an NGO petition about unemployment, 52% would discuss the issue with family and friends, 19% would attend a rally and a small but significant 12% would go door-to-door.

The results are similar for NGO campaigns about health, social protection, and rising prices. This shows that there is already a small but significant constituency of Georgians ready to volunteer their time and money to a range of causes.

Data from other studies reinforces the idea that there is a developing sense of public duty in Georgia: in 2011, 77% of Georgian citizens said it is very important for a citizen to support people who are worse off than themselves, another 18% said it was rather important. Furthermore, this appears to be an upward trend: in 2009, 48% said it was very or rather important for a citizen to volunteer, by 2011 that number had risen to 57%.

As noted above, Georgians are already happy to volunteer their time and effort among family, friends and the local community, and a sense of civic duty appears to be developing. Nonetheless, generalised feelings of mistrust and cynicism present continuing problems for NGOs, donors, the government or anyone who seeks to encourage volunteerism and a culture of civic participation.

### Managing Volunteering

As the research shows, Georgia's general environment requires careful development of volunteering practice, and this development does require a systematic approach to ensure that volunteering generates a real impact, is a thoroughly positive experience and its substance is easy to communicate.

Studies by the Urban Institute in the United States have identified a number of management practices that help ensure a vibrant volunteer engagement.<sup>4</sup> These include:

1. liability coverage or insurance protection (or at least risk-management),
2. training for paid staff in working with volunteers,
3. screening procedures to identify suitable volunteers,
4. written policies and job descriptions for volunteer involvement,
5. regular supervision and communication with volunteers,
6. recognition activities, such as award ceremonies, for volunteers,
7. training and professional development opportunities for volunteers, and
8. establish a welcoming culture, and allocate resources to volunteer activity.

These are not necessarily practiced consistently across the thousands of charities and organizations in the United States that use volunteers (four out of five charities use volunteers).<sup>5</sup> However, having at least some of these measures in place helps retain volunteers, since American studies seem to have shown that more than 40% of

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<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey L. Brudney (1999) "The Effective Use of Volunteers: Best Practices for the Public Sector." *Law and Contemporary Problems*.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Hager, Jeffrey Brudney (2004) *Volunteer Management Practices and Retention of Volunteers*, Urban Institute, <http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=411005> (retrieved April 2012)

volunteers had stopped volunteering at some point because they were managed badly.<sup>6</sup> Problems were as basic as volunteers feeling that the organization was not making good use of their talents and their time, or insufficient definition of the tasks they were engaged in. This emphasizes that the type of disconnect highlighted above, and the need to ensure that experiences are positive and illustrate to volunteers that they are making a difference.

Organizations that already are good at managing their staff, and their staff's time and talents, should find it easier to take the next step towards expanding toward engaging abroad a volunteer base. Conversely, less systematic management of the core team makes it unlikely that volunteers can be engaged and retained. Organizations thus need to be realistic about what they can accomplish, and in many cases may need to consolidate internal practices before reaching out more systematically.

Good management is needed especially since mobilizing volunteers will require a methodical approach, and persistence. If 12% of Georgian respondents say that in principle they would be willing to assist, this means that in canvassing volunteers, organizations trying to involve volunteers are likely to be rejected nine times before they get someone to agree in principle – at which point they still need to make the agreement stick.

Retaining recruited volunteers is based primarily on making it a good experience for them. This, too, requires good management: challenging the volunteers sufficiently so that they feel a lasting sense of achievement, yet not to the point where they are overwhelmed. Put slightly more broadly, volunteers are not just an instrument to be used for a purpose, they have to feel that they are part of the purpose. Making volunteering such an experience requires sophisticated and responsive leadership.

Given the tough environment, perhaps the best step for organizations to start engaging volunteers is indeed to assess themselves, in what they are already doing well, and in what they need to do better, and then to change one thing at a time in expanding the engagement of volunteers.

#### **Government: less might be more**

For the government, politicians and state bodies, the challenges are different. As we have seen, there is a great deal of ingrained cynicism about politics, as well as an abiding belief that politics is a dirty business, and a general reluctance to talk about the subject. Nonetheless, there are still certain areas where direct action might be effective. “Shabatoba”, for example, remains a popular idea in spite of its Soviet heritage. While a full scale re-boot of the program would almost certainly back fire, small scale state sponsored initiatives might meet with more success. Local governments, for example, could become involved in facilitating tree planting efforts, city beautification, or sports competitions as a way to foster engagement at a community level.

Furthermore, at a nationwide level, the government could introduce a legislative and regulatory framework that would encourage volunteerism and civic participation. By clearly defining volunteers in the law, and examining ways of incentivising their role,

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<sup>6</sup> UPS Foundation (1998) *Managing Volunteers: A Report from United Parcel Service*. Available at <http://www.community.ups.com>.

the government could provide the institutional substructure on which increased engagement might be built.

#### **Donors: let volunteers lead by example**

For donors to successfully help build a culture of volunteering and participation, a good strategy might be to help share know-how, and build capacity by helping successful volunteers and organizations share their experience.

Supporting contacts between successful volunteers and social entrepreneurs on the one hand, and NGOs and local communities on the other, would help to share best practice and show what works. Donors can also put materials in place to facilitate the adoption of good practice, such as small manuals, translating and adapting organizational materials and sharing case studies. Organizing trainings and seminars on engagement strategies could help overcome cynicism and distrust.

The prime focus, however, remains with the leadership of small organizations that need to drive the process, and need to ensure that volunteering is a positive experience, that achieves concrete results, and has the visibility to attract even more volunteers.

#### **Issue Areas**

The number of issue areas for volunteering to come to mind, but this list is only tentative so far:

- Volunteers are already active with orphans and other vulnerable young people, in small but significant engagement. Most if this is ad hoc and almost spontaneous, involving groups of friends visiting orphanages or arranging trips to the theatre. Such behaviour could be formalized into a more structured welfare or mentoring program that would both benefit the children and provide an example of how volunteerism might be systematized.
- Many of the areas where volunteerism is traditional in western countries (visiting the elderly or the ailing, working with addicts) are partly covered by the Georgian Church. Others are largely taken up with in Georgian families. This does require brainstorming to find appropriate entry points.
- Success is most likely where impact can be demonstrated. However, volunteering should not impact on areas that otherwise might be paid jobs, nor should volunteering focus too strongly on cleanups, or efforts that later require constant maintenance. These can work, as a number of successful cases illustrate, including EPF's Youth Bank program.