



THE CHANGEMAKERS 2021 | POLICY PAPER RECOMMENDATIONS



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Introduction

The document was prepared as the output of the Changemakers Summit 2021. The summit was administered by the Economic Policy Research Center with the financial assistance and support of the Chevening Alumni Programme Fund / British Embassy in Tbilisi. The aim of the initiative was to expand the network of changemakers by connecting and strengthening the relationship between the experienced Chevening Alumni and the curious youth for the purposes of generating social impact. Three cross-cultural teams, were assigned to work on a policy recommendation documents, all under the umbrella of three major Sustainable Development Goals:

1. Health and Well-being
2. Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions
3. Quality Education

Participants were selected from the EaP member states through the application submission process. Applicants demonstrated their interest and capacity to work on the selected documents with the short essays and CVs submitted as the part of the selection stage. 21 participants were selected and split into three groups. Groups were mentored by the Cheveners and acting professionals. Through thematically relevant workshop sessions for each group, participants were assisted in generation of the scope and the vision of their final recommendations. After workshop sessions, participants were given time to finalize their thoughts and present their recommendation packages on the last day of the summit.

Change makers summit was a three-day workshop which expects to have a lifelong impact on the participants. On the first day of the summit participants were introduced to each other and were given guidelines how to write the policy recommendation packages. Then they were split into predetermined groups and were given time to draft initial thoughts and ideas regarding the chosen policy issues. On the second day of the summit mentorship sessions were held and participants alongside with the mentors' guidance drafted the policy recommendation packages. Policy recommendation packages were presented on the last day of the summit and final remarks and suggestions were given to the participants.

Final results of the policy recommendations prepared and submitted by the groups are presented in the following document.

01.

Nurses in Georgian Healthcare System - Policy Challenges and Solutions

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Nurses in Georgian Healthcare System - Policy Challenges and Solutions

The spread of the Covid-19 pandemic worldwide has called into question the level of human resources and their qualifications in the healthcare sector. In the Georgian reality, this problem has become even more specific. Between the pandemic waves, medical academics and experts actively discussed the need to mobilize the necessary resources against the current challenge.

The complexity of disease management and the increased referrals have highlighted the need to increase the number of qualified medical staff. The number of nurses in Georgia is low, reflecting the very low status of nursing as a career. Indeed, in 2016, more doctors were working in Georgia than nurses, which has significant implications for human resources planning and policy.¹ In comparison with western European countries, the balance between the number of doctors and nurses is reversed. Soviet and post-Soviet stigmas also influence the shortage of nursing applicants, and the nursing profession in the country is also problematic in terms of gender.

Overall, nursing education lacks standardization, there is no accreditation for nursing schools, and minimum training requirements vary widely.² A consistent and targeted campaign to popularize the nursing profession and adequately recognize and value it will be an essential step toward strengthening human resources in the medical sector. It is vital to improving the implementation process of the Government of Georgia Resolution 2019³, approving the Nursing Development Strategy as a basis for real and tangible changes.

Nurses who are on the front lines of the fight against familiar or unknown diseases are trying to ensure citizens' safety at the cost of their own lives. Willing to improve the human resource in health care in Georgia, from nurses' perspective, the following recommendations are set out to increase the number of highly qualified nurses in Georgia.

Taking into account all the above mentioned conditions and shortfalls, we believe that one of the fundamental preconditions for the further development of the Georgian Health Care System is the proper recognition of the nursing profession and its qualified development. For the **Ministry of Labor, Health and Social Defence of Georgia**, in collaboration with **the Georgian Nurse Association**, some of the following deliverables and policy objectives might be suitable for achieving the abovementioned aim:

- Addressing the lack of nurses around the country

According to the WHO, the proportion between doctors and nurses shall be 1 to 4 (4 nurses per 1 doctor). According to the National Strategy on Nursing 2020-2025 in Georgia, this ratio is 1 to 0.8, where there are 0.8 nurses per doctor. According to the figures brought in the same strategy, there have been 509 nurses per population of 100 thousand before 2019, while the European average is 609 per 100 thousand. According to a social justice platform, the Women's Gaze 1 nurse has to serve up to 12 patients at the same time in Georgia, as opposed to 6-8 patients per nurse around Europe. This constitutes a work overload and thus worsening the working conditions for nurses and creates additional risks for patients' under care.

The National Council of the Nursing Professional Development with the Ministry of the Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, of Health, Labor and social affairs (the Ministry) shall ensure the timely implementation of the National Strategy of Nursing Profession's Development (the strategy), which aims to increase the number of nurses in the country gradually. Namely, each objective implementation shall be assigned to a specific entity (the department, agency, council), responsible staff of which shall be held responsible and accountable for not meeting the deadlines and strategy indicators. The disciplinary measures shall be taken against the staff not meeting the deadlines set out in the document.

¹ *Health Systems in Transition* Vol. 19 No.4 2017, Georgia Health system review. Pg. 49. See also: World Health Organization, *Georgia Profile of Health and Well-being* pg. 34

² *Health Systems in Transition* Vol. 19 No.4 2017, Georgia Health system review. Pg. 72

³ Available online at - <https://bit.ly/3rISsT9>

- Improving the qualification of nurses with potentially discriminatory and science-denying attitudes

A qualification of a nurse shall not be including only technical skills of performing specific medical manipulations. The nurses shall undergo education in critical thinking, ethics, patients' rights, the technics and etiquette of treating patients with disabilities, values based education, which will prevent discriminatory and science-denying attitudes amongst nurses, which have negatively demonstrated themselves during this pandemic.

The Council of the Development of the Nursing Profession, consisting of the representatives of the Ministry of health, the hospitals and medical service providers, and the academia shall seek international partnerships with other hospitals abroad to make online distance workshops and exchange programs available for the working nurses. This international educational component will be in line with the already existing vision of making life-long learning mandatory for the nurses according to the strategy.

- Increasing the prestige of nursing as a profession

According to the Baseline information provided in the national strategy, nursing is not considered a prestigious career in Georgia.

Thus the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia shall take measures to make nursing higher educational degrees more accessible. Namely, to increase the number of state universities offering Bachelor's degrees in nursing. The Government of Georgia shall put the higher degrees in nursing in the category of the free-of-charge degrees, where a student will be able to receive state funding for his/her study without having to obtain a state scholarship. This measure will contribute to the increase of nursing students at the higher educational level.

The state universities offering higher education degrees in nursing (namely Tbilisi State Medical University) shall partner with the EU-based universities to establish credit mobility programs for nursing students in the Erasmus Plus framework. This will also contribute to incentivizing the youths to enroll in a nursing program.

- Work on the competence of nurses /job description.

Covid-19 affected all spheres of the government system, and there is no denying that it had a massive effect on the healthcare system. Here comes the problem, everyone is claiming that doctors are the cornerstone of the healthcare system, and not many people are stating about the nurses⁴; those nurses are fighting every day against the pandemic. However, their work is rarely mentioned; this is an issue because it affects their overall performance; if a nurse sees that his/her work is appreciated and everyone is thankful for it, the person is more motivated and more delighted to work. According to the IOSR Journal of Business and Management, the working environment is tremendously linked to the worker's overall performance⁵, so everyone should appreciate the work done by nurses, and how can it be done? If you ask people right now in the streets of Tbilisi or any city in Georgia, I doubt that many of them will adequately describe the nurse's job; why is this like that? The main reason for it is the lack of information.⁶ And they do not know what the obligations of nurses are, what kind of education they have, what is done by them in hospitals, and furthermore. In order to change that government should work on the competence of nurses, and it can make some events whenever the description of the nurse's job is provided.

- Start an extensive communication campaign to promote nurses (promotion at school, to use social media, media and civil sector)

According to the Legislative Herald of Georgia, the number of nurses in Georgia is meager; thus, Georgia's place among the 53 countries in the European region is 51⁷, as the World Health Organization states. Additionally, it is not enough, as the doctors are quite many, while nurses are not, while in Denmark, Germany, Ukraine, the nurses are by far more than doctors. In order to change this situation, the government should start extensive communication campaigns by which it can promote nurses, make this job prestigious and make (alt. encourage) more people start a carrier as a nurse. We advise beginning the promotion of the nurses at school, as it might be helpful since children will see the opportunity to seek a carrier as a nurse. However, school is not the only solution to this problem. Since social media has a tremendous

⁴ (2020). Georgia - Profile of Health and Well-being. Denmark: World Health Organization.

⁵ Massoudi, A. H. (2017). *The Consequence of work environment on Employees Productivity*. IOSR Journal of Business and Management.

⁶ Richardson, E. (2017). Georgia - Health system review. Berlin: European Observatory.

⁷ (2019). Legislative Herald of Georgia. Tbilisi: Government of Georgia.

impact today, everyone is able to use social media, and it became a great source of spreading information, so the government can use this segment as well and start a campaign about nurses and their jobs; this information might be the job's description or responsibilities of the nurses, which will spread the information about them for people, who do not know about this. Furthermore, it will encourage others to start a career as a nurse, as there is not enough amount of them in the country. Media can help this issue as well, and if they share the stories of successful nurses, it might encourage others as well. In order to achieve some success, the government should always work with civil society, which is seen as a third sector. With them, the government can make a campaign where the business sector can be involved and encourage others as well to become a nurse. If those three sectors work together, success could be achieved by far more straightforward. The campaigns will increase the nurse's work's overall performance, the number of them will increase, and general knowledge about health system will be increased as well.

- Wage incentives for nurses

A satisfactory wage is a significant factor in job-seeking behavior and is especially important in keeping workers in their current positions.⁸ Unfortunately, wages for nurses in Georgia, unlike for their European colleagues, are not satisfactory.

Wages of nursing staff in Georgia vary from institution to institution but are commonly low. In some cases, the nurse's salary is much lower than the subsistence level. In the research conducted by the Georgian Nurses Association and the Open Society Foundation Georgia (project code Med / 29/11 - 18475), 97% of the total number of respondents (412 - doctor, 2 382 - nurse and 66 – manager) consider that the current salary of nurses is inadequate with the amount of work they do and believe that the salary should be at least doubled.⁹

Issues of low salary and excessive work are some of the main reasons why the shortage of nurses exists. For this reason, some mechanism should be introduced to control compliance of the wages with the volume of work performed by the nurse. For a possible solution to the mentioned issue, we propose introducing a precondition for hospitals: in order to participate in the Universal Health Coverage Program and get reasonable funding from the government, they should manage to pay fair salaries to their nurses. Another way to a salary increase for nurses could be introducing the appropriate minimum hourly wage for them (The minimum wage is the lowest wage that an employer is allowed to pay an employee per hour, according to a law or agreement).

- Fight gender stereotypes regarding the nursing profession

Gender stereotypes are manifested in many areas, and the nursing profession is no exception. The vast majority of nurses working in various hospitals and clinics in Georgia are women. As for men, they very rarely choose a nurse's profession or just go through practice in clinics as a nurse while studying in medical universities. Although the country is actively fighting to achieve gender equality, much remains to be done. Historically, the nursing role has been predominately a female profession. This social stereotype has automatically excluded men from entering the profession and created a stigma. As statistics show, this attitude has not disappeared. Another problem connected to gender stereotypes is that many men are going into the nursing profession face gender discrimination, particularly if they are seeking a position in obstetrics and gynecology. In order to break the existing approach, it is necessary to provide the population, especially pupils and students, with the correct information and to show that this profession has no gender affiliation and that women and men can master it with equal success. It is essential to encourage the nursing profession among men as much as possible through the calls of experienced male nurses, various motivational commercials, frequent meetings with experienced individuals, and direct communication. Raising public awareness about the nursing profession will significantly regulate gender balance and will contribute to its popularization.

- Improve the working condition for nurses

Coronavirus 2019 had seriously affected nurses' working conditions throughout various countries around the world – including developed countries as well. Data collected by the World Health Organization global surveillance for COVID-19, primarily from European and American countries, estimate that approximately 14% of COVID-19 cases reported to WHO are among health workers.¹⁰¹⁰ In countries with adequate reporting mechanisms, the data show that nurses were the most extensive health worker group with COVID-19 infection.¹¹ Besides the infection from the virus, the virus has

⁸ May JH, Bazzoli GJ, Gerland (2006) Jul-Aug; 25(4): W316-23.

⁹ გოგაშვილი, მ. (2016) საექთნო საქმის მდგომარეობა და მისი განვითარების პერსპექტივები საქართველოში.

¹⁰ Prevention, identification, and management of health worker infection in the context of COVID-19 Interim guidance 30 October 2020, p.1.

¹¹ Protecting nurses from COVID-19 a top priority: A survey of ICN's national nursing associations <https://www.icn.ch/system/files/documents/2020-09/Analysis>.

negatively affected the mental health of nurses. The data quality analysis showed that the nurses experienced many challenges such as a bad feeling of inefficiency, stress, excessive physical fatigue, the dilemma between care delivery and pollution, and enclosed in protective equipment while taking care of patients with COVID-19.¹²

Our recommendation to the Ministry of Labor, Health and Social Defence of Georgia:

- a) Providing an adequate ventilation system to the public hospitals - such as displacement ventilation, either natural or mechanical, where the air is drawn in through lower-level inlets and extracted at a high level. Such a system is economically and environmentally sustainable, and after minor retrofitting, it can easily be implemented into existing buildings.¹³ Moreover, it can help to cease the spreading of the virus in the hospital and guarantees a safer working environment for the nurses and other medical staff.
- b) Apply nurses' permanent testing, providing best hand hygiene and environmental cleaning, medical masks, and eye protection supplies to public hospitals.
- c) Providing the nurses and other medical staff in major hospitals with the highest numbers of Covid19 patients with psychological support and counseling (including online and personal courses) to help them¹⁴ cope with the hardships, which they face daily. Helplines, apps, and online services are also available in some countries (e.g., Belgium, Finland, Ireland, Norway, Romania, UK.). In Stockholm, Sweden, the rules for accessing 24-hour mental health support has been relaxed for the duration of the crisis, such that health workers are able to access help directly without a referral from their manager.¹⁵

[COVID-19%20survey%20feedback_14.09.2020.pdf](#) p.3.

¹² Exploring nurses' perception of taking care of patients with COVID-19. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1002/nop2.616>, p.6.

¹³ Displacement ventilation: a viable ventilation strategy for makeshift hospitals and public buildings to contain COVID-19 and other airborne diseases. <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/pdf/10.1098/rsos.200680>, p.2.

¹⁴ How are countries supporting their health workers during covid-19? <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/336298/Eurohealth-26-2-58-62-eng.pdf>, p.3.

¹⁵ Ibid.

02.

Judiciary Reforms and Covid-19

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Judiciary Reforms and Covid-19

A fair and independent judicial branch is a cornerstone of a democratic system of government. An independent judicial branch is not an end in itself, but a means of ensuring the rule of law, since only by being free from outside influences can judges decide cases on the law and facts alone. A fair judiciary requires not only the freedom for judges to make case decisions without outside influence, but also the recognition of the judicial branch as a coequal branch of government, separate from the legislative and executive branches within a system of checks and balances, responsible for governing itself and accountable to the public. Georgia suffers from soviet legacy - it does not have a strong tradition of a fair and impartial judiciary, which is a prerequisite for Georgia's membership in international organizations such as NATO and the EU. Apart from the country's international responsibilities, biased judiciary affects the overall degree of democracy, hence the daily life of citizens. What is more, impartiality of the judiciary is proportional to the economic prosperity of the country as the international investors pay attention to their right to a fair trial when investing money.

Existence of an influential group of judges (so-called 'clan') in the judicial system and lack of autonomy (the fact that the courts are subject to political influence) remain the main problems. In turn, the judicial system is closed, new judges are barely allowed to enter the system, which hinders not only the timely consideration of cases but also the process of improving and renewing the court. The closure of the system is also the result of the opaque process of selecting judges. As commonly known, there are approximately 300 judges in the system of common courts of Georgia, while according to different estimates, their optimal number for timely consideration of cases would be 400-450 judges. Therefore, the judicial system is overloaded and effective justice cannot be administered. Besides, there is a high risk of a judge making a mistake and violating the legal deadlines, which in turn raises the additional mechanism of restricting his autonomy by imposing disciplinary liability on him. It should be noted that the electronic case distribution system failed to unload the flow of cases into the court system and there is a reasonable suspicion that there are levers that can interfere with the random distribution of the case by the electronic system.

Solving the problem of the closure of the judiciary and updating human resources in the courts would not only facilitate the timely consideration of cases, but also strengthen the judiciary with new judges free from influence, which would weaken the authority of the so-called 'clan' in the court.

Recommendations:

- **The optimal number of judges** in common courts according to the number of ongoing and pending cases shall be determined;
- **Inflow of new judges should be ensured on a single occasion** – the High School of Justice, which is responsible for the arranging the mandatory prerequisite courses and qualification exams for the future judges, are linked to the 'clan', which makes it possible to control the influx of new judges into the judiciary and thus maintain influence within the judiciary. To solve this problem, it is important to review and specify the requirements and selection criteria for the School candidates, create the legal duty for the High Council of Justice to substantiate the decision, and give the right to the candidates to appeal. In order to decentralize the power of the High Council of Justice, it is necessary to create alternatives to the High School of Justice on the basis of higher education institutions, which will enable a wider range of judges to acquire relevant knowledge and, if appropriate, enable career development in the judiciary. There is also an alternative that the High School of Justice should not be a prerequisite for a judicial career, its importance should be limited to both the training of the current judges and the development of appropriate skills for the newly appointed judges.
- **The electronic case distribution system shall be improved** - the process of electronic distribution of cases should be protected from external interference and the technical justification of this protection should be open and accessible to all interested parties.

Problems during the pandemic:

During the pandemic, authorities focused on two main issues – saving human life and protecting their health. Last year, in March, Georgia declared a state of emergency. The decree of the President of Georgia determined the measures to be taken. The state of emergency restricted some fundamental rights. In May, legislative changes authorized the General Courts of Georgia to conduct court hearings remotely using electronic means of communication. The new rule had not only immediate and short-term but also long-term effects on accessibility on justice too. Lack of accessibility to justice remains a threat to sustainable development.

Before the court started remote proceedings, judges indefinitely postponed the absolute majority of criminal cases. They restricted physical access to courtrooms for all. It could have been an expected and logical decision of courts unless it lasted for months.

1. According to the regulations, attendance at the court hearings was restricted but not completely. Despite this, observation on the ongoing processes showed that at Tbilisi City Court, judges did not allow attendance at court hearings at all. Gradually, the court started working remotely, and initially, stakeholders were not allowed to join the meetings. These facts question the transparency and publicity of the court.
2. Besides that problem, technical issues affect the court trials and delay the meetings. That makes the process very time-consuming. According to the Special Court Monitoring report elaborated by the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association, from March 2020 - to June 2020, almost all court hearings that they attended started late.
3. The court hearings remotely also involve a risk of leakage of the court participant's confidential information.
4. The examination of evidence at remote court hearings is also a problem, especially the material evidence, because the court can face with replacement of evidence, a substantial alteration in its features, or disappearance of significant traces left on the evidence.

Recommendations:

1. The court should ensure transparency of hearings by allowing interested parties to attend the meetings. It is recommended to establish mechanisms that allow stakeholders to request information, clarifications and explanations on the court's website, this way improving two-way communication.
2. The court should improve technical performance to start the hearings on time. Participants of court proceedings and the local municipality should ensure that individuals who do not have the necessary technical resources to participate in remote court hearings are provided with them so that the social conditions of individuals do not cause the delay of court proceedings. Also relevant agencies should train the participants of the court proceeding in the use of technical equipment. For remote questioning of witnesses, the courthouse should allocate a room with appropriate technical equipment, from which witnesses will be able to join court hearings. This will ensure that the information provided by witnesses is not available to others and psychological threats or pressure usually accompanying the interrogation of witnesses in police units or a lawyer's office is minimized.
3. Specific regulations should guarantee the confidentiality of the court participants and information disclosed during closed court sessions should be better protected. Also the regulations for providing audio-video and photo shooting of remote court hearings should be developed.
4. The court should examine the evidence in a physical format according to the Covid-19 regulations in order to avoid any doubt about a possible replacement of evidence, a substantial alteration in its features or disappearance of significant traces left on the evidence.

A year has almost passed after the first change in the Criminal Procedure Code of Georgia and first decision of the court to delay cases. The problems remain unchanged. Physical attendance of people in courtrooms is still challenging. Lack of access to the public hearing significantly reduces the public confidence in the courts and the judgments of the courts. Reliable, strong and independent institutions are key for sustainable development.

In conclusion, during the policy-making legislative body of each state should take into account the meaning of justice and the importance of the rights established in it. Access to justice will not be effective if in the process of pleadings participants are not guaranteed to exercise their rights properly. Each branch of state should provide the consequences of their actions for building peace and strong institutions within the country.

Problem: Lack of specialization in Georgian Courts.

Nowadays one of the biggest issues concerning Georgian Judiciary System is lack of specialization in courts. Georgian common court system consists of administrative, civil and criminal chambers. But in Civil Law there are different branches of law requiring different knowledge and expertise. For instance, labor law and insolvency law have their own unique characteristics, but in Georgia the same judge can decide labor law and insolvency matters. As a result of this, the quality of judgement decreases. Unfortunately, the quality of the legal reasoning, often determines the level of the development of the particular legal system – in our case, Georgia.

If we make the chambers specialized, judges will know in advance their area of competence and will be prepared to give substantiated legal judgements. To accomplish this goal, we propose creating for the first stage the specialized chambers of labor, corporate and insolvency law, as a lot of cases nowadays are decided by the provisions of corporate, labor and insolvency law.

Best practice demonstrates that specialized courts do increase the efficiency and uniformity of judgements and thus, are vital for the development of the legal system. Specialized courts are embraced throughout the developed countries, for instance in Germany.

Recommendations:

- Specialize the judiciary system in Georgia;
- For the first stage make corporate, insolvency and labor law chambers;
- After examining the results of the first stage specialization, we can continue the process in other areas of civil and criminal law.

Problem: Current Administrative Offence Code

Current administrative offence code does not ensure fair trial and does not protect presumption of innocence. In many cases the main witness is the policeman and sometimes lawyers and even media representatives cannot access the process as cases should be resolved in 24 hours after the submission of the case to the court.

It is noteworthy to mention, that in contrast to the criminal procedure, it is much more “easier” for the accusing party to prove the guilt of the accused people.

We consider that in order to ensure fair trial and protection of constitutional principles in administrative courts, it is important to incorporate criminal procedural law principles to administrative offence code and thus, increase the burden of proof for the accusing party, will be a much more effective legal “shield”.

Recommendations:

- Raise the level of protection for detained people in Administrative Procedural Law;
- Incorporate criminal procedure law principles in administrative offence code;
- Extend the period during which the case should be resolved (currently it is 24 hours);
- Replace the law (which was written in the Soviet period) with new code which will be relevant to modern challenges;

Trade-offs

If we do not reform our judiciary system, it will definitely affect our political and economic development. Independent and effective judiciary is the prerequisite for civil society and economic prosperity.

As to some risk in our recommendations, there is risk that if we increase the number of judges without prior reforms of the courts, the increased number of judges may even worsen the situation. However, to avoid such an outcome it is recommended to regulate the selection process with the most transparency enabling the most qualified candidates to become judges.

03.

Improving Access to Online Secondary School Education for Children with Hearing and Sight Impairments in Azerbaijan and Georgia

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Overview of the Global Context

The global Covid-19 pandemic has impacted various directions of life around the world; however, its impacts on the education system are subject to particular concern due to their profound effect on children's future development. The sudden closure of schools has not only led to a temporary change in the style of teaching but an acceleration of the global transition towards digital education. Difficulties arising from this shift have been particularly distinct in the EaP region's transitional economies, where pre-pandemic problems of persistent underfunding, poor infrastructural development, and lack of teachers' digital training were further exacerbated by the transition to online teaching (SCF, 2021). The increased visibility and acuteness of the shortcomings of these countries' educational systems create an urgent need and opportunity for reform.

While aggravating the pre-existing shortcomings of the educational systems, the Covid-19 pandemic has also magnified the systemic inequalities in access to education, as students with disabilities already faced social and educational disadvantages prior to the pandemic (OECD, 2020). Children with disabilities, most recognizably, physical disabilities relating most closely to education – deafness, and blindness, often require special tools in the form of assistive technology to adapt the learning process to their needs. For instance, blind or visually impaired students may use Braille text, bold or enlarged text, or audio-learning to gain access to the information provided in class, while students with hearing impairments may use sign language, transcripts, or special software towards this end (Cooper, 2006). The sudden transition to digital learning has, on the one hand, underprovided such adapted learning methods for disabled students, and on the other, creating new opportunities for their inclusion in the learning process.

With the move to distance learning, children with special needs are often deprived of supportive educational resources in the form of teachers' support and inclusive learning methods (World Bank, 2020). While due to their disabilities, students with visual and hearing impairments used digital technology in their learning process more than their peers before the pandemic, this has not necessarily assisted them in the transition to online education, as their specific needs often prevent them from accessing the online learning resources in place. For instance, attending live video classes would be of low utility to a deaf student unless a precise transcript or sign language translator were put in place. Similarly, visually impaired students would face significant difficulties accessing homework communicated through e-mail or other textual forms (OECD, 2020).

Making education in mainstream schools more inclusive, irrespective of the students' social backgrounds and ability, has seen a surge in prominence in official legislation throughout the world. There is a general move towards integrating students with disabilities into mainstream secondary schools and adaptation of the curricula to students with special needs (Andersen and Sorensen, 2015). The transition to online education can, in many ways accelerate this process by taking advantage of the opportunities that inclusive education offers to students with disabilities. The transformation of the education system in the pandemic context is not a transitory process but rather a long-term shift in the way schools teach. In the EaP region, the difficulties arising from the pandemic are likely to have long-lasting impacts on children's education and the educational systems in place (Giannini, 2021).

Inclusive Education in Georgia and Azerbaijan

Among the EaP members, Georgia and Azerbaijan have been facing issues of digital transfer similar to the rest of the region. In both countries, secondary schools were forced to close for months at a time, and the issues faced by already unaccommodated students with disabilities have been compounded. In Georgia, in 2015, people with disabilities represented 3% of the general population (IDFI, 2015). Of these, in 2013, there were 3737 cases of special needs reported in secondary public schools and 628 students in special schools (Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, 2013). In Azerbaijan, students with disabilities represent 1.8% of the population under 18. Of these, 13456 are reported

to have impaired vision, while 3457 are deaf or have a reduced hearing (Ministry of Health of Azerbaijan, 2013). The level of adaptation of the school curricula to these students has been markedly low for decades, as physical facilities and learning materials have not supported these children in receiving an education suited to their needs. It should be noted that the statistics of these disabilities in both countries are likely to be less than the actual numbers of such pupils as in Georgia; for instance, the number of people receiving social benefits for disabilities far exceeds the number of officially recorded people with disabilities (IDFI, 2018).

As confirmed by the Inclusive Education Development Division of the Ministry of Education of Georgia (2013), as a legacy of the Soviet segregation of students with disabilities from mainstream schools, the social stigma and discrimination by the existing system towards children with disabilities still persist. In Georgia, there is a perception that inclusive education as a burden to the education system rather than its integral responsibility is prevalent, which significantly impedes action from schools and the ministry (UNESCO, 2017). As reported by a blind respondent in the UNICEF (2020) survey, there were no systems in place in Georgia to accommodate students with vision impairment, particularly since the transition to fully online learning. While the transition period has been highly stressful for both Ministries of Education, disregard for the educational needs of students with disabilities, on the individual level, means a significant decline in the ability of young people with various levels of disability to access education, while on the societal level it points to neglect for the most vulnerable and underrepresented members of the society.

In November 2020, under the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF), an independent team of researchers assessed the impact of Covid-19 on access to online and offline education in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries - Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. The researchers identified four main headline conclusions: Pre-Covid-19 underfunding of educational and technological infrastructure, lack of digital literacy, and employability of teachers, which inhibited the region's capacity to sustain a practical educational experience for school pupils and university students during the Covid-19 pandemic. Economic context for the region and each EaP country, and the distribution, affordability, and reliability of Wi-Fi access and learning technology, as well as seeking youth testimonies. Education is the basis for a strong, entrepreneurial, globally competitive economy. There is a circular interdependence between education and the economy such that stagnation in one leads to stagnation in the other. Strengthening investment in young people's skills and delivering quality education is admittedly need to be further reinforced in the EaP countries for a sustainable post-pandemic recovery.

The responsibility of this reform, first and foremost, lies with the ministries of education of the above-discussed countries - the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgian and the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan, for which the recommendations of this report are produced for.

Problem Statement: Children with hearing and sight impairments in Georgia and Azerbaijan lack access to digital secondary education.

Legal Framework

Among the current problems, the issue of education of children with disabilities is quite essential and constantly relevant; given the current epidemic and future threats, the current Unified Education and Science Strategy does not respond to the conceptual approaches necessary for the introduction of Digital Inclusive education in educational institutions despite the many principles and regulations provided by law. The process of inclusive education in Georgia was conditioned by the 1994 Salamanca Declaration initiated by UNESCO and the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. On December 23, 2013, the Parliament of Georgia adopted a resolution on the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which provides for the introduction of an inclusive education system and access to lifelong learning.

Supportive Laws on Inclusive Digital Education

Inclusive education in Georgia is regulated by the following basic laws: The Constitution of Georgia, the Law of Georgia on General Education, the Law of Georgia on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Code of Georgia on the Rights of the Child. According to Article 11 (4) of *the Constitution of Georgia*: "The State shall create special conditions for persons with disabilities to exercise their rights and interests." The *UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights* has a provision

on the right to education of all people. According to the Article 7 (1) of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*: “States Parties shall take all necessary measures to ensure the full enjoyment by children with disabilities of all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with other children.” According to the article 25 of the Constitution of Azerbaijan Republic: “persons with disabilities can enjoy all the rights and carry all the duties enshrined in the Constitution, apart from those rights and duties, the exercise of which can be difficult due to their limited capabilities.”

Laws on Inclusive Digital Education which should be amended

I. The non-adapted environment and resources in inclusive education in the general education system are still a problem. No changes to the curriculum as a result of the transition to digital learning.

On June 12, 2020, the Laws of Georgia on General Education were amended to provide distance learning. *The updated and subsequent strategies should clearly reflect the state’s conceptual vision for the digital transformation of inclusive education.* According to Article 61, paragraph 3 of the *Law of Georgia on General Education*: “Distance learning shall be implemented in the form of simultaneous communication. Simultaneous communication shall mean the interaction when communication between the teaching and learning process participants is performed at the same time.” *In view of all the above, it is clear that despite the changes in the law, we do not find relevant and necessary changes in the individual curriculum for inclusive digital education.* According to Article 10, paragraph 5 of the Law of Azerbaijan Republic on General Education: “Respective curricula are used for in-service teacher training, distance learning, and other special forms of learning.” Inclusive education is the involvement of a student with special educational needs in the general education process with peers, so schools offer an individualized curriculum. An individual curriculum is a curriculum based on a national curriculum for a student with special educational needs that should maximally address all the educational needs of students with special educational needs and how to meet them, the student’s interests, and individual abilities necessary to achieve the individual curriculum goals. A particular curriculum is created within one month of identifying a student’s special educational needs. In the process of developing and implementing a unique curriculum, it is crucial to involve the parent / legal representative of a student with special educational needs and to work with the school team.

II. According to the Article 27, paragraph 3 (c) of *the Law of Georgia on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*: “the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, based on international experience and with the participation of persons with disabilities and relevant qualified experts, shall develop at all levels of education: c) Relevant advanced training modules for working specialists, which are mandatory for both public and private educational institutions. According to Article 15, paragraph 4 of The Law of the Azerbaijan Republic on social protection of disabled persons: “The State provides teachers’ staff with training particularly for education and vocational training of disabled persons.” A study of inclusive teaching within the Institute for Social Research and Analysis found that teachers often fail to implement individual curricula and that the introduction and implementation of ISGs in public schools is inconsistent. In the case of any educational system, a certain proportion of children are left out of the learning process, as the system is not ready to approach students with different abilities individually. As a result, they are excluded from society and education.

III. All of the above shows that at first glance the state is committed to providing education for children with disabilities, although an in-depth analysis of the issue leads to the conclusion that in reality, there is no full internet access for distance learning and the necessary social or internet packages are not provided by the state, which would make it easier for such students to access inclusive education. Effective implementation of universal internet projects is essential. All regions should have access to the internet and inclusive digital education. It is also important to develop appropriate social or internet packages for children with disabilities to provide them with remarkable technologies to make computers and online resources available to them. This process will help maximize the opportunities of inclusive digital/distance education and create an appropriate environment to protect the fundamental rights of the individual.

Opportunities Created for Vision and Hearing-Impaired Students

1. No longer having to attend schools physically might make it easier to acquire education, as the possible difficulties arising from commuting can be avoided.
2. Students with hearing impairments can use technology to make their inclusive educational process more comfortable; for instance, e-learning platforms give such a person the ability to view video lectures with specific subtitles, which they would not have been able to do in a regular classroom. Adapted programs such as braille

keyboards or voice-to-text software and audio recordings are of immense utility to the development of inclusive learning.

3. The E-learning platform has a particularly crucial role for those students with disabilities who are to be considered vulnerable to the coronavirus, as it reduces the interaction with others.

Possible Solutions and International Experiences

Some countries have taken immediate actions to deliver quality education and support children with disabilities during the Covid-19 crisis. Some of the main commendable and vital approaches worldwide are listed below:

- To support students who have hearing impairments, the Ministry of Education and Rwanda Education Board, alongside UNICEF and Humanity & Inclusion, are ensuring that all television lessons have their sign language interpretation included. Also, some organizations are working on printing and handing out learning resources on Braille. Specifically, scripts from radio lessons that were broadcasted were translated into Braille, printed, and distributed. More than 168 recipients in all parts of Rwanda have received copies.
- In Nepal, Disabled Empowerment and Communication Center's role is to ensure that its community volunteers motivate learners to listen to the radio lessons provided, ensuring they are accessible for children with disabilities, specifically with sight problems. They support teachers in delivering the tasks according to the inclusive principles, maintaining a slow and steady pace and making constant repetition, taking into account students' diverse needs.
- In the United States, teachers launched a free homework help hotline for visually impaired students. They can navigate accessible websites with screen reader software or tutor in braille reading and writing. They also have the advantage of reaching out to the additional services they often receive in schools, such as extra support, one-to-one learning sessions, and psychological support. Therefore, in most OECD countries, tutors offer individual online support or provide their students with specific material to compensate for such losses. Without support measures in classes or daily activities, these students may lose their sense of belonging and self-worth.
- Amid the pandemic, the University of Padua in Italy expanded its internet resources to include support on online teaching for students with disabilities of all kinds. Students with hearing problems can benefit from the online stenotype service, consisting of the transcription of both synchronous and asynchronous lectures that quickly follow their courses.
- Moreover, the approach to making learning inclusive to all depends on the country's development as well-in developed countries, students with impairments have more access to assistive devices and tech-friendly classes with the support of the government and corporate sector. Therefore, in such countries, emphasis is put on personnel training rather than the infrastructure side. Especially, universities in Scandinavian countries give classes to future teachers and edu-specialists on arranging courses to appeal to the mixed type of students in regular schools to join the society with no adaptation problems in the future. One such example is Finland, known for its best education system in the world. Finland municipalities try to organize school classrooms small in size and mixed students with and without disabilities. This helps to improve individual attention, better involvement of students in the groups and tasks. Each student with special needs gets provided parental care, both regular teachers and special education teachers and personal assistants who guide them starting from kindergartens. (Lempinen, 2017) Another good inclusive education model is individual school initiatives; these are popular in Europe. Cleves primary school in London tries to be one of the most accessible schools for all types of students with its technological infrastructure and assistive aids such as magnifying glasses, touch control devices, alternative keyboards and mouse, speech-to-text word recognition tools, etc. Also, partnership connections with governmental bodies and telecommunication agencies make the lessons more deliverable to all.

Recommendations

1. Including people with disabilities in the policymaking process is essential to achieve effective agenda-setting, planning, and implementing inclusive digital education projects. Various charity organizations, NGOs, and civil society organizations can support both ministries of education in this process.

- In Georgia, Association CHRONIKONI, Association of Young Economists of Georgia, Center for Political Development, Open Society Georgia Foundation, Save the Children, Georgian Catharsis, Free Pedagogical Centre can assist the ministry in implementing the recommended initiatives.
- In Azerbaijan, various NGOs and charity organizations can help the Ministry of Education to implement and fund inclusivity projects, including, but not limited to, the Union of Disabled People Organizations (UDPO), Public Association of talented disabled people, Towards Community Care for Disabled and Orphan Children, For a Barrier-Free Life.
- International organizations operating in the two countries, including USAID, UNDP, UNICEF, ADA Austrian Development Agency, European Commission, People in Need, Brot für die Welt, and others, have also demonstrated their readiness to support greater integration of people with disabilities into society through providing funding and know-how and can be of immense assistance to both ministries.

2. Developing adaptation standards and methodologies for the development of inclusive education is provided by the laws of Georgia and Azerbaijan Republic. However, the law should devise a clear, unified action plan for the adaptation of distance learning for persons with disabilities.

3. A digital inclusive education platform, created with the joint involvement of various educational institutions or Ministries of Education, will aim to discuss the advances in information technology in the field of education and provide appropriate training modules for children with disabilities through donors to raise awareness of digital education. It can be useful to create centralized online platforms that will facilitate inclusive access to educational resources. An electronic library for centralized inclusive education may be established throughout the country, where e-learning resources will be available in the formats necessary for inclusive education, including textbooks, monographs, articles, and video lectures.

4. It is necessary to train teachers to master the teaching methods of distance learning related to the provision of inclusive digital education for children with disabilities. Secondary school teachers should undergo intensive digital and inclusivity training programs. Teachers already working with students with impaired vision or hearing should be engaged in courses for capacity building. In addition, financially motivating teachers to take on students with special needs as a result of these pieces of training should be taken into consideration.

5. To support educators and curriculum developers in implementing inclusive digital learning platforms and using responsive accessible virtual/broadcasted and printed learning materials for inclusive distance education and supporting persons with disabilities for the inclusive learning process. These can include captions, larger print, preliminarily provided transcripts, provision of Braille converted textbooks for visually impaired students, synchronous sign-language broadcasting for large-scale lessons.

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