






“Exploring the effectiveness of social control mechanisms in fostering citizen involvement in rural local budgeting: The Kazakhstani perspective”

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EXPLORING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SOCIAL CONTROL MECHANISMS IN FOSTERING CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT IN RURAL LOCAL BUDGETING: THE KAZAKHSTANI PERSPECTIVE

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the involvement of citizens in the administration of local budgets, which significantly contribute to the financial and economic independence of rural areas. The study presents the findings of a sociological research conducted in the Turkestan region, Kazakhstan. The survey included 259 rural residents from 14 rural districts and two significant cities in the region, all aged 18 and above and permanent residents of these areas.

The analysis is based on the survey results, focusing on the overall level of citizens' engagement in decision-making regarding local budget formation and distribution in rural areas. The study reveals a low level of citizen participation in managing the local budget. While general meetings and local gatherings serve as primary avenues for citizen involvement, only 79.9% of respondents reported participating in budget discussions, with only 20.1% of their opinions considered during budget allocation.

Finally, the study identifies several factors that negatively affect effective citizen participation in local budget management. These factors include a lack of timely awareness and information about upcoming planning and budget meetings (56.4%), insufficient transparency in the actions of local executive leaders (Akims) (14.3%), bureaucratic complexity and a formal approach to budget discussions (3.5%), and low levels of citizen trust in rural district Akims (5.4%).

Keywords

budget, social control, local government, citizens, participation, rural area, transfers, trust, involvement

JEL Classification

H61, R58, I10, H75

INTRODUCTION

The active involvement of citizens in decision-making helps the government to be more open and accountable and develops a positive perception of state bodies. In this context, the government benefits from encouraging a policy of effectively involving citizens in forming and distributing local budgets. With that in mind, in 2018, the local Kazakhstani government budget was transformed into a part of a four-level system, which implies effective and well-implemented public engagement. Kazakhstan tries to create an innovative and client-oriented public service, focused on the needs of society (Bokayev & Amirova, 2023).

Today, Kazakhstan has a four-level budget system. The first level comprises the Republican budget; the second level comprises the regional

budgets of cities of Republic-wide significance and the capital; the third level comprises the budgets of cities of regional significance and district budgets; and the fourth level comprises the budget of the villages, the rural districts, and cities of district significance therein.

The fourth level of the budget implies that all revenues and expenditures of the local government are formed and spent at the local level, and decisions on distribution are made taking into account the local community's opinion. Independence means freedom from needlessly higher budgets, with local governments seeking a transparent and efficient budget. Moreover, income redistribution is the main element of state regulation of socio-economic processes.

According to state policy, a strong local government system should become the basis for citizens' participation in improving the quality of life in their locality, opening new opportunities for the development of regions, reducing dependency attitudes, and creating deep-rooted democratic transformations in the country.

However, research shows that in Kazakhstan, the reports by executive leaders (Akims) on the work done and the execution of the budget are formalities. The obvious reason is that persons approved by the Akim or his deputy end up being those appointed to the local assembly of the community and public councils. Seeing this negatively affects the level of involvement of citizens, especially in the discussion of the local budget.

Therefore, it is crucial to assess citizens' opinions regarding providing timely and high-quality information on local governments' activities, openness, transparency, and accountability. Today, citizens want and can bear joint responsibility for resolving issues related to elections to local governments, revenue generation, and allocating budget funds for the socio-economic development of the local community.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The activity and intensity of citizens' participation in solving local problems are influenced by various factors, one of which can be considered as the confidence of the population of rural districts in the authorities and local self-government. Scientists rightly point out that the public's trust in the institutions of the political system is a necessary condition not only for the legitimacy of the existing power in society but also the most critical factor of civil self-organization, the inclusion of a person in the activities of public organizations. Forming an independent budget within the local government has become the object of scientific and practical research. As a participatory and democratic act of policymaking, it relies on government consultation with the citizenry rather than reliance on elected or appointed officials to define and allocate the budget (Zhang & Yang, 2009). Since 2017, Kazakhstan has actively promoted a citizen-centric approach to government decisions. The citizen has become a central part of government policy, and their political role has increased (Bokayev et al., 2021). In

order to function effectively, research has identified key environmental factors that must be cultivated, including the structural composition of the government, transparent and trustworthy legal and political climates, and an engaged population of sufficient size and diversity (Ebdon & Franklin, 2006).

For instance, in East-Central Europe, local political elites exhibit distinctive characteristics. On one hand, they have been shaped by the legacy of the communist régime. On the other hand, they have also been influenced by contemporary administrative trends, such as the fiscal decentralization of public administration. Consequently, this creates a system that limits the full participation of all stakeholders in the decision-making process (Marin, 2015). Nevertheless, democratization and decentralization can still take place within such contexts, as exemplified by Poland. In Poland, the population actively engages in state processes, facilitated by the implementation of community empowerment tools, with one of the most significant being budgeting with public participation (Kamrowska-Zaluska, 2016).

The ideal role of the citizens has evolved into active participants in the decision-making process. However, existing procedures in Kazakhstan for determining policy must be improved to attract and encourage citizen participation. Correia et al. (2023) proved the vital role of citizens' demands and motives in defining methods and creating democratic approaches to enhance their participation.

The level of citizen involvement depends on their own desire. For example, Kim and Schachter (2013), having studied cases in the USA and Korea, concluded that the population's involvement is associated with a lack of interest among many citizens due to various reasons (strict schedules or lack of confidence). According to Manes-Rossi et al. (2023), the interplay between communication, information exchange, and trust that takes place as part of citizen engagement cannot be neglected without sacrificing the effectiveness of any collaboration. Various stakeholders are involved in the budget formation process of local authorities. Thus, local authorities can hold public meetings and discussions to attract and satisfy their stakeholders (Johnson et al., 2021).

Sedmihradská (2015) showed the fragmented nature of public information disclosure. For example, there are no requirements to publish all budget documents, and non-compliance rarely causes fines or penalties. At the same time, officials participating in these meetings cannot always reliably inform the population about the decisions taken or speak on behalf of the population.

Local authorities manage communication with citizens in pandemic-related crises through their social media profiles, applying the most attractive communication strategy (Gorska et al., 2022). Local bodies should demonstrate practical and rational financial resources and public services management. According to Carcaba et al. (2022), good governance positively affects the population's quality of life and well-being. Moreover, public involvement reduces corruption in the country, showing the openness and accountability of state bodies to the population. However, the degree of such involvement depends on the government itself. The government plays a significant role in deciding how far citizen involvement can stretch.

In this regard, most problems in the governance, policy, and management decisions that can be observed end up requiring institutional changes that allow citizens, businesses, and local authorities to cooperate in joint problem-solving (Tang, 2021).

The government's goodwill and integrity can be increased by announcing details of public participation and budget initiatives. Budget programs with public participation can directly affect budget allocations and indirectly via trust (Ardanaz et al., 2023). In recent years, authorities have increased the use of social media to disclose relevant documents and data. Various crises show the need to spread information among the citizens, proving government commitment and increasing the population's readiness and awareness (Padeiro et al., 2021). It is imperative to assess the opinion of citizens regarding the access to information in governmental social networks and factors such as transparency, trust, efficiency of state and local authorities, and citizens' participation in political life (Arshad & Khurram, 2020).

Popular trends in modern public administration include the online publication of open government data. Such initiatives toward enhanced transparency and openness should determine why, how, and what data should be published (Lourenço, 2023). Openness promotes harmonious social changes and positively affects the level of trust citizens feel about state bodies (Bokayev et al., 2022).

The participation of citizens is a necessary condition for the openness and transparency of state power. Citizen involvement in public administration has a direct consequence of increasing public awareness. This leads to citizens becoming more aware of political leaders and civil servants, which ultimately affects the election results. In addition, public participation is a barrier to corruption and unjustified spending of budgetary funds (Gubnitsyn, 2009). Local self-government bodies are closely interconnected with the population; therefore, their success and viability depend on how mature and responsible the position of each citizen will be (Yuvitsa et al., 2019).

Local authorities should elaborate on their strategies and plans, paying attention to citizens' wants and demands to meet community needs (Pang et al., 2011). Traditional governance practices establish citizen involvement as an obstacle to achiev-

ing top-down governance goals, thus excluding local communities and public movements. Further research is needed to develop new management methods that allow for more effective integration of the local population into the management process (Rollason et al., 2018).

Citizen participation is crucial during all stages of decision-making and management. However, only some people decide to join such initiatives. Moreover, predominantly older generations visit public discussions and seminars. As a rule, it often takes years to implement, and it requires all generations to express their opinion about what is necessary for the future. Social networks are a tool to establish communication between citizens and local authorities, which promotes genuine participation. In addition, social networks make it possible to effectively carry out explanatory work and notify about meetings or public seminars. Unlike newspaper or website ads, these sites help reach the audience filtered by territory, age, or interests (Rania, 2017). Officials should comprehend the socio-economic conditions of specific communities to enhance communication and citizen interest (Ling et al., 2022). It is worth involving the population in the decision-making and management, considering their willingness to participate in events. Local self-government bodies should expand the participation of citizens. In this regard, alternative methods should be considered, for example, online platforms for the effective involvement of citizens in governance (Ogbe, 2022). The assessment of citizen engagement is vital to make such processes beneficial and transparent for both sides (Fekete et al., 2021). There needs to be evidence of citizen contribution to create a joint space for everyone to achieve genuine citizen participation (Lim et al., 2021). Thus, the main purpose of involving citizens in local governance is to solve issues of local importance independently or jointly with local authorities to satisfy the communities.

2. AIM AND HYPOTHESES

The objective of this study is to assess the extent of citizen participation in local budgeting within rural communities in Kazakhstan. To achieve this objective, two research hypotheses have been formulated:

H1: The level of citizen involvement in decision-making processes related to the formation of local budgets is relatively low in rural communities in Kazakhstan.

H2: Factors such as education level, income level, and accessibility to information significantly influence the extent of population participation in budget management at the local level within rural communities in Kazakhstan.

By investigating these hypotheses, this study aims to gain valuable insights into the current state of citizen participation in local budgeting and identify the key factors that affect such involvement within rural communities in Kazakhstan. The findings of this paper will contribute to a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with citizen engagement in the budgetary processes at the local level, ultimately informing strategies to enhance participation and promote transparent governance in rural areas of Kazakhstan.

3. METHODOLOGY

A sociological survey is used to determine the involvement of citizens in the management of the local government budget at the fourth level. The survey was conducted among 259 rural residents from 14 rural districts and two cities of regional significance in the Turkestan region, all aged 18 and older and permanently residing in these cities and districts. The choice of this region was determined by its population density, geographical location, and socio-demographic determinants. At the same time, more than 50% of the population of the Turkestan region lives in rural districts. Table 1 shows the structure of the Turkestan region's fourth-level budgets over five years.

The primary sources of local government budget revenues are transfers, and their average share is 80.5%. The share of tax revenues shows a negative trend over the years: in 2019, it decreased by 3.39% and in 2020 by 2.85%, though with a slight positive trend in 2021 and 2022. This may be caused by a decrease in the number of taxpayers paying the IIT (individual income tax) during the pandemic and due to the moratorium on the IIT until 2023.

Table 1. Structure of rural budgets of Turkestan region (tenge, in millions)

Source: Compiled by the authors based on requests and information from the Department of Finance and State Assets of Turkestan region (2022) for 2018–2022.

Characteristics	2018		2019		2020		2021		2022	
	tenge	%	tenge	%	tenge	%	tenge	%	tenge	%
Income, total	29,926.7	100	36,492.5	100	33,001.02	100	14,005.4	100	15,909.0	100
	Including									
Tax receipts	4,115.1	13.75	3,778.9	10.36	3,596.72	10.90	3,949.9	28.20	4,470.54	28.10
Non-tax receipts	216.25	0.72	39.9	0.11	73.46	0.22	90.9	0.65	35.15	0.22
Proceeds from the sale of fixed assets	1.828	0.01	0.033	–	1.004	–	3.6	0.03	576.78	3.63
Transfer receipts	25,593.5	85.52	32,673.7	89.54	29,329.84	88.88	9,961.0	71.12	10,826.53	68.05
Expenses	29,396.9	100	36,490.6	100	32,820.2	100	14,319.6	100	15,642.2	100
Deficit (surplus)	529.80	–	1.9	–	180.8	–	–314.2	–	266.8	–

The share of transfers in local budgets increased by 4.2% in 2019 and 3.36% in 2020. In 2021 and 2022, there was a reduction in the total revenues of the fourth-level budgets due to a reduction in transfers.

Table 2. Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

Category	Percent	Number
Gender		
Male	36.7	95
Female	63.3	164
Age		
18-30	41.3	107
31-40	22.0	57
41-50	22.0	57
51 and older	14.7	38
Education		
Secondary	10.0	26
Specialized secondary	1.9	5
Higher	76.4	198
Postgraduate education	11.6	30
Occupational Status		
Civil servants	52.6	136
Students	30.1	78
Company employees	4.2	11
Entrepreneurs	3.5	9
Self-employed	4.6	12
Unemployed	3.5	9
Retirees	1.5	4

According to Table 2, women constitute 63.3% of the surveyed population. The proportions by age category are as follows: from 18 to 30 – 41.3%; from 31 to 40 – 22.0%; from 41 to 50 – 22.0%; from 51 and older – 14.7%. Regarding their level of education, 78.3% of respondents are specialists with diplomas from secondary specialized and higher educational institutions, 11.6% of respondents have postgraduate education, and the remain-

ing 10% graduated only from secondary school. Meanwhile, 52.6% of respondents reported being civil servants, 30.1% – students, and 4.2% – company employees. The rest reported being entrepreneurs (3.5%), self-employed (4.6%), unemployed (3.5%), or retirees (1.5%) (Table 2).

In general, the socio-demographic analysis of the respondents showed that the survey was dominated by women (63.3%). In contrast, by age category, the majority of respondents can be attributed to the able-bodied population, i.e., from 18 to 50 years or 85.3%. By education level, more than half of the participants reported average or higher qualifications (78.3%). By social status, about 85% of respondents are economically active (Table 2). As can be seen, most respondents have a sufficiently high human potential. This finding could hypothetically be used by local government bodies to guide their metrics for involving the local community in the decision-making process to solve socio-economic problems.

4. RESULTS

The analysis of the sociological survey showed that 52 respondents, or 20.1%, are members of the public council, and 61 respondents, or 23.6%, of all respondents participated in meetings. This indicates a low level of involvement of citizens in the decision-making process.

An analysis of questionnaires on why citizens did not participate in meetings and gatherings of the local community showed that 37.1% of respondents did not know that they had the right to participate, 22.8% of respondents were not informed

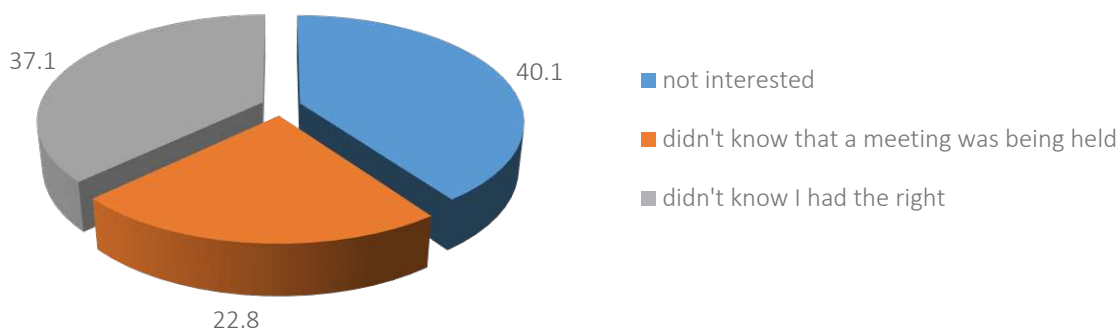


Figure 1. Reasons why citizens did not participate in meetings and gatherings of the local community (%)

about upcoming meetings, and 40.1% of respondents were not interested because they did not trust local government bodies (Figure 1).

Meetings and gatherings of local communities on financing socio-economic tasks for the development of the village are held either monthly (19.7%), quarterly (21.6%), semi-annually (15.1%), or once a year (16.2%). It is worth noting that 27.4% of respondents indicated that local governments did not hold meetings at all, despite the legislation of the Republic of Kazakhstan holding that local authorities must meet with citizens at their request and, if necessary, have meetings outside the calendar (Legislation of Kazakhstan, 2022).

Respondents who participated in local government meetings were asked, “In what form did you participate in the discussion of the local budget?” 50.8% participated by voting in meetings or gatherings of the local community, 24.6% of respondents participated through a mobile application, 11.4% via online voting using an electronic digital signature (EDS), and 13.2% through a questionnaire on paper.

To the question, “Does the mayor discuss with you budget planning for solving socio-economic problems of the village?”, 47.5% answered positively, and 52.5% answered negatively.

When discussing the budgets of local governments, 204 respondents (78.9%) did not make their proposals on their distribution, and only the opinions of 55 respondents (21.2%) were taken into account.

4.1. Assessment of citizens’ participation in the management of the local budget

The analysis of the sociological survey on the satisfaction of the population in the discussion of the local budget showed that 79 respondents (30.5%) were not satisfied, 25 respondents (9.7%) were partially dissatisfied, 72 respondents (27.8%) were partially satisfied, and 83 respondents (32.0%) were satisfied (Figure 2).

To the question, “Do you think that citizens can and should participate in planning and using the budget of your rural district?”, the majority of re-

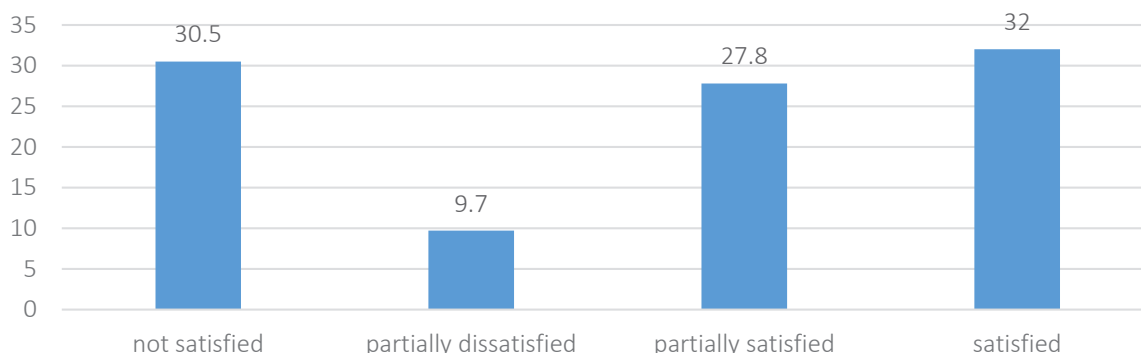


Figure 2. Satisfaction of the population with the degree of participation in the discussion on the village budget (in %)

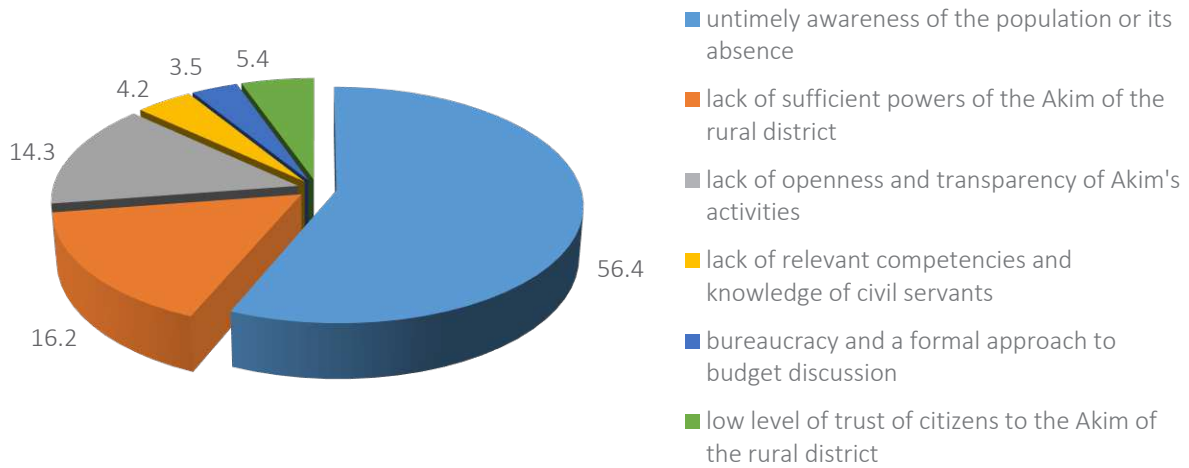


Figure 3. Factors affecting the effectiveness of local budget management (in %)

spondents (71.4%) answered positively, and 6.2% answered negatively. 22.4% of respondents could not answer this question.

The factors that negatively affect the effectiveness of the formation of a policy for the management of the budget of local self-government include (Figure 3):

- untimely awareness or lack of information about upcoming meetings (56.4%);
- lack of sufficient powers of the executive leader (Akim) of the rural district (16.2%);
- lack of openness and transparency of Akim's activities (14.3%);
- lack of relevant competencies and knowledge among civil servants (4.2%);
- bureaucracy and a formal approach to budget discussions (3.5%);

- low level of citizens' trust in the rural district's Akim (5.4%).

As shown in Figure 4, most respondents prefer meetings formatted as general meetings and local community gatherings (42.1%). In second place were mobile application contacts (30.1%), while in third place were local referendums (21.2%). Written surveys were in last place (6.6%).

According to the survey participants, the most effective form of assessing the effectiveness of the village budget execution was quarterly reports by the local Akim (44.0%), open publication of the civil budget on the website of the village Akim (29.8%), the monitoring of budget execution through a mobile application (12.7%), sociological surveys of the population (6.9%), and public control (6.6%) (Figure 5).

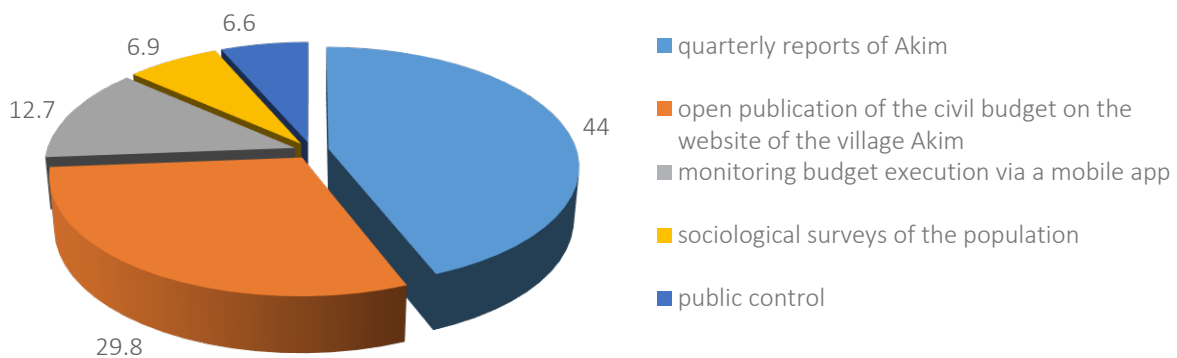


Figure 4. Forms of citizen interaction with local government bodies (%)

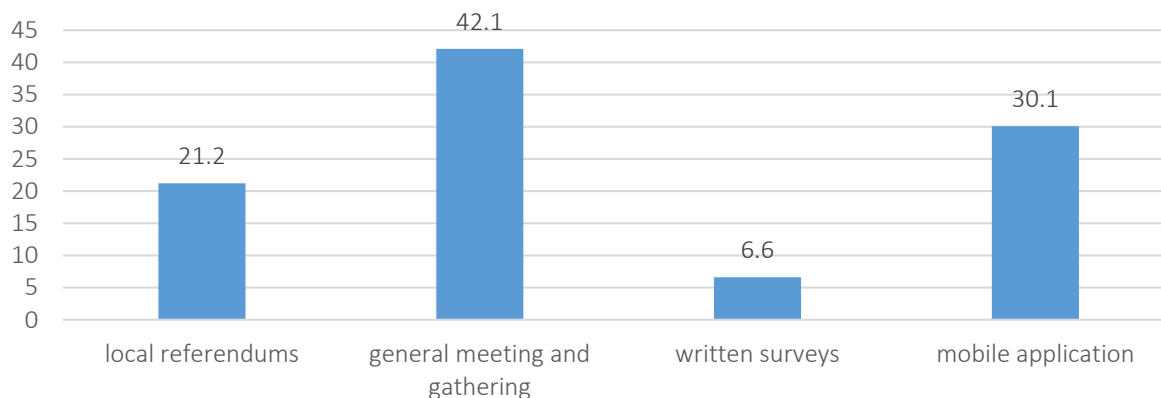


Figure 5. Forms for evaluating the effectiveness of budget execution (%)

5. DISCUSSION

In this study, the analysis and assessment of citizens' involvement in the management of local government budgets were carried out by determining the overall level of citizens' involvement in decision-making regarding the formation of the local budget, and by identifying factors influencing the participation of the population in the management of an independent budget. The results of the study, where the majority of respondents had a sufficiently high human potential to engage in civic participation, which could hypothetically be used by local government bodies to better understand how to involve the local community in the decision-making process to solve socio-economic problems. Moreover, the survey results indicate a low level of involvement of citizens in the decision-making process. In respondents' opinion, there are currently no specific mechanisms for citizens' participation in local government, which negatively affects the level of involvement in the management of the local budget.

Although rural residents are positive about the idea of participating in the management of the budget of local self-government, they either do not use the available opportunities out of low interest in the perceived benefits, or do not know about them due to a lack of information.

The factors that negatively affect the effectiveness of the formation of a policy for managing the budget of local government include a lack of information or awareness about upcoming meetings, potentially exacerbated by a perceived lack of sufficient authority from the Akim of the rural dis-

trict. Most of the respondents prefer meetings in the format of a general meeting and a gathering of the local community. The most widely used form of assessing the effectiveness of the village budget is the quarterly report by the Akim, and the open publication of the civil budget on the website of the Akim of the village.

The introduction of the fourth-level budget in terms of obtaining financial independence of rural districts was supposed to increase the interest of citizens in planning and distributing the rural budget, as well as involve the population in solving local issues. The activity of the participants demonstrates the willingness of residents to get involved in decision-making processes. Citizens want and can participate in the discussion of the budget, but still remain unconvinced when it comes to cooperation with local authorities, participation in meetings and gatherings of the local community. The main factors hindering the active participation of citizens in local government are poor awareness, a lack of knowledge about their role in discussing issues of local importance, a distrust of executive authorities, and a perceived weak interest from the Akims for active cooperation.

Studying the decentralization reforms and recommended budget management practices of the fourth-level budgets reveals a model of decentralization of public administration in Kazakhstan that is in many ways similar to models found of East-Central Europe (Marin, 2015).

Managing the budget of local government with broad involvement by citizens can have a noticeable impact on the creation of a vibrant civil so-

ciety, helping to democratize the decision-making process and creating effective dialogue between officials and non-governmental organizations. This can increase the transparency of budget management. As a result of the active process of democratization and decentralization taking place in the world, the role of public participation in planning and management is increasing, and many new tools for empowering communities are being introduced.

Of course, the development of public participation in the management of the fourth-level budgets is necessary. However, for residents themselves, these forms of participation are still obscure and not fully accessible.

To become active participants in the management process, citizens must see the results of their activity and understand the connection between their participation and positive changes in the rural district. The results should satisfy the population.

Thus, problems arise when the population does not know their rights and obligations, leading to the observed lack of interest among many citizens and reinforcing general distrust of executive authorities. The level of involvement by citizens depends on their own desire, so civic engagement is only developed by raising awareness and people's desire to participate in the processes.

Special attention should be paid to timely informing and educating local residents in the management of local government budgets. The most im-

portant issues of socio-economic development relevant to rural areas should be discussed with the local population, as it is necessary to involve residents and civil society institutions in discussing plans and programs for rural development, as well as in drafting budgets and budget execution reports, and in providing the population with sufficient information about the activities and plans of local government bodies. To do this, it is necessary to actively hold gatherings and meetings of citizens, as well as conduct citizen surveys to identify the opinions of the population that can be taken into account when making decisions on issues of local importance.

According to the Budget Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan, budget information must be published in local mass media, but this requirement is not always met. Local government bodies do not actually publish information on the execution of fourth-level budgets. This is followed by poor awareness and even ignorance from the population about the opportunities and mechanisms of civic participation. Therefore, it is necessary to use all available means of informing the population about the budget – the local bulletin board, the district's website, and most crucially of all, social networks and online messenger platforms.

Effective local government has a positive and very significant impact on the well-being and quality of life of the population. Indeed, the active participation of the population in the management of an independent budget is a necessary condition for the sustainable development of the territory.

CONCLUSION

The study aimed to evaluate the level of citizen participation in local budgeting in Kazakhstani rural areas. Based on the results, no specific mechanisms currently exist to encourage citizen participation in local government or local budget management. In order to begin cultivating a new culture of civic participation, civil servants must have effective communication skills: to talk to people, to be open, and to give helpful information through established and accessible communication channels. For example, social networks and online instant messenger platforms can provide regular insights into what is being done by local government bodies and for what purpose, thereby encouraging engagement with civic initiatives and popular discussions of official activities.

As for the level of involvement of citizens, the participants demonstrate the residents' willingness to get involved in decision-making processes. Developing civic engagement, raising awareness, and increasing people's desire to participate in the processes allows for the popular acquisition of management rights. Moreover,

it is necessary to realize that at the same time, increased civic participation imposes on people specific responsibilities and joint responsibility for the results of decisions with a popular mandate. Over time, there is an increase in the political, economic, and financial literacy of the newly interested population.

Thus, significant energy must first be dedicated to increasing the responsibility of local government bodies in facilitating the effective redistribution of resources and public services. To ensure the effectiveness of this development, local civil society institutions must be equipped with the capability to foster constructive dialogue and actively participate in the decision-making process. Local government bodies should create a healthy basis for stimulating entrepreneurial activity, stress accountability, and be transparently open to dialogue with citizens to foster a society that feels empowered to improve their welfare and quality of life through democratic representation.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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