Executive Summary

The “Strengthening Voice and Accountability” Project (VAP) is a multi-phase intervention in the Kyrgyz Republic supporting citizen participation in local budgetary process and local self-government (LSG) responsiveness to civic initiatives. As its overall goal VAP seeks to ensure that **public finances are managed by LSGs in a more transparent and accountable mode through citizen participation in decision-making process**.

The Project was delivered in three distinct stages - 2011-2012 (inception phase), 2012-2015 (phase I) and 2015-2020 (phase II, with extension). This Project Document elaborates the proposed Exit Phase activities for the period from September 15, 2020 to March 15, 2022, with intended outcomes aimed at strengthening long-term foundations of sustainability and scale.

**Implementation approach:**

The implementing strategy for this final phase deprioritizes programmatic activity in the “field”, or direct engagement of LSGs, in favor of effecting changes through institutional intermediaries, in a way that is highly targeted at enabling long-term continuity after the end of project. The main intention of VAP is to provide a lasting contribution towards long-run sustainability and nationwide reach and replication of participatory budgetary process. This will be accomplished while ensuring strong continuity and coherence with the previous phases and building on the achieved results and lessons learned to date. The main level of operation will be at the macro (work with national-level partners) and meso (work with regional universities, regional units of central bodies), with limited micro, or LSG-level activities. There is no specific geographic targeting, unless suggested by the patterns of where the LSGs are showing most “resistance” to participatory budgeting due to a variety of factors.

Results and lessons learned

**Exit Phase planned results:**

The concluding Exit Phase project effort intends to consolidate the achieved outcomes with focus on sustainable, institutionalized **capacity building systems** for the municipal sector, and further reinforcement of the **legal, policy and regulatory environment**, prioritizing gender-responsive budgeting.

By the end of Exit Phase in early 2022 following key results are planned:

* Building on institutional support and capacity of the Union of LSGs, a main non-state partner, VAP will launch the **Portal of Best Practices**, a primary digital resource for learning, training and developing communities of practice for municipal servants and local council members. VAP will also integrate the popular, established media component, the **Municipality magazine**, as a self-supporting publication firmly embedded in the community of municipal servants;
* VAP will help the State Personnel Service (SPS) institutionalize the mechanism for training municipal servants and deconcentrate the **continuous qualification upgrade** training within the professional development system, by involving the regional universities and LSG experts.
* VAP project will provide specific assistance to ULSG, the State Agency for Local Governance and Inter-ethnic Relations (SALSGIR), SPS, the Ministry of Finance (MF) and other national stakeholders to advance several significant legal and regulatory frameworks – including the **Code on Local Self-Governance, Law on Inter-budgetary Dialogue** - and promote national policy alignment with the key norms and principles of the **European Charter of Local Self-Government**;
* In parallel, VAP will enable the main national partners for **enforcement of existing participatory budgeting frameworks** with emphasis on a genuinely representative, inclusive, and gender-responsive local budgetary process, through technical assistance, advocacy and limited civic initiatives funding under a local initiatives mechanism.

Objectives

## Project objectives and the expected results with: outputs, outcomes and impact

Based on results of Phase II, including the external end-of-phase Evaluation, the concluding Exit Phase project effort intends to consolidate the achieved outcomes at the macro level of engagement. The overall goal statement remains the same, with minor adjustment of wording - public finances are managed by LSGs in a more transparent and accountable mode through citizen participation in decision making process.

The broader underlying theory of change is also essentially the same: ***If*** *there is an adequate enabling environment (legislation, enforcement, practices) and if LSGs have sufficient capacities (rights, authorities, funds and skilled staff), and if accountability is required by local communities willing to participate in the decision-making process,* ***then*** *LSGs will become accountable* *and responsive to the needs of citizens.*

Specific intended outcomes under Exit Phase are aimed at ensuring there is sufficient sustainable capacity, and adequate enabling environment for enforcement:

* ***If*** *the capacity buildings systems are institutionalized to function in future independently of VAP,* ***then*** *all municipal servants and LSGs will continue to benefit from access to learning, practice and networks.*
* ***If*** *key incentivizing frameworks are in place and key stakeholders are enabled for enforcement,* ***then*** *more LSGs will show interest in and implement the legally mandatory participatory budgeting methods.*

More specifically, while Phase II leveraged the mutually reinforcing cycle of demand for LSG accountability (community engagement, participation and responsibility) and supply of LGS accountability (LSG’s responsiveness to civic initiatives) – the Exit Phase effort seeks to ensure this beneficial cycle of demand and supply is maintained independently of VAP, thus strengthening long-term sustainability and scale in relation to that broader theory of change.

As outlined in Figure 2 below, the Exit Phase activities are structured to support core remaining needs.



Figure 2. Structure of the Exit Phase.

## Outcome 1. Capacity building system enabling LSGs is operational and sustainable

By the end of Exit Phase in March 2022, the current ecosystem of individual and institutional capacity building resources and programs supporting competent, accountable and responsive LSG governance will have been significantly improved. Figure 3 below provides a visual summary of this ecosystem.



Figure 3. Institutionalizing capacity development systems for LSGs.

***Output 1.1 The ULSG, SALSGIR and DPI provide institutionalized access to best practices, knowledge/experience sharing and capacity building trainings by/among municipalities and local communities***

Under this output, VAP seeks to institutionalize the capacity-focused programmatic outcomes of the previous phases, related to knowledge development and dissemination and network building. For this end, VAP will extend and facilitate an existing tri-partite partnership agreement among the Development Policy Institute, Union of LSGs and State Agency for Local Self-Governance and Interethnic Relations, which will now be centered on establishing a Portal of Best Practice. As of June 2020, this represents an ongoing workstream in which SALSGIR created a working group supporting the Portal’s development.

Acting as an antecedent of a methodological and knowledge-based center of excellence for municipal servants, this entity will serve as a primary resource curating, organizing and unlocking access to a large body of knowledge, expertise, skills and professional development opportunities. The Portal of Best Practices (PBP) will provide multi-format services, envisioned as a major part of the ULSG’s educational and capacity building function, under its organizational strategy. It will also closely integrate the Municipality magazine as a publication firmly embedded in the community of municipal servants.

As a digital web-portal, jointly managed by the three partners (ULSG, SALSGIR and DPI), PBP will serve as an access point to practical resources for LSG management for all LSGs, their staff and other stakeholders with interest in municipal governance. The Portal will provide an extensive, customized and well-maintained collection of locally relevant reference materials in all key aspects of efficient LSG governance, organized into 10 different themes, from communications through utilities to budget planning. It will also offer a selection of learning materials, consolidating not only the VAP-provided materials but also the materials from various municipal development projects. Recognizing the role of the local council deputies, the project will make available a dedicated set of resources on the Portal for this audience with uniquely different needs. VAP will engage the Ministry of Finance to coordinate and collaborate under this output, especially in relation to the online training center.

In addition, the Portal will feature an online training section and functionality to set up and maintain digital “communities of practice”, allowing the members to interact for learning purposes. This functionality will be cross-linked with the currently operational and popular social media messenger channel, maintained by ULGS. Building on PBP, ULGS will be supported in developing and managing an additional System for Training and Peer to Peer Learning. ULSG will develop internal capacity, with procedures and functionality to identify needs among its member LSGs, and organize learning experiences (workshops, seminars, master classes), including mentoring and coaching relationships among the LSGs. A special emphasis will be made on online trainings and consultations, in view of potential public health considerations.

***Output 1.2 State Personnel Service outsources the continuous qualification upgrade services by involving the regional universities and LSG experts.***

In order to sustain the achievements of Phase II that activated the role of SPS in meeting the professional development needs of municipal services, VAP will help SPS establish a reliable, institutionalized mechanism for training municipal servants. Instead of in-house delivery of trainings which has significant drawbacks, SPS has been piloting an outsourcing approach, based on the well-established state order (tendering) placement method, that relies on the regional universities as providers of capacity building services.

This contracting mechanism targets a specific section of professional development, the upgrade of professional qualifications, which is different from retraining, training of trainers, trainings in support of national strategic priorities, and training programs for political municipal positions. Under the existing legislation (the Law on State Civil Service and Municipal Service, Article 28[[1]](#footnote-1)), municipal servants are required to undergo professional qualifications upgrade at least once every three years. This training is taken into account in performance evaluations and in selection/recruitment processes for municipal positions. The themes of training are determined by several standards and regulations, related to qualification requirements, competitive selection and promotion. The training is also a factor in assignment of municipal service class ranks.

In the last two years, these qualifications upgrade courses were tendered for delivery in each of the seven regions and the city of Bishkek. For some of the common areas of knowledge, the delivery of these courses is combined for state public service and municipal service and is separate for areas of knowledge that are specific to municipal service.

The curriculum covers administrative Kyrgyz language, legal and normative development for state and LSG bodies, public procurement of goods, services and works, business communications in state and municipal service, budgetary planning and forecasting, human resource management, administration of records and documentation, land resource management, organizational management of local services. There is also a separate course with advanced topics, such as financial and economic fundamentals of local self-governance, strategic planning of local development, digital technologies in local government, programmatic budgeting, gender policy and anti-corruption aspects. The content and themes are determined by the SPS in accordance with legislation and relevant regulations, such as the Methodology for training needs assessment for public servants.[[2]](#footnote-2)

VAP will support further improvement and operationalization of the essential processes that deliver this curriculum through the regional universities. Additional support will be provided to the regional universities in terms of negotiating their interest, inventorying their capabilities and identifying areas of improvements. VAP will also help universities in developing their roster of experts and trainers, based on the project database of municipal sector practitioners.

By supporting the implementation of qualification upgrade services by the SPS, the project will finalize during the Exit Phase the mechanism for an essential capacity-building process. While directly developing the content for qualification upgrade programs would be beyond scope, VAP will reflect participatory budgeting priorities in its technical, advisory and operational support to this process.

## Outcome 2. Citizens influence local decision-making through participatory and gender responsive budgeting

As almost 70% of LSGs across the country have conducted public hearings by early 2020, the conditions are in place for improving further the reach, quality and impact of the local budget processes. The current momentum, where municipal servants are taking steps to engage citizens in budget planning, requires assistance to institutions with nationwide impact. By the end of the Exit Phase the VAP project intends to strengthen the capacity of national stakeholders to mainstream participatory and inclusive budgeting, by focusing on policy advocacy capacity and strategic support to implementation and enforcement of existing frameworks. Figure 4provides a visual summary for Outcome 2.



Figure 4. Outcome 2 visualization.

***Output 2.1. ULSG and other national stakeholders effectively advocate for key legal frameworks supporting nationwide shift to participatory, gender responsive budgeting***

VAP project will provide specific assistance to ULSG, SALSGIR, SPS, MF and other national stakeholders to advance several significant legal and regulatory frameworks. The project will make available legal expertise, analytical guidance, and facilitate expert consultations in following areas.

Working primarily with the ULSG, VAP will strengthen its engagement in the development and adoption of the Code on Local Self-Governance. The activity will reinforce the role of local budget transparency in the code, and specify the criteria for inclusive, participatory budgeting. As a follow-on activity, VAP will co-deliver with ULSG an information campaign for LSGs, citizens and local communities in order to popularize and enforce the new Code; additional emphasis will be made on the inclusive, gender-responsive and participatory approaches of budgeting. The campaign will be conducted taking into account the epidemiological situation either offline or online. In any case, the Portal will take part in it.

Building on earlier recognition and discussions, jointly with ULSG VAP will promote national policy alignment with the key norms and principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Government.[[3]](#footnote-3) If the Kyrgyz Republic officially adopts the Charter, it will provide a substantial new base for monitoring and benchmarking of local governance. Through periodic country reports, country visits, local elections monitoring and validation of some of the principles of the Charter, the instrument provides an impetus for high-profile national attention and recognition of LSG reform priorities. As such, this instrument will help identify and remove the existing barriers for inclusive and gender-responsive LSG governance.

In order to strengthen the financial stability of LSGs and consideration of the needs of local communities in national planning, the project will facilitate ULSG’s advocacy in relation to the Draft Law on Inter-budgetary Dialogue. This will help improve the predictability of local revenues and promote a more transparent process of equalizing and stimulating fund allocations.

Under this output, VAP will place a strong emphasis to setting the expectations for a genuinely representative, inclusive, and responsive local budgetary process. Building on its existing gender-sensitive guidance for LSGs, additional measures will be taken to focus the national partners on consideration of the needs of all members of local community, including through the lens of gender-responsive budgeting.

In particular, VAP will integrate in its advocacy recommendations the insights from the gender-responsive budgeting approach, piloted by the UN Women and NDI in 2013-2015. Considering the limitations of current data collection by the LSGs in relation to gender-responsive budgeting, VAP will support a qualitative case study on inclusiveness and participation in local decision-making of all local residents, with particular attention to vulnerable, marginalized and effectively disenfranchised groups.

Additional reviews will be held to identify scope for methodological materials that further expand, clarify and operationalize the meaning of inclusive, gender-sensitive budgetary planning. Such clear guidance for engaging different groups of underrepresented and traditionally excluded citizens will be developed with both the urban, semi-urban and rural settings in mind.

In delivering the activities under this output, VAP will recognize that the task of improving legal and regulatory process is a continuous, and iterative process, which cannot be conclusively finalized within the Exit Phase framework. Still, these activities will support the actors in adopting such an approach that assigns importance to viewing it as a cycle of proactive, practical review of rules, their continued refining and most importantly, enforcement (feeding back to review).

***Output 2.2. National partners are enabled for enforcement of existing participatory budgeting requirements***

As of 2020, VAP assistance has helped evolve the legislative frameworks to an extent that all LSGs are expected to conduct public budgetary hearings (Chapters 16 and 24 of the 2016 Budget Code, describing the requirements for local councils and LSGs, and specifying the citizen budget and process for hearings). Majority of the LSGs have achieved compliance from 2019 onwards. In order to sustain this change at compliant LSGs and ensure the non-compliant LSGs (primarily in non-target regions) also conduct public budgetary hearings, VAP will provide support ULSG, SALSGIR and MF in achieving nationwide compliance. This concerted, strategic push during the Exit Phase time period for the participatory and transparent budgeting requirements will take shape of several interlinked activities.

Technical support will be provided to the Ministry of Finance, as the main actor of influence, owing to its budgetary functions, as well as the ULGS, and SALSGIR in promoting participatory budget processes at non-target municipalities with weak or missing participatory record. This support will help identify the key barriers for compliance and determine a case-by-case structure of incentives and engagement for each LSG.

As a tactical measure, reinforcing national prioritization of local budget transparency and accountability, in coordination with the SIPD project, VAP will advocate for inclusion of local budget hearings in the periodic reports of the Government to Parliament.

In parallel, under the auspices of the ULGS, the project will help organize a national competition “Citizen Participation in Budget Hearings”, which will provide additional opportunity to advocate for participatory budget hearings at specific LSGs (those with no or limited track record of budget hearings). As part of this limited initiative, VAP will also promote use and adoption of the online citizen budget model at non-target municipalities and specify a separate gender-responsive budgeting category for participating LSGs. This activity will be facilitated through the Portal of Best Practices. In addition, jointly with SALSGIR, in specific non-target municipalities, where citizen engagement may require additional support, the project will consider co-funding a limited number of Local Initiatives projects.

As an additional measure that supports the enforcement of existing frameworks, ahead of the Spring 2021 local elections, VAP plans to hold a Leadership School for young women intending to run in the elections for the seats in local councils. In addition to general personal development workshops in leadership, communications and networking, the School will provide foundational training in municipal governance, existing policy frameworks, local community and civic engagement, and participatory, gender-responsive budgeting. Participants will benefit from this opportunity even if they don’t get elected to local councils, as the experience will be structured to support activity within local women’s initiative groups or community mobilization and monitoring groups.

Implementing strategy

In delivering the Exit Phase intervention, the main intention of VAP is to provide a lasting contribution towards long-run sustainability and nationwide reach and replication of participatory budgetary process. This will be accomplished while ensuring strong continuity and coherence with the previous phases and building on the achieved results and lessons learned to date.

Based on lessons from the previous phases of activity, the Exit Phase will concentrate on determinants that support high rates of acceptance, adoption and improvement among the target audience of LSGs in relation to participatory, accountable and genuinely inclusive local budgetary process. Figure 5 provides an overview of such determinants under four main areas, all addressed in an interlinked manner during the Exit Phase.



Figure 5. Main determinants of success for nationwide replication of participatory budgeting.

The main level of operation will be at the macro (work with national-level partners) and meso (work with regional universities, regional units of central bodies), with limited micro, or LSG-level activities. There is no specific geographic targeting, unless suggested by the patterns of where the LSGs are showing most “resistance” to participatory budgeting due to a variety of factors.

One of the major contextual influences on implementing strategy in this planned phase will be the COVID-19 public health environment. The project team will monitor and follow established recommended practices that minimize the risks to all participants, partners and beneficiaries of the project, including, but not limited to digital and other alternative means of activity. From programmatic standpoint, the activities listed above will be examined in light of the COVID-19 impact, providing a flexible and adaptable model of intervention.

VAP will deploy a variety of programmatic approaches in implementing the intended outcomes, with the main types of activities including:

* Technical and operational assistance;
* Advisory support, mentoring and consultations;
* Legal analyses, reviews, and relevant subject matter expertise;
* Research and analytical support;
* Tailored capacity building activities for the staff of national partners;
* Support to in-house and public-facing events (roundtables, working group meetings);
* Facilitating advocacy, strategic communications and outreach activities.

The implementing strategy for this final phase deprioritizes programmatic activity in the “field”, or direct engagement of LSGs, in favor of effecting changes through institutional intermediaries, in a way that is highly targeted at enabling long-term continuity after the end of project. Each institution that VAP partners with and supports in this phase has a mandate to assist, oversee, guide and influence all or any of the LSGs in the Kyrgyz Republic.

## Institutional engagement approach

With regards to Output 1.1, designed to provide institutionalized access to best practices, knowledge/experience sharing and capacity building trainings by/among municipalities and local communities –the ideal long-term solution would have been to organize such institutionalization within the Union of LSGs. As the only voluntary union of LSGs in the country with established structure, history, functions and legitimacy, ULSG has outsized importance for any lasting LSG-oriented activity. Its mission is centered on representation and protection of the interests of LSG and supports the development and enhancement of local governance.

However, while ULSG has ensured its institutional stability, its institutional capacity, financial instability, limited membership reach among the LSGs and their participation have been a well-voiced concern, limiting VAP’s ability to anchor or integrate the project’s capacity-building tools and mechanisms at this organization. For this reason and considering the focused nature of the Exit Phase activities, the VAP approach to ensuring long-term continuity, access and availability of capacity-building resources for LSGs does not stress institutional development of ULSG as a direct beneficiary institution. Instead, the approach is to build a partnership-based capacity-building resource that aligns well with ULSG’s strategic priorities but remains implementable even in case of major challenges with ULSG’s institutional performance.

The current strategy of ULSG for the years 2020-2025 places an emphasis on representative, expert-analytical, educational and communication functions of the Union. The Portal of Best Practices and the *Municipality* magazine are fully in agreement with the latter three functions – providing a very strong incentive for ULSG to take a leading role in integrating, developing and maintaining these platforms.

Moreover, in early 2020, ULSG and DPI developed a strategy of cooperation, based on a detailed analysis of the strengths, weaknesses and complementarities of the two organizations. It spells out the vision of a Center for LSG Development, as a separate legal entity, co-founded by ULSG and DPI. Contingent on outcomes and lessons of the Exit Phase, this entity will serve as the main vehicle for project delivery, capacity building, communication and analytical and expert support of and on behalf of ULSG.

Development Policy Institute represents the third, non-government partner whose long term strategic and institutional motivation lies in the area of promoting local development and ensuring strong performance as a center of applied expertise, analysis, monitoring and evaluation. DPI is prepared to set up a full handover of both the Portal and the *Municipality* to ULSG or an affiliated separate legal entity once the organizational conditions and capacity are confirmed. This links well with DPI’s interest in ensuring organizational sustainability of the analytical and communicative resources developed under VAP.

Similarly, the partnership-based resource is aligned with the related mandate and interest of SALSGIR as a state policy and policy implementation actor. SALSGIR is directly responsible for providing support to LSGs of organizational, methodological and advisory nature, forming expert and working groups under its mandate. It also coordinates activities involving state, LSG, civil society, development partners and media. In the form envisioned by VAP for the Exit Phase, the Portal of Best Practices, along with the *Municipality* magazine provide SALSGIR with strong incentives to engage and provide institutional support.

This trilateral initial partnership will be open for accommodating additional participants, including the State Personnel Service, the Ministry of Finance, relevant departments at the Apparatus of Government and potentially, larger urban municipalities.

The Portal of Best Practices, leveraging the *Municipality* magazine has validated feasibility of achieving financial sustainability. Published monthly in Kyrgyz and Russian languages, with a current print run of 700 copies, Municipality is an established professional publication for the municipal sector. It has track record of over 100 issues and built a dedicated audience among the LSGs, state organizations, universities and civil society groups. In 2019, VAP conducted a market survey with responses from 170 subscribers. 93% of the respondents are interested in receiving the magazine on continued basis, 47% are prepared to pay for each issue. 67% value the print issue more than the electronic version. In the editorial team’s experience, there is significant sustained interest in placing advertisements aimed at the LSG audience.

VAP developed a detailed analysis of financial sustainability of the Portal and the Municipality publication, projecting a mix of revenue from subscriptions and individual sales of the magazine, advertisement revenue, partnerships and donations, allowing the resource to cover its costs in full within 5 years of potential spin-off, provided substantive assistance is provided within the first 1.5-3 year horizon.

With regards to Output 1.2. related to serving the qualification upgrade needs of LSGs at the regional level, SPS has a well-defined set of institutional responsibilities in the area of developing a highly professional municipal workforce. It also is expected to remain a committed partner, capable of and willing to consistently delivering the qualification upgrade activities.

The regional universities, all of which have faculties or departments of state and municipal service, and continue to prioritize developing their expertise, staff and resources in LSG-specific directions, also demonstrate strong institutional continuity. In facilitating their participation in SPS commissioned capacity building activity, with the goal of laying out a systemic and symbiotic relationship, the VAP project follows and builds on the core interests and motivations of each involved actor. This provides additional confidence in availability and quality of capacity-oriented services for the municipal sector after the project exit.

By end of the Exit Phase, VAP envisions a following institutionalized structure for the capacity building system supporting the LSGs and their primary representatives, municipal servants, local council deputies and interested local community stakeholders.

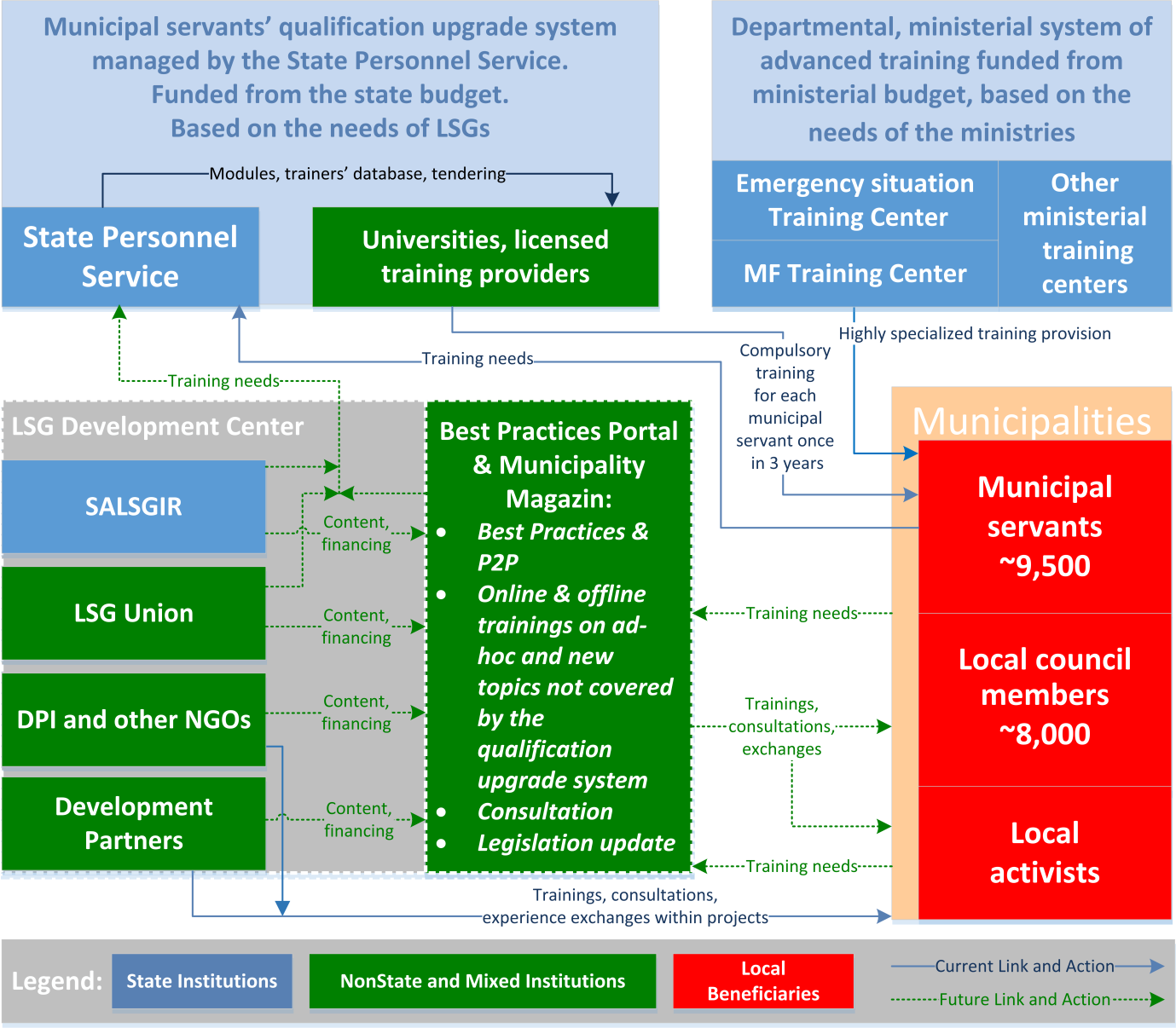


Figure 6. VAP vision for the capacity building system by 2022.

With regards to outputs 2.1 and 2.2, setting the new supporting frameworks and emphasizing enforcement of existing frameworks, the VAP project does not envision direct advocacy and regulatory development engagements, focusing instead on the main institutional actors. Here, VAP seeks to mobilize a strategic advocacy effort based on coordinated, complementary contributions of SALSGIR, ULSG, MF and other stakeholders. This effort capitalizes on existing institutional objectives of each partner.

ULSG is a primary conduit for participation of LSGs in developing the policy and legislative frameworks. Even though there have been missed opportunities in ULSG-led participation, it still remains an operational institution that can enable the LSG bodies to interact with the national government, take part in working groups developing relevant frameworks and contribute to policy initiatives from the Parliament and ministries. ULSG’s current strategy is particular about strengthening the organization’s role as a force that actively shapes and refines the municipal sector’s governing rules.

As a policy leader in the area of municipal governance, the role of SALSGIR is also essential, it has a clearly specified responsibility for sectoral policy development. It is the main entity assigned with the task of advancing the accountability of LSGs to local communities in relation to results of the LSG activities.

The Ministry of Finance has been a supportive and open partner in developing the regulatory and procedural base (albeit in soft terms of enforcement, with recommended mode of documents, as opposed to mandatory). The Ministry is responsible for efficient, transparent and equitable planning and expenditure of local budgets. It holds significant influence on LSGs as a body planning and allocating the national budget transfers to LSGs.

Together, the stakeholders mentioned above have substantial powers in effecting change in relation to achieving a nationwide compliance of LSG participatory budgeting.

## Strategic emphasis on inclusion, gender-responsiveness and conflict sensitivity

In planning and delivering each output in particular and the project impact in general, VAP will build on prior phase activities and ensure continuity, with sustained emphasis on inclusive, representative and participatory process, in relation to gender, ethnicity, social, economic status, with particular attention to disenfranchised, underrepresented, excluded groups.

Without a full-fledged gender analysis, VAP’s field experience and project learning suggests the need to strengthen the gender dimension across the Exit Phase programming. Locally, despite early signs of change, women are underrepresented at local councils and municipal servant pools. There has been highly publicised resistance in some cases to quotas for women members of local councils.

Women represent an increasingly more active part of the local community, taking part in budget hearings, local development planning and decision-making, but the models of token inclusion still prevail. Municipal servants and council deputies lack access to gender-responsive capacity building opportunities. Local budget decisions often fail to address gender inequality, and often tend to inadvertently deepen the cultural, economic and governance patterns that suppress women (e.g. in socio-cultural development planning, sports, elections management).

There is limited awareness of existing countrywide legal frameworks promoting gender equality, such as the National Gender Strategy on Achieving Gender Equality, the Law on State Guarantees Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Men and Women, and other related legislation and regulations. LSGs are also seen as actors that underperform in their contribution to prevention of domestic violence, bride kidnapping, underage marriage, and unequal property rights. Even though some improvements have been introduced, the main actors within the national system for municipal sector governance – ULSG, GAMSUMO, MF – have not yet acquired well-defined data collection, analysis and response functions, capacities and to a lesser extent, political will to act on these and other areas of weakness.

Considering these challenges, the VAP project envisions that following indicative activities will be undertaken:

* Throughout its work on the Portal of Best Practices, VAP will consolidate, define and disseminate a resource section devoted to gender-responsive budgeting, with a supporting communication campaign that engages the target audiences.
* In the direction of working on new legal and regulatory frameworks, VAP will conduct as one of the key pre-requisites a comprehensive gender expertise of all the documents developed and submitted under the project’s Outcome 2. VAP will also provide workshops on gender aspects of legislative development for the working group members engaged in legislative development.
* In collaboration with the SPS and interested regional universities, gender-informed and gender-sensitive review of the current curriculum and content provided to municipal servants under the SPS-led qualification upgrade system with recommendations;
* In its work with the Ministry of Finance, VAP will advocate for provision of more detailed, disaggregated data on the public hearings, achieving additional clarity on: 1) number and share of citizen recommendations received from women; 2) number and share of such recommendations that were considered and integrated in local budgets;
* The Leadership School for young women running in the local elections of Spring 2021 will further strengthen the gender-responsive dimensions of local governance.
* Within local engagements, VAP will explore partnerships with multiple existing movements that have not been engaged previously. One example is the organization of religious women leaders - Mutakalim, an emerging primarily rural women’s rights network with religious education roots. The network is strengthening its interest in local community participation and contribution to local decision-making, including through pooling of local resources. Such partnerships can build both the gender-responsive elements of local participatory budgeting and help mobilize new underrepresented groups with limited history of engagement by all stakeholders.

In relation to the Do No Harm approach, recognizing the volatile local and national contexts with potential for political, social and communal tension and violence, the project team has organized an internal project conversation aimed at explicit discussion and review of the “Do No Harm” framework and its applicability to the Exit Phase activities. In particular VAP has mapped the stakeholders and the envisioned context for the years from mid 2020 to early 2022, with clear identification of the core issues that hold the “divider” – tension-building; and “connector” – peace-promoting potential. VAP also outlined the gender-specific dimensions of the project within such contextual mapping. VAP examined the role and relationships of ULSG and other institutional actors; the needs of LSGs with latent conflicts and fragile local environments; as well as the resource transfers facilitated by and with assistance from the project.

The main objective conflict zone that needs to be considered is the competition for budget resources that takes place at the local level during allocation. Apart from the divisive potential, if no constructive culture of deliberation has evolved, there is an underlying gender dimension as well. For example, in VAP’s experience the consistently winning priorities are water and sanitation, waste management, transportation, often framed in business-oriented terms and with lesser attention to childcare, local social services supporting women and youth.

As presented in Figure 7 below, the divider issues include the recently introduced gender quote, seen as a point of tension; related patriarchal patterns and traditions of male and *aksakal* (male elderly leaders) dominance; the role of local informal religious leaders. Budget deficits within the COVID-19 conditions are likely to be become another source of tension, as are the potential challenges of institutional collaboration between the ULSG and SALSGIR, as observed in the past.

Connector issues and opportunities are related to the increasingly more prominent, stable and successful gender-responsive engagement models, coming from the civil society groups, women’s social and political leadership movements, religious leaders and their practical communicative approaches based on both secular and religious sources. System and institutional level connectors lie within the local governance institutions and surrounding core policy frameworks, as well as the constructive deputy-level leadership within ULSG and SALSGIR.

1. http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/111354 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/99692?cl=ru-ru [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The European Charter of Local Self-Government is a treaty adopted in 1985 under the Council of Europe. It sets basic rules and principles of local self-government and is open for non-EU states. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/122#:~:text=The%20Charter%20commits%20the%20Parties,where%20practicable%2C%20in%20the%20constitution.> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)