

Improving the Competencies of Municipal Employees: The Case of Armenia

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This article examines the challenges and prospects for improving the competencies of municipal employees in the Republic of Armenia, against the backdrop of administrative-territorial reforms and the need for a more effective local governance system. This study utilises both statistical analysis and qualitative assessments to evaluate the competencies of municipal employees in the Republic of Armenia. Expert interviews and content analysis were used to develop a comprehensive competency matrix for municipal employees. The study advocates a multi-level approach to reform, emphasising the importance of continuous training, implementing a competency matrix, and adopting client-oriented local governance. It also highlights the critical role of gender equality and the potential benefits of international cooperation in addressing these challenges. The findings suggest that improving the competencies of municipal staff is central to advancing local governance in Armenia and offer insights that may be relevant to similar reform initiatives in other contexts.¹

Keywords: local government, management, communities, advanced training, certification, municipal service

1. Introduction

In the modern world, municipal employees play a crucial role in the development of the local economy and the improvement of the quality of local services, and therefore the level of their education and qualification has a decisive impact on the development of national states – including the Republic of Armenia. According to the official administrative-territorial division of Armenia, the country is divided into ten provinces (known as *marzes* in Armenian) and the Yerevan municipality, which holds a special administrative status. Each *marz* is governed by a governor (*marzpet*), appointed by the government of Armenia, while Yerevan is headed by an elected mayor. Local self-government in Armenia operates at the municipal level, where all 1,002 settlements are organised into 78 enlarged

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municipalities, each responsible for governing one or more towns and villages. The municipalities operate within the framework of local self-government, which includes both administrative and fiscal autonomy under Armenian law. These municipalities are tasked with addressing the specific needs of their communities while adhering to national legislative frameworks, ensuring improved service delivery and administrative efficiency.

Given the growing demand for enhanced competencies among municipal employees, this study also examines Armenia's integration into the pan-European system of local and regional authorities. Participation in initiatives such as the European Assembly of Local and Regional Elected Representatives and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (CLRA) provides Armenian municipal employees with access to best practices, training programmes, and policy frameworks that promote professional growth and align local governance with international standards. Such exposure is instrumental in addressing competency gaps and improving governance quality at the municipal level.

This study seeks to address the following question: How might the professional competencies of municipal employees in Armenia be enhanced to ensure more effective local governance, particularly in the context of ongoing administrative-territorial reforms? In answering this question, the study aims to identify the key factors influencing the professional development of municipal employees and to propose solutions for enhancing their qualifications.

The works of Martirosyan (2022), Zohrabyan and Asryan (2019), Karapetyan and colleagues (2023) and Gasparyan (2023) were considered for their relevance to Armenia. These authors focused on governance models, the dual roles of municipal employees, and factors influencing public satisfaction in Armenia. To ensure thematic coherence, the study prioritises Armenian scholars addressing local challenges, as their insights are most relevant for improving municipal governance in the Republic of Armenia.

2. Literature Review

The professional development and competencies of municipal employees have attracted considerable attention in academic literature, as these factors are critical to the efficiency and effectiveness of local governance structures. Municipal employees serve as the primary executors of local policies and the intermediaries between government authorities and the public; thus, their competencies, education, and ongoing professional de-

velopment are fundamental to the successful implementation of governance strategies. This section will undertake a review of relevant studies on the competencies of municipal employees, with a particular emphasis on their roles in citizen-oriented governance, capacity-building initiatives, and the challenges they face in Armenia and beyond.

Martirosyan (2022) introduced a customer-oriented governance model, highlighting the pivotal role of municipal employees in adapting services to meet citizens' needs. The study emphasised that municipal governance must integrate citizen feedback to ensure greater transparency and responsiveness. This approach demands that municipal employees develop competencies in public engagement, data analysis, and the application of feedback mechanisms to refine service delivery. Martirosyan's work underscores the growing importance of soft skills, such as communication and interpersonal abilities, which are essential for fostering trust and co-operation between citizens and local governments.

In a similar vein, Zohrabyan and Asryan's (2019) study explored the dual responsibilities of municipal employees, namely the maintenance of administrative stability alongside the promotion of continuous improvement. Their study emphasised the need for employees to balance operational efficiency with innovative capacity to address emerging challenges. This dualistic role necessitates a combination of strategic thinking, problem-solving skills, and adaptability – competencies that are increasingly valued in modern municipal governance.

The incorporation of Armenia into international governance frameworks has engendered novel opportunities to address competency gaps among municipal employees. The CLRA has pioneered initiatives such as "Strengthening the Association of Communities in Armenia". These projects include training programmes and consultation mechanisms that aim to align local governance practices with international standards. The outcomes of these initiatives underscore the importance of fostering global competencies among municipal employees, such as intercultural communication, understanding international policy frameworks, and adopting best practices from other governance systems.

In their study, Karapetyan and colleagues (2023) examined the competencies required of municipal leaders in Armenia, focusing particularly on expertise in taxation and regional development. The study identified specialised knowledge in fiscal management, legal frameworks, and regional socio-economic dynamics as crucial for effective municipal leadership. The authors further emphasised the significance of customised capaci-

ty-building programmes in addressing these competencies. The study emphasises the necessity of developing competencies that are aligned with the specific challenges faced by municipalities in Armenia, advocating for a tailored approach to capacity-building.

Recent scholarship has identified communication skills as a critical competency for municipal employees. Gasparyan (2023) evaluated the impact of local legislative reforms on public satisfaction, finding that insufficient communication and a lack of visible benefits negatively affected citizens' perceptions of governance. This research underscores the importance of equipping municipal employees with the ability to clearly articulate the objectives, processes, and outcomes of governance initiatives. Effective communication fosters transparency and builds public trust, both of which are essential for the successful implementation of reforms. Furthermore, Gasparyan's findings imply that the lack of these competencies can potentially result in diminished citizen engagement and satisfaction.

The present study aims to address these gaps by proposing a comprehensive competency matrix tailored to the Armenian municipal context. This matrix will identify core and specialised competencies required for municipal employees and provide actionable strategies for continuous professional development. The study places particular emphasis on fostering digital literacy, enhancing problem-solving abilities, and promoting adaptive leadership skills. By addressing these areas, the study seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on municipal governance and provide practical solutions for improving employee competencies in Armenia and similar contexts.

The conclusion of this study is that a robust framework of competencies is required from municipal employees carrying out multifaceted roles and responsibilities, as highlighted by the reviewed literature. While significant progress has been made in identifying key competency areas and implementing capacity-building initiatives, gaps persist in addressing specific professional development needs and adapting to emerging challenges. The findings of this review emphasise the importance of targeted interventions that align with local governance objectives and international standards, ultimately contributing to a more effective and citizen-centric municipal governance.

3. Materials and Methods

This study employed descriptive statistics, regression analysis, and comparison analysis to assess the major performance indicators across all

municipalities in Armenia. The studied data comprised longitudinal data from prior years and cross-sectional data from the latest available reports. Descriptive statistics enabled a comprehensive overview of data trends and patterns, while comparison analysis was utilised to evaluate Armenia's municipal performance against that of EU countries, establishing a contextual baseline for governance standards.

3.1. Statistical Approach

Descriptive statistics were predominantly employed to encapsulate data concerning employee engagement, educational qualifications, and training certificates throughout diverse locations in Armenia. This method enabled the study to ascertain central tendencies (mean, median) and variability (standard deviation) in the data, providing insights into the overall distribution of key performance indicators (e.g., number of certified employees, advanced training participation, and educational qualifications of municipal leaders).

Furthermore, regression analysis was employed to investigate the correlations between particular factors and municipal performance results. The study employed regression models to examine the impact of education level (independent variable) on the number of vacancies filled or the efficacy of municipal governance (dependent variable). Regression analysis was executed utilising SPSS version 26, guaranteeing the precision and transparency of the statistical tests. The independent variables comprised the educational qualifications of municipal officials, the number of employees who received training, and the gender distribution within leadership positions. The dependent variables encompassed governance efficiency metrics, including the quantity of filled vacancies and the efficacy of local government in service provision. The findings of the regression analysis indicated the impact of education and training on governance efficiency.

Comparative research was conducted to evaluate Armenia's municipal governance performance relative to those of EU countries. This investigation concentrated on metrics including government transparency, personnel qualification levels, and the accessibility of training programs. The study utilised benchmarks from worldwide standards to elucidate Armenia's standing in comparison to its EU counterparts.

3.2. Data Sources

Information regarding municipal employee activities was sourced from official government reports and internal municipal documentation, encompassing employee certification records, training programmes, and recruitment data. These data sources facilitated a thorough assessment of the professional development of municipal employees, their educational credentials, and the execution of governance reforms.

The competence matrix was developed via the criteria list technique, incorporating a synthesis of theoretical frameworks, expert interviews, and previous research in public administration. The matrix classified competencies into basic, functional, and specialised categories, encompassing a spectrum of talents from general knowledge to specific jobs in municipal governance. The matrix was enhanced via interviews with municipal employees, trainers, and specialists, guaranteeing the incorporation of competencies that represent both theoretical and practical requirements in local governance. The data collection approach was enhanced by qualitative methods, such as interviews with municipal officials and experts, which yielded useful insights into the practical implementation of the competence matrix and the efficacy of existing training programmes.

The research examined the effects of Armenia's integration into international governance frameworks, specifically analysing the European Assembly of Local and Regional Elected Representatives and the CLRA. These international frameworks established a foundation for examining the impact of international collaboration on improving the capabilities of municipal employees, facilitating access to training programs, knowledge-sharing platforms, and best practices that conform to European governance requirements.

4. Results

The activity of local self-government bodies is aimed at solving public problems of a local nature, which, as a rule, cannot be solved by national structures due to local specifics and the inefficiency of using global resources for such private cases. Accordingly, the success of municipal bodies is conditioned by optimising their structures and hiring staff with not only appropriate professional qualifications, but also an understanding of local conditions and traditions. This understanding is critical for developing tailored solutions that meet municipality needs.

In this context, transparent and efficient mechanisms for staff recruitment are essential. Equally important is an ongoing training system to ensure the professional growth and advancement of the most talented employees. Annual assessments of key indicators are conducted to understand the dynamics of the municipal governance system's development. One pivotal indicator is the number of positions within the staffing table, which provides insights into the resources allocated to local governance.

To illustrate this, annual assessments of key performance indicators were conducted. One of the most pivotal indicators is the number of positions represented in the staffing tables of local governments. As evidenced in Table 1, the data indicates that in the wake of the 2021 administrative-territorial reform, the newly constituted municipalities had a considerable number of municipal servants, accounting for over half of the total positions within local administrations. This prevalence indicates a potential overreliance on these roles to address local governance issues, which may impact efficiency and responsiveness to municipality needs.

Table 1: *Number of full-time municipal positions by regions of the Republic of Armenia*

Region	Number of political positions		Number of municipal employees		Number of technical staff		Number of employees under a civil contract		Total	
	Plan	Fact	Plan	Fact	Plan	Fact	Plan	Fact	Plan	Fact
Aragatsotn	161	128	396	356	343	321	-	-	900	805
Ararat	136	129	313	313	205	213	96	96	750	751
Armavir	217	204	632	546	370	324	750	732	1,969	1,806
Vayots Dzor	63	59	137	129	143	131	12	11	355	330
Gegharkunik	170	167	377	354	262	253	54	54	863	828
Kotayk	92	84	347	326	134	125	33	25	606	560
Lori	164	147	507	431	226	206	41	40	938	824
Syunik	119	104	306	289	154	145	17	20	596	558
Tavush	103	101	282	258	159	144	8	14	552	517

Shirak	177	169	466	420	272	234	22	25	937	848
Total	1,402	1,292	3,763	3,422	2,267	2,096	1,033	1,017	8,465	7,827
Yerevan	60	44	1,550	1,520	383	380	-	-	1,993	1,944
Total	1,462	1,336	5,313	4,942	2,650	2,476	1,033	1,017	10,458	9,771

Source: Authors, based on Statistical Committee Republic of Armenia (2022).

Table 1 illustrates the distribution of full-time municipal positions across the various regions of Armenia. One of the most notable observations is the significant discrepancy between the planned and actual numbers in both political and municipal employee positions, e.g. the planned number of municipal employees in Armavir was 632, yet only 546 positions were filled, indicating a discrepancy of 13.6%. This discrepancy may indicate difficulties in the recruitment or retention of municipal employees, potentially due to an absence of adequate incentives or local infrastructure issues. Furthermore, the region of Yerevan is notable for having the highest number of full-time municipal employees (1,520), which is reflective of its central administrative role. This stands in stark contrast to the situation in smaller regions, such as Vayots Dzor, where only 129 municipal employees are recorded, highlighting the difficulties faced by smaller municipalities in terms of governance capacity and the availability of qualified personnel.

According to current legislation, there are no educational or professional restrictions when nominating candidates for local government bodies, and the same person can be nominated and elected an unlimited number of times. Even though Armenian legislation does not impose restrictions regarding the level of education of candidates for municipal bodies, the vast majority of municipality heads in Armenia have higher education. The process of municipality unification has positively influenced this metric; as of early 2022, 77 out of 93 municipality heads had graduated from a higher educational institution, surpassing 80%. Conversely, eight heads hold secondary vocational education, and seven have only secondary education.

Higher education institutions are universities or colleges that offer undergraduate (bachelor's) and postgraduate (master's, doctoral) degrees. These institutions provide advanced academic and professional training required for leadership roles in local government. In addition, eight local government leaders have secondary vocational education, which is a form of schooling that focuses on practical skills and vocational training.

This type of education is usually taken after primary education and prepares individuals for specific technical or craft jobs, making it a useful qualification for operational roles within local government. In addition, seven municipality leaders have secondary education, which refers to the schooling that follows primary education and precedes higher education or vocational training, and usually includes middle and high school levels. With regard to educational qualifications, Table 2 demonstrates that a considerable majority of municipal leaders have obtained higher education degrees.

Table 2: *Educational level of municipal leaders of the Republic of Armenia*

Region	Number of communities	Education of the head of the municipality		
		Higher	Secondary professional	Average
Aragatsotn	9	5	1	3
Ararat	5	5	-	-
Armavir	8	8	-	-
Vayots Dzor	5	5	-	-
Gegharkunik	20	14	4	2
Kotayk	11	11	-	-
Lori	16	12	2	1
Syunik	8	8	-	-
Tavush	4	3	1	-
Shirak	6	5	-	1
Yerevan	1	1	-	-
Total	93	77	8	7

Source: Authors, based on Statistical Committee Republic of Armenia (2022).

Table 2 offers an intriguing perspective on the educational background of municipal leaders in Armenia. The majority of leaders (82.8%) have obtained higher education degrees, which is indicative of the high level of qualification among those occupying leadership roles in the majority of communities. It is also noteworthy that a considerable number of municipal leaders possess only secondary education, particularly in regions such as Aragatsotn, where only three leaders have completed secondary

education. This discrepancy in level of education may have an impact on decision-making processes and the quality of governance at the municipal level. Those with lower levels of education may lack the capacity to effectively navigate the complexities of modern municipal management. The absence of higher education among municipal leaders may impede the implementation of advanced governance reforms and technologies designed to enhance local governance.

The elective nature of many leadership positions negatively impacts the motivation for advanced training, as the selection of such leaders is often subjective. A centralised appointment process for municipal heads could incentivise improvements in candidate competencies. Alongside educational qualifications, another essential aspect of municipal governance is the adherence to gender equality in leadership positions. According to Table 3, only four out of 92 communities (excluding Yerevan) had women mayors, and out of 188 deputy heads of communities, only 13 positions were entrusted to women, i.e. only about 7%. On the contrary, the gender distribution of the position of public secretaries – 91 women and 87 men – is relatively proportional, and the functions of ordinary municipal employees are performed by women in 59% of cases.

Table 3: Gender distribution of positions at different levels of municipal employees in the Republic of Armenia

Region	Mayors		Deputy mayors		Members of the public council		Staff secretaries		Public servants	
	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M	W	M
Aragatsotn	-	9	6	43	14	99	28	28	189	167
Ararat	1	4	-	9	38	81	1	4	222	147
Armavir	1	7	1	14	88	612	3	4	330	211
Vayots Dzor	-	5	-	10	17	53	4	4	69	55
Gegharkunik	1	19	1	23	28	96	3	17	141	203
Kotayk	-	11	-	11	44	130	6	5	216	105
Lori	-	15	3	11	49	168	16	3	285	134
Syunik	-	8	-	13	34	87	6	3	215	118
Tavush	-	4	-	4	17	59	3	1	90	60

Shirak	1	5	2	37	36	89	21	18	220	161
Total	4	87	13	175	365	1,474	91	87	1,977	1,361

Note: W – women; M – men.

Source: Authors, based on Statistical Committee Republic of Armenia (2022).

The data from Table 3 suggests the necessity for targeted interventions to advance gender equality in local governance. The representation of women in leadership roles must be increased to foster a more inclusive decision-making environment that reflects the diverse needs of the population. The gender ratio in the leadership of municipal employees necessitates public intervention to ensure the respect of women's rights during the selection of leadership positions in the *marzes*.

The gender ratio in the leadership of municipal employees is of concern and requires public intervention so that women's rights are respected in the selection of leadership in the *marzes*. The situation is more progressive in the capital – more than half of the employees of the Yerevan City Hall, about 53.6%, are women. At the same time, the gender structure of members of the Yerevan Community Council is far from balanced – the number of men exceeds the number of women almost twice. As for mandatory qualification control, according to current legislation, the certification of municipal employees is carried out once every three years. In 2021, 876 public servants were certified, and local governments announced 499 competitions to fill relevant vacant positions. According to the data in Table 4, 388 (78%) of the announced competitions were recognised as valid, which is a high figure.

Table 4: *Number of certified municipal employees and number of announced and held competitions for vacant positions*

Region	Number of certified employees	Number of announced competitions to fill vacancies	Number of competitions held to fill a vacancy
Yerevan	206	46	40
Aragatsotn	107	36	34
Ararat	106	12	12
Armavir	89	59	46
Vayots Dzor	58	52	48
Gegharkunik	65	52	34

Kotayk	66	11	9
Lori	24	104	48
Syunik	40	14	14
Tavush	0	41	41
Shirak	115	72	62
Total	876	499	388

Source: Authors, based on Statistical Committee Republic of Armenia (2022).

Table 4 illustrates the number of certified municipal employees and the frequency of competitions held for filling vacant positions across different regions. A high share (78%) of announced competitions for vacant positions were successfully filled, suggesting that the competition system is functioning relatively well. However, the variation between regions is noteworthy; the number of certified employees in Yerevan (206) is far higher than in smaller regions like Tavush (0), indicating potential disparities in access to certification and training opportunities. This disparity could affect the overall quality of municipal services, particularly in regions with fewer certified employees. The high number of competitions in regions like Lori may indicate higher turnover or vacancy rates, which could disrupt the stability and continuity of local governance.

In general, vacancies in the municipal service are filled in the format of a competition, which is based on the idea of attracting more qualified, educated and professional personnel. However, this mechanism works relatively effectively only in densely populated areas, while contests organised in small towns and settlements are formal. The existing personnel reserve for municipal administration, designed to fill temporary vacancies, does not fully serve its purpose, and issues related to staffing local administrative bodies with individuals possessing the necessary communication and professional skills persist.

Moreover, due to the uneven distribution of the budget between *marzes*, some modern projects, such as the Smart City digital strategy, are implemented only in the capital (and not at a fast rate), while the digital infrastructure is often absent in other municipalities. In addition to the mandatory qualification exam, every municipal employee in Armenia must undergo mandatory training at least once every three years. Training may also be initiated by the employee himself or by the head of the municipality, if there are changes in the functional duties or requirements to the rights and duties set out in the job description of the position.

The procedure for training programmes for municipal employees, including issues related to direct functions, powers and management skills, are approved by the state body in the sphere of local self-government, and the training itself is carried out by organisations selected on a competitive basis. In 2021, training for municipal servants was conducted by the “Master Style” training centre, and training for heads of local self-government bodies was conducted by the Academy of Public Administration of Armenia. A total of 1,589 local government employees were trained in 2021, including 148 from the staff of Yerevan Municipality and its administrative subdivisions. Notably, the number of public servants trained in the *marzes* increased almost ninefold compared to the previous year, likely due to the easing of COVID-19 restrictions (Table 5).

Table 5: *Dynamics of the number of trained municipal employees by year*

Region	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Aragatsotn	39	-	9	100	154	139
Ararat	60	41	-	120	9	140
Armavir	120	24	-	140	-	200
Vayots Dzor	20	-	14	17	-	72
Gegharkunik	40	25	11	100	-	140
Kotayk	20	65	24	79	-	195
Lori	80	60	24	99	3	157
Syunik	19	-	25	3	-	145
Tavush	37	-	25	40	-	123
Shirak	60	63	16	80	-	130
Total	495	278	148	778	166	1,441
Yerevan	198	561	309	286	454	148
Total	693	839	457	1,064	620	1,589

Source: Authors, based on Labour Market in Armenia (2022).

Table 5 demonstrates a significant increase in the number of trained municipal employees from 2016 to 2021, with a notable spike in 2021 following the relaxation of COVID-19 restrictions. This trend suggests that the Armenian government is proactively seeking to enhance the skills

and knowledge of its municipal employees, particularly in response to the challenges posed by the pandemic. However, the distribution of training opportunities across regions remains uneven, with areas such as Armavir and Kotayk exhibiting significant growth, while regions such as Syunik and Tavush demonstrate relatively modest increases. All regions must have equitable access to training to enhance the overall competence of municipal employees and ensure the standardisation of the quality of services provided by local governments.

Despite large-scale efforts to improve the training process since the introduction of the system of advanced training for municipal employees, it should be noted that the current training programme still has many gaps. Another disadvantage of the training system is the discrepancy between the content of certain educational programmes and the real need for advanced training of personnel. As a rule, the final results and objectives of the training programme are not determined in advance, i.e., the knowledge, skills, and abilities that participants will acquire at the end of the programme are not clearly defined. The issue of the relevance of the content of training materials also remains problematic, as a result of which there are repeated cases when the same municipal employee attends courses on the same educational programme in different years. In addition, it should be noted that regular meetings to exchange experiences with colleagues from other municipalities, which must be held regularly in the format of joint internships in the workplace, play a big role in increasing the qualifications and raising the level of education of employees (Spren, Afonso & Gerrish, 2020).

For a more efficient assessment of the municipal servant's competence and the need to improve his/her qualification, a competence matrix consisting of three levels – basic, functional, and special – was developed within the framework of the present work. The skills of functional competence were decided to include:

- the ability to communicate effectively with visitors, petitioning citizens and customers' requests in the form of telephone conversation, email and messenger communication, as well as in person;
- carrying out explanatory work among the residents of the municipality.

Special competence implies the compliance of the employee with such qualities as:

- knowledge and observance of the local conjuncture, traditions, and customs;

- exemplary behaviour in dealing with elders and opinion leaders;
- proficiency in financial paperwork and an impeccable credit history;
- ability to prepare documentation for the organisation of public events, coordinate with all competent services, and sign the necessary contracts with contractors;
- performing extracurricular activities to popularise civic ideas and values;
- creating and communicating service instructions to subordinates and colleagues.

Thus, in order to promptly determine the employee's competence level, it is proposed to assess his/her compliance with the following duties and requirements (Figure 1).

Figure 1: *Competency matrix of a municipal employee*

Basic level	• Compliance with the norms of official behavior based on the norms of the Constitution of the Republic of Armenia, legislative acts of marz, job description, common business etiquette and traditions of the Armenian people. • Préparation of primary documents according to the existing service regulations and in accordance with the established requirements, applying skills of using modern office equipment and application programs. • Maintaining the System of electronic document management and record keeping in accordance with the approved nomenclature.	Functional level	• Conducting effective communications with coworkers and citizens using messengers, office email and verbal communication. • Conducting outreach to the public about the department's activities, resolving communication problems. • Reviewing oral and written appeals, formally responding to them within legal deadlines.	Special level	• Knowledge of and compliance with local conditions, peculiarities of relations between local residents, traditions and customs. • Drawing up financial reports and other documents, controlling the flow of funds and the justification of their use. • Organization of cultural and mass events, conclusion of contracts with contractors and tenants, obtaining necessary permits. • Development of job descriptions for colleagues and subordinates. • Organization of informal communication after hours with the residents of the municipality in order to better understand the problems and expectations of fellow countrymen, establishing communication with local opinion leaders and elders.
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Source: Authors.

Key findings include significant gaps in functional competencies, such as citizen interaction and resource management, and special competencies like drawing up financial documentation and public event coordination. Addressing these gaps through targeted training aligned with the competency matrix will enhance the efficiency and responsiveness of municipal governance.

Armenia's relations with Western countries deserve special attention, which, through a number of targeted programmes, help to improve the qualification level of municipal staff. Thus, for the purpose of monitoring and evaluation of the local self-governance system, the USAID-funded CELoG programme developed a project in 2017 on "Annual Assessment of Local Self-Governance Reforms and Index Calculation Methodology" adjusted the specifics of Armenia (Markwart, 2022). Another example is the Open Government Partnership (OGP), where two Armenian communities were selected to join a global group of reformers – Vanadzor and Gyumri. By maintaining an ongoing link between local authorities and civic organisations, OGP Local promotes innovations that make local governments more open, accountable and responsive to citizens (Pazylov et al., 2023).

The quest for improved local self-governance in Armenia is further supported by the CLRA through the project "Strengthening the Association of Communities in Armenia", which is funded by the Swiss Government. The objective of this project is to facilitate the development of democratic processes at the local level through the establishment of effective consultation mechanisms between the government and Armenian municipalities. Furthermore, the project aims to foster greater public confidence in local authorities through enhanced transparency in the reporting practices of local self-government. Nevertheless, the level of public involvement in these processes remains relatively low.

In 2022, a new online tool, bE-Open, was launched with the objective of supporting local and regional governance actors in improving the quality of local democracy. This portal offers practical guidance on public ethics and provides immediate and convenient access to a comprehensive database of pertinent international standards, domestic legislation, and exemplary practices from municipal authorities in Armenia, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine. By forging alliances with nations that espouse democratic principles, Armenia can confront the challenge of uneven regional development by establishing specialised clusters, including those focused on tourism and agriculture (Zolotukhin, 2018).

Furthermore, as part of the municipal coaching and benchmarking programmes, the development of a unified rating system for municipalities and their employees is of paramount importance. It is imperative to acknowledge that alterations in development programmes should not necessarily result in a reduction in municipal personnel. The dismissal of employees represents a significant loss of the time and resources invested in their training. In the context of regional restructuring, the implementation of retraining initiatives for personnel can facilitate the preservation of earlier investments in human capital.

The study's conclusions indicate substantial issues in the municipal governance system of the Republic of Armenia, especially with staffing, qualification levels, gender balance, and access to professional training. Statistical analysis revealed significant discrepancies between the projected and actual staffing levels across regions, highlighting challenges in attracting and retaining personnel – particularly in less desirable areas – due to insufficient incentives, infrastructural limitations, or the low prestige associated with public service. Regression research revealed that more than 80% of municipal leaders possess higher education degrees, which favourably corresponds with the results of the administrative-territorial reform. Nonetheless, significant inequalities persist in staff readiness across regions, with certain municipalities appointing individuals possessing only secondary education. A comparative analysis revealed that the number of trained public servants in 2021 nearly tripled relative to 2020.

However, access to training programmes remains inequitable, with notably low participation rates in the *marzes* of Syunik and Tavush – potentially compromising governance efficacy in those regions. A competency matrix for municipal employees was created using the criteria list method and expert interviews, incorporating basic, functional, and specialised levels, and addressing essential skills such as effective communication, public engagement, document management, compliance with local customs, and organisation of public events. This matrix facilitated the identification of current competency gaps and the formulation of specific recommendations for enhancing the staff training and retraining system. A case analysis of Armenia's involvement in international projects, including OGP and CELoG, revealed that international collaboration facilitates the adoption of open governance standards and improves the qualifications of local officials. The utilisation of a comprehensive methodological framework – comprising quantitative analysis through SPSS, qualitative expert evaluations, legal framework examination, and case studies of international practices – facilitated the development of a representative and thorough

understanding of the current state of municipal governance in Armenia, thereby identifying practical avenues for enhancement.

5. Discussion

The findings of the research study indicate that municipal employees in the Republic of Armenia exhibit clear deficiencies in a number of key competencies, particularly in the areas of professional development, gender balance, and regional disparities in governance. These findings directly address the research question posed at the outset of this study, namely how the competencies of municipal employees might be enhanced in order to ensure more effective local governance.

The analysis reveals significant discrepancies between planned and actual staffing levels in Armenian municipalities. For example, in Armavir, there is a 13.6% deficit in filled municipal positions compared to the planned figures. This discrepancy may be indicative of recruitment or retention issues, potentially driven by inadequate training opportunities or incentives. These findings resonate with the conclusions of Maksat and colleagues (2024), who emphasise the significance of decentralisation strategies adapted from European countries such as Denmark and Germany. Their analysis highlights the role of municipal associations and citizen engagement initiatives, such as Finland's Internet portal for civil initiatives, in improving governance efficiency. Adapting similar governance strategies in Armenia could address challenges related to staffing and resource allocation in smaller municipalities.

Public engagement and training are critical to enhancing governance effectiveness. In a related context, Halili and Berisha (2023) underscore the necessity of fostering a culture of genuine engagement within public institutions. Their study on public consultations in Kosovo suggests that targeted training in municipal management can significantly improve the responsiveness of local governance. Similarly, integrating targeted training programs for Armenian municipal employees could bolster their ability to address citizen needs effectively, particularly in regions with historically low engagement rates.

With regard to educational qualifications, a significant majority (82.8%) of municipal leaders have attained higher education degrees. However, in regions such as Aragatsotn, there are leaders who have only completed secondary education, which may impede their capacity to implement

complex governance reforms. This underscores the necessity of prioritising access to advanced education for municipal leaders, as supported by the findings of Mariana (2020). Mariana's study on local government employees found a direct correlation between higher educational attainment, increased motivation, and enhanced work performance. These insights suggest that emphasising professional development and educational opportunities could significantly improve governance effectiveness in Armenia, particularly in underserved regions. Cibák, Kollár and Filip (2021) found that graduates from institutions accredited under programmes like Erasmus+ have better employment prospects in municipal employees. This suggests that focusing on advanced education for municipal employees, possibly through partnerships with internationally accredited institutions, could significantly improve local governance outcomes.

Gender disparities in municipal leadership roles are another pressing issue. Only four out of 92 municipalities are led by women, and just 7% of deputy mayors are female. This stark imbalance reflects broader global trends of underrepresentation of women, and highlights the importance of targeted interventions, such as leadership training programmes tailored for women or the introduction of inclusive policies to promote gender equality in governance. This imbalance is noted in the study by Bishu and Heckler (2021). The authors show that gender stereotypes frequently impede women's authority in domains traditionally dominated by men, such as municipal governance. However, this study makes a contribution in that it provides region-specific data which can inform the implementation of targeted interventions, such as the introduction of gender quotas or the design of leadership training programmes which are specifically tailored to the needs of women in public administration. Despite criticism of gender quotas from researchers such as Otero-Hermida and Lorenzo (2020) and Spaziani (2022), Armenia may benefit from tailored programmes that focus not only on increasing the number of women in leadership roles, but also on fostering an inclusive governance culture that values diverse perspectives.

Training opportunities for municipal employees show promising trends, with a notable increase in participation in 2021 following the easing of COVID-19 restrictions. However, there are significant regional disparities in access to training programmes, as evidenced by lower participation rates in regions like Syunik and Tavush. This unequal distribution highlights the need for more equitable access to training opportunities, as regions with fewer trained personnel may face reduced governance effectiveness. This finding is supported by Rodrigues and Franco (2021),

who demonstrated that the level of digital skills among municipal staff is inversely related to regional depopulation trends in Portugal. This insight suggests that enhancing access to professional development in underrepresented regions could help mitigate similar trends of internal migration in Armenia.

In terms of digital competencies, the findings underscore the necessity of equipping municipal employees with the requisite skills to effectively navigate contemporary governance challenges. The competency matrix incorporates digital literacy as a pivotal element, aligning with the conclusions of Jonsson and colleagues (2022) and Dingelstad, Borst and Meijer (2022). These scholars emphasise the necessity for municipal employees to possess data literacy, teamwork skills, and critical thinking abilities to make well-informed decisions in a data-driven governance environment. As municipal services become increasingly reliant on digital platforms, the capacity of staff to engage with these technologies is of paramount importance for enhancing service delivery and responsiveness to citizen needs. It is therefore recommended that digital training programmes, targeted at specific skill sets, should be given priority status within the broader competency framework. Also, the competency matrix developed in this study aligns with the conclusions of Schenk and Dolata (2020). These scholars advocate for practice-oriented curricula in public administration education to equip municipal employees with the skills needed for digital transformation. Their findings are particularly relevant in the context of ongoing administrative-territorial reforms in Armenia, where a digitally proficient workforce is essential for successful e-governance initiatives. Expanding digital training programmes and integrating them into the competency framework could enhance service delivery and responsiveness to citizen needs.

This study offers valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with enhancing the competencies of municipal employees in Armenia. The findings underscore the significance of education, gender equality, and digital proficiency in fostering effective local governance. The implementation of the competency matrix, coupled with the addressing of the disparities identified in this study, would enable Armenia to enhance the quality of its municipal services and foster a more inclusive and responsive governance system. The results also have broader implications for other countries undergoing similar governance reforms, particularly in the areas of municipal capacity building.

6. Conclusions

Modern municipal employees must have computer and office equipment and smartphone skills, be able to communicate effectively with colleagues and residents through messengers and social networks and be able to deliver key messages both in person and through the media. By investing in the training and development of municipal employees, local communities can provide themselves with the human capital needed to succeed in the 21st century. Quality planning and continuous development, infrastructure management, public safety, and social services – this is not a complete list of qualifications and competencies of municipal employees that can influence the development of the local economy and the quality of life in the municipality. At the same time, it should be noted that the unjustified administrative-territorial division of the Republic of Armenia and the current one-tier model of local self-government have led to uneven regional development and the need for new reforms in the sphere of municipal development.

Special attention should be paid to the principle of preserving investments in work with local self-government employees, according to which dismissal of an employee in whose training time and funds have already been invested is a measure of last resort. If the qualifications of such an employee do not match the position he or she holds, additional training should be provided to preserve human capital in the structure of the municipality. In general, in the sphere of municipal coaching in Armenia, it is necessary to create a unified rating system for municipal servants, identifying leaders who will then be able to engage in training and retraining. Also, with the help of marketing activities, it is possible to position each municipality as, e.g., a production, health, or tourism centre of the district, thus initiating the development of the cluster theory of regional development in Armenia. Analysing such regional peculiarities and advantages of each Armenian territory could be the subject of the next research paper.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study, which should be addressed in future research. Firstly, the analysis did not fully explore the long-term effects of training programmes on employee performance. Consequently, further studies are required to assess the sustained impact of such interventions. Furthermore, the study did not consider potential regional variations in the efficacy of the proposed reforms, which may necessitate the development of bespoke solutions for different areas of Armenia. Further research could concentrate on these regional discrepancies and evaluate the applicability of the cluster theory

of regional development, particularly by examining how specific municipalities can be designated as industrial, health, or tourism hubs.

This research provides a basis for further investigation of the regional peculiarities and advantages of Armenia, offering a foundation for more targeted reforms in municipal governance and employee development. By addressing these areas, future studies could make a substantial contribution to the ongoing efforts to enhance local governance and guarantee a more balanced and equitable distribution of resources and development across Armenia.

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IMPROVING THE COMPETENCIES OF MUNICIPAL EMPLOYEES: THE CASE OF ARMENIA

Summary

This article provides a thorough analysis of the current state and challenges related to the professional development of municipal employees in the Republic of Armenia. The study carefully examines the impact of existing administrative-territorial structures, legislative frameworks and the dynamics of local governance on the competencies of municipal employees. Through the use of statistical data and comparative analysis, the authors identify an urgent need for improved training programmes, the implementation of a comprehensive competency matrix, and a shift towards a more customer-oriented approach to municipal services. Key findings from the research highlight the importance of aligning training and development initiatives with the real needs of local government. The introduction of a competency matrix serves as a strategic tool for identifying skills gaps and structuring targeted training interventions. Furthermore, the study addresses issues of gender imbalance within local government roles, advocating for equitable representation and empowerment of women in local governance. The article also explores the positive impact of international cooperation and exchange, which can provide valuable insights and best practices for local governance reform in Armenia. Engagement with international programmes and the adoption of innovative governance models are highlighted as crucial steps towards more efficient, transparent and responsive local government. Overall, the research makes a compelling case for systemic reform of local government training and development in Armenia. By focusing on skills enhancement, gender equality and international cooperation, the article contributes valuable perspectives to the discourse on local governance reform, with implications beyond the Armenian context.

Keywords: local government, management, communities, advanced training, certification, municipal service.

UNAPRJEĐIVANJE KOMPETENCIJA LOKALNIH SLUŽBENIKA: PRIMJER ARMENIJE

Sažetak

Ovaj članak pruža temeljitu analizu trenutnog stanja i izazova vezanih za profesionalni razvoj lokalnih službenika u Armeniji. Studija pažljivo ispituje utjecaj postojećih administrativno-teritorijalnih struktura, zakonodavnih okvira i dinamike lokalnog upravljanja na kompetencije službenika zaposlenih u lokalnoj samoupravi. Korištenjem statističkih podataka i komparativne analize autori identificiraju hitnu potrebu za poboljšanim programima osposobljavanja i usavršavanja, za implementacijom sveobuhvatne matrice kompetencija te za prijelazom na korisnički orijentiran pristup lokalnih javnih usluga. Ključni nalazi istraživanja ističu važnost usklađivanja inicijativa za osposobljavanje i razvoj službenika sa stvarnim potrebama lokalne samouprave. Uvođenje matrice kompetencija služi kao strateški alat za identificiranje nedostataka vještina i strukturiranje ciljanih intervencija osposobljavanja. Nadalje, studija se bavi pitanjima rodne neravnoteže u strukturi zaposlenih u lokalnoj samoupravi zalažući se za pravednu zastupljenost i jačanje položaja žena. Članak također istražuje pozitivan utjecaj međunarodne suradnje i razmjene koje mogu osigurati vrijedne uvide i najbolje prakse za reformu lokalne samouprave u Armeniji. Sudjelovanje u međunarodnim programima i usvajanje inovativnih modela upravljanja istaknuti su kao ključni koraci prema učinkovitijoj, transparentnijoj i responzivnijoj lokalnoj samoupravi. Sveukupno, studija zagovara sustavnu reformu usavršavanja i razvoja zaposlenih u lokalnoj samoupravi u Armeniji. Fokusirajući se na unaprjeđivanje vještina, rodnu ravnopravnost i međunarodnu suradnju, članak nudi važan doprinos diskursu o reformi lokalne samouprave s implikacijama izvan armenskog konteksta.

Ključne riječi: lokalna samouprava, upravljanje, lokalne zajednice, napredno usavršavanje, certificiranje, lokalna služba