

ANALYSIS OF FACTORS INFLUENCING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PUBLIC COUNCILS

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ABSTRACT

Public councils serve as a crucial mechanism for fostering interaction between the state and society, playing a key role in implementing the concept of a "Listening state" and promoting a citizen-oriented governance model. This article examines the primary factors influencing their effectiveness by identifying five key challenges, analysing their causes and consequences, and proposing recommendations for improvement. The research employs content analysis of over 20 sources and utilises methodologies such as "Problem Tree Analysis," the "5 Whys" technique, and the Pareto 80/20 principle. Additionally, stakeholder analysis was conducted. The findings indicate that the dominant role of the state in the establishment and operation of public councils significantly undermines their effectiveness, positioning citizens as passive participants rather than active contributors. The practical significance of this study lies in its potential to aid policymakers in designing mechanisms to enhance the effectiveness of public councils. This research extends existing work by elucidating the cause-and-effect relationships underlying the challenges faced by public councils.

Keywords: Civil Society, Good Governance, Listening State, Public Councils, Problem Tree Analysis, Responsive Governance, Stakeholder Analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Public administration has undergone continuous transformation over the past two centuries, integrating new concepts, doctrines, and approaches. However, governance models successfully implemented in one context often yield different results in another. Consequently, theoretical and practical frameworks for governance tools and methodologies have evolved in diverse ways. Nevertheless, fundamental principles such as responsiveness, accountability, and transparency remain the cornerstones of effective governance.

Addressing societal needs, incorporating public expectations, and considering local specificities enable the development of outcome-oriented policies that optimise limited resources. A government that effectively communicates with its citizens while balancing short-

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term public demands with long-term national interests is perceived as more responsible and forward-thinking. Such governance enhances a nation's reputation, attracts investment, and fosters sustainable development.

Citizen engagement in decision-making processes is essential for effective state-society interaction. Various international models facilitate public participation (OECD, 2001; Zholdybalina and Ahmetzharov, 2017), one of which is the institution of public councils. The establishment of public councils in Kazakhstan and other post-Soviet states, such as Belarus, Russia, and Uzbekistan, represents a significant development in the democratisation of society. The modern society of these countries unites generations who grew up in both the old system and the new one; and these generations carry different worldviews, values and ideas about the state. Thus, it is quite interesting to seek answers to such research questions as “to what extent they find coordinated solutions”, and “to what extent they can be independent from the pressure of government agencies”.

In Kazakhstan, public councils have been operational for eight years, with annual national reports documenting their activities. A dedicated website (www.kazkenes.kz) showcases their contribution to social issues. Despite these efforts, the effectiveness of public councils remains a widely debated and a topic of much research (Knox and Janenova, 2017; LRPC, 2020; Shvecova et al., 2023; Davletbayeva and Zagrebin, 2024), which this study also addresses.

The primary research question focuses on identifying the underlying causes of five specific factors that hinder the effective functioning of the public council, as well as exploring the repercussions of these obstacles. This analysis aims to examine how each of these issues not only impedes the councils' operations but also affects their broader impact on community engagement and governance. By gaining a deeper understanding of these dynamics, we can develop more effective strategies to address the challenges faced by public councils and improve their ability to serve the public interest.

A key contribution of this study, supplementing existing research, is the finding that public councils' limited effectiveness stems from the state's dominant role in their establishment and operation, while citizens remain passive participants. This conclusion is further supported by stakeholder analysis, which identifies government agencies, the quasi-public sector, business entities, and the academic community as primary actors. Meanwhile, civil society remains on the periphery, positioned between key stakeholders and potential advisors. Despite widespread media coverage of public councils' activities, their influence remains moderate at best.

Structurally, this article begins with an introduction to the topic, followed by a literature review. The research methodology is outlined in the subsequent section. The next section presents the results and discussion, while the final section provides conclusions and general recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Institutional theory posits that modern states operate based on a social contract in which the state and its citizens undertake mutual obligations. Under this framework, the state functions as both a protector and a service provider, ensuring public safety and delivering essential public goods to sustain economic competitiveness and societal stability (Litvincheva, 2003). As a service provider, the state is expected to remain responsive to the needs of its citizens at all times.

However, over time, a disconnect between governments and the public has emerged. Governments increasingly assume they are best positioned to determine societal needs, often perceiving their decisions as superior to public opinion. This detachment has fuelled public dissatisfaction, criticism, and demands for governance reforms and more inclusive decision-making processes.

Responsive governance theory addresses this gap by advocating for active governmental engagement with citizens, integrating public needs into policy development, and adjusting decisions based on societal feedback. This approach aligns with democratic governance principles, fostering transparency, accountability, and inclusivity.

Simultaneously, the concept of Good Governance emphasises balancing short-term societal demands with long-term national interests (Linde and Peters, 2020). Effective governance must be flexible, transparent, and socially responsible, thereby enhancing public trust, cohesion, and stability.

The International Association of Public Participation outlines five levels of citizen involvement in governance, while the OECD classifies three main types (Table 1). Public participation can be either direct or indirect, with varying degrees of implementation across different countries (OECD, 2001: 81–238).

Public councils, established in countries such as Belarus, Brazil, Germany, Canada, Russia, and the United States, represent one form of public engagement in policymaking. In Kazakhstan, increasing citizen expectations (Baimenov et al., 2022) and the ineffectiveness of existing state-society engagement mechanisms, coupled with declining public trust in government, have necessitated new governance tools. As of 2022, Kazakhstan employed sixteen official communication channels for citizen engagement (ACSH, 2023).

The establishment of public councils in Kazakhstan was initiated under the "100 Specific Steps" National Plan in 2015 (Muratova and Onuchko, 2021). In 2016, councils were formally established in accordance with the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 383-V SAM "On Public Councils" (Zakon 2015) and the Order of the Minister of Information and Public Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan No 69/26.02.2021. These regulations define the structure, operational procedures, responsibilities, and rights of public councils.

Public councils are established and operated under the authority of government agencies and quasi-governmental organisations, categorising them as government-led initiatives with active participation. Currently, Kazakhstan has 258 public councils: 25 under central government agencies, 17 under regional akimats, 41 under city akimats, 163 under district akimats, and 12 under quasi-governmental organisations.⁶

Public councils serve as a mechanism for fostering civil society development. They provide a structured platform for citizens to express their views, reconcile diverse perspectives, and contribute to public decision-making. Additionally, public councils play a fundamental role in shaping a people-centred public administration model,⁷ supporting the principles of a "Listening state" (KISR, 2023; Shvecova et al., 2023a) and advancing the concept of a Just Kazakhstan (Poslanie, 2024).

⁶ <https://kazkenes.kz/ru/council/kgs/>

⁷ *Koncepcia razvitiya gosudarstvennogo upravleniya v Respublike Kazahstan do 2030 goda* [The concept of development of public administration in the Republic of Kazakhstan until 2030]. Ukaz Prezidenta Respubliki Kazahstan ot 26 fevralya 2021 goda № 522 <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/U2100000522>

Table 1. The forms of public participation

International Association of Public Participation ⁸	OECD (2001)
Inform is to provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	Information: -active - passive
Consult is to obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	Consultation/Feedback: -unsolicited -solicited
Involve is to work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered	Active participation: -Government-led -Citizen-led
Collaborate is to partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	
Empower is to place final decision making in the hands of the public.	

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a range of analytical tools to identify and examine the factors affecting the effectiveness of public councils. A content analysis of over 20 sources, including opinion polls, video materials, scientific reports, and academic articles, was conducted to identify key challenges. The "Problem Tree Analysis" method was used to determine the root causes and consequences of these challenges. The "5 Whys" analysis technique was applied to establish cause-and-effect relationships, while the Pareto 80/20 principle helped prioritise key issues, revealing that 80% of consequences arise from 20% of causes. Lastly, the "Stakeholder Analysis" method was utilised to assess the level of influence and interest of various stakeholders involved in public council activities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Content analysis of expert opinions, sociological surveys, scientific articles, and reports revealed five primary challenges affecting the effectiveness of public councils. The first major issue is their lack of visibility among the public. In 2021, 69% of respondents (out of 1,200) reported being unaware of the existence of public councils (Ruhani Zhangyru, 2021). By 2023, awareness had improved, with 43.2% of respondents acknowledging the presence of public councils (KISR, 2023a). However, more than 82.1% had never engaged with them by submitting issues or suggestions (Mirmanova et al., 2023).

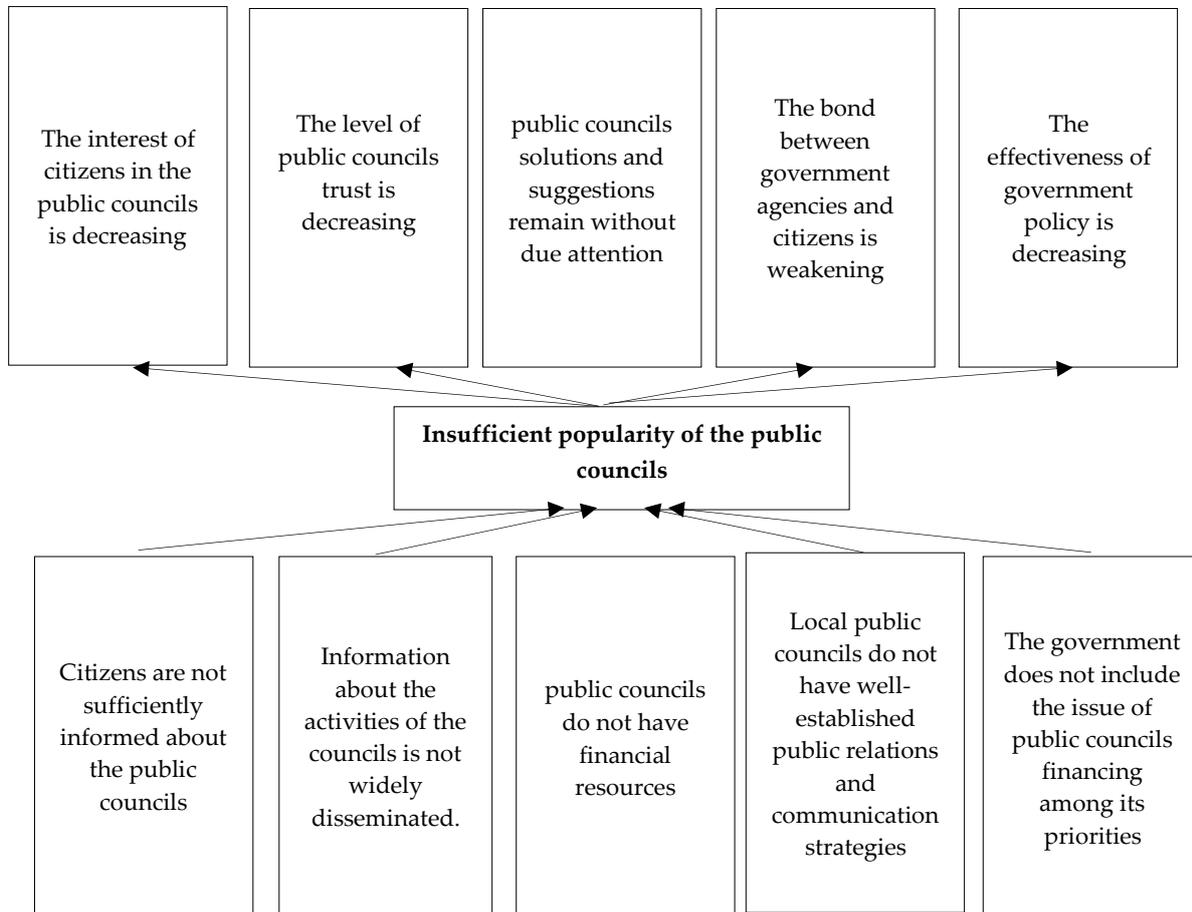
If the assumption is that a lack of visibility in media and online spaces is the primary reason for low engagement, the data suggests otherwise. In 2022, only a few councils maintained social media pages (Akhanova, 2022), whereas by 2023, 83% of them had established an online presence (Mirmanova et al., 2023, p.115). Despite this, respondents reported learning about council activities primarily through TV (47.2%) and Instagram (32.8%).

Although public councils utilise a broad range of communication tools, our analysis suggests that weaknesses in their communication strategies hinder their reach and impact (Figure 1). To improve the situation, it is necessary to review information strategies, in particular, to

⁸ IAP2. Spectrum of Public Participation <https://www.iap2.org/page/pillars>

increase the media activity of council members, and to involve communication specialists to sanctify the activities of the councils.

Figure 1. The Tree of Problems "Insufficient popularity of Public Councils"



A significant issue influencing the effectiveness of public councils is the process of their formation. This topic has been widely discussed in the literature on public councils (Knox and Janenova, 2017; Baisbai, 2021; Vajda, 2023; Shvecova et al., 2023; Mamashuly, 2022).

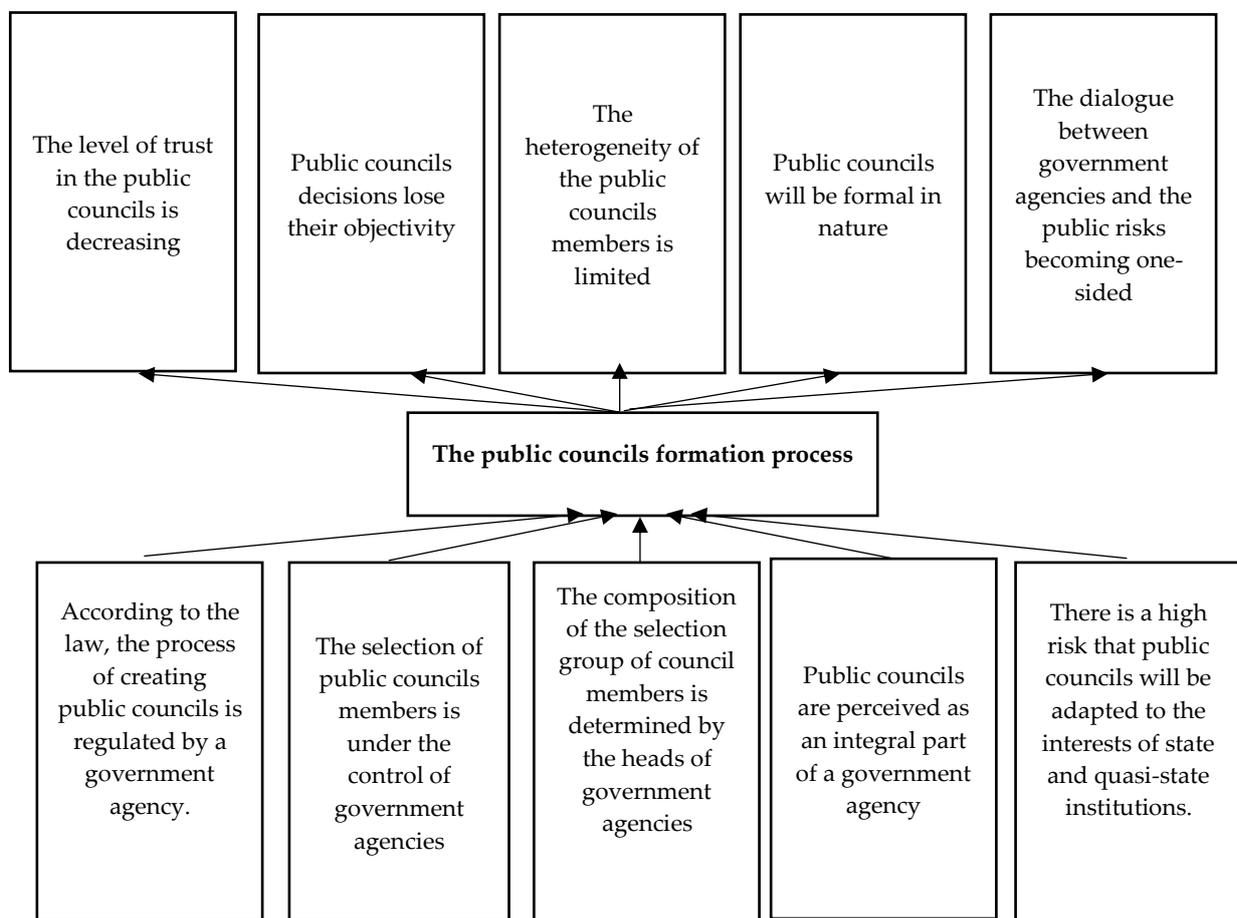
Public councils are established by government agencies, which oversee the selection process of candidates nominated by non-profit organisations and individual citizens. In 2022, candidate selection was conducted through a competitive process, with up to four applicants per seat. However, many candidates reported that interviews were structured more like examinations (Akhanova, 2022). Given that government agencies control the selection process, concerns have been raised about the potential for manipulation, where authorities may filter candidates to select "convenient" members.⁹ Consequently, government agencies may retain

⁹ See Baisabai, E. (2021). Sovershenstvovanie vzaimodejstviya grazhdanskogo obshchestva i gosudarstvennyh organov [Improving the interaction between civil society and government agencies]. Obrazovatel'naya programma magistratury «Gosudarstvennaya politika» po napravleniyu podgotovki «7M041- Biznes i upravlenie». Magisterskiy proekt na soiskanie stepeni magistra gosudarstvennoj politiki <https://repository.apa.kz/bitstream/handle/123456789/888/%D0%9C%D0%B0%D0%B3%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%80%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%B8%CC%86%20%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B5%D0%BA%D1%82%20%D0%91%D0%B0%D0%B8%CC%86%D1%81%D0%B1%D0%B0%D0%B8%CC%86%20%D0%95..pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>; see also Abai.kz (2022) Qoғamdyq keñesterdiń qyzmeti men máseleleri [Activities and problems of public councils] 28 Shilde, 2022. Available at: <https://abai.kz/post/155714>

disproportionate influence over council decisions, limiting independent viewpoints and fostering a one-sided dialogue between the state and society. As a result, public councils risk failing to truly represent public interests (Figure 2).

The existing formation process raises concerns regarding transparency and fairness. A potential solution is to establish a more transparent and equitable selection process for council members. One proposed approach is to develop an official page on eGOV.kz portal where citizens and non-profit organisations can apply for council membership. Applicants would submit their credentials, professional experience, and motivations, while government agencies could use a randomised selection mechanism to ensure diversity and impartiality. This method would not only enhance civic engagement but also promote balanced and representative councils.

Figure 2. The Tree of Problems "Forming Public Councils"

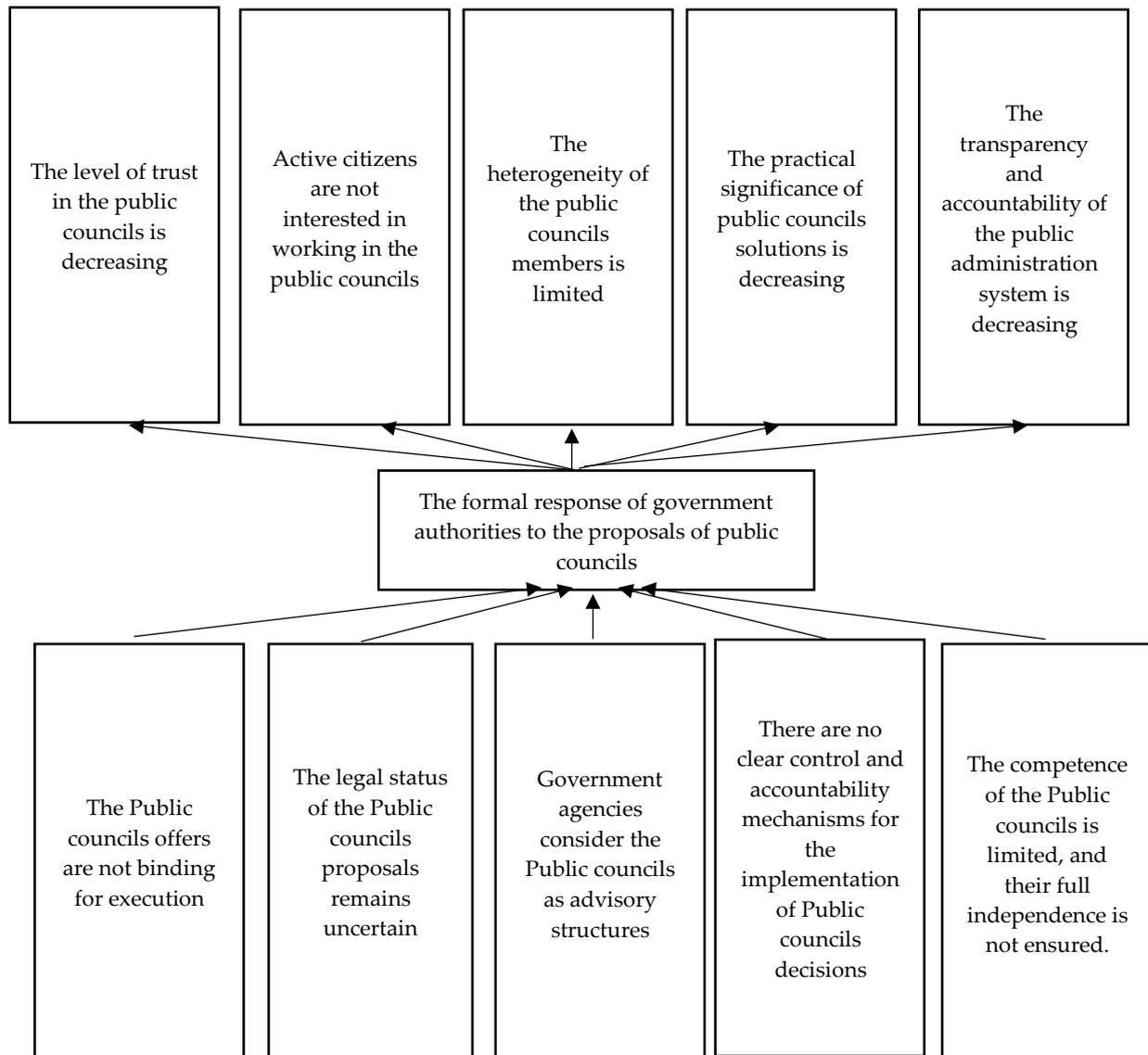


Another problem is the formal reaction of government agencies to the proposals of public councils (Vajda, 2023; Talaptalks, 2021).

The root of this problem, in our opinion, lies in the very nature of public councils, as defined by the law "On Public Councils" (Zakon, 2015). These bodies are advisory bodies to government agencies and their decisions are advisory in nature. Paragraph 8 of Article 1 of the Law states that "recommendations of public councils are mandatory for consideration by government agencies, quasi-public sector entities that make decisions provided for by the legislation of the Republic of Kazakhstan and provide reasoned responses." However, as our analysis shows, there are virtually no mechanisms for enforcement and control of recommendations (Figure 3).

The solution to this issue may be to consolidate at the legislative level the obligation to implement the proposals of public councils with the establishment of the responsibility of government agencies for their non-compliance. The creation of independent commissions to monitor the implementation of recommendations and require government agencies to report can help strengthen the authority of public councils. At the same time, in order to improve the quality of recommendations, it is important to involve experts in the work of the councils, which will help strengthen the role of councils in solving significant social issues.

Figure 3. The Tree of Problems "Formal response of government to public councils proposals"



Another problem is the low activity of council members. This is due to the fact that the agenda of meetings is often formed unilaterally, focusing on the interests of government agencies, and avoiding consideration of issues that may be unfavourable to them. The priorities of government agencies are set in opposition to the initiatives and proposals of council members. The consequence of this situation is a decrease in the quality and objectivity of the decisions of the councils. As a result, members are less interested in the work of the councils.

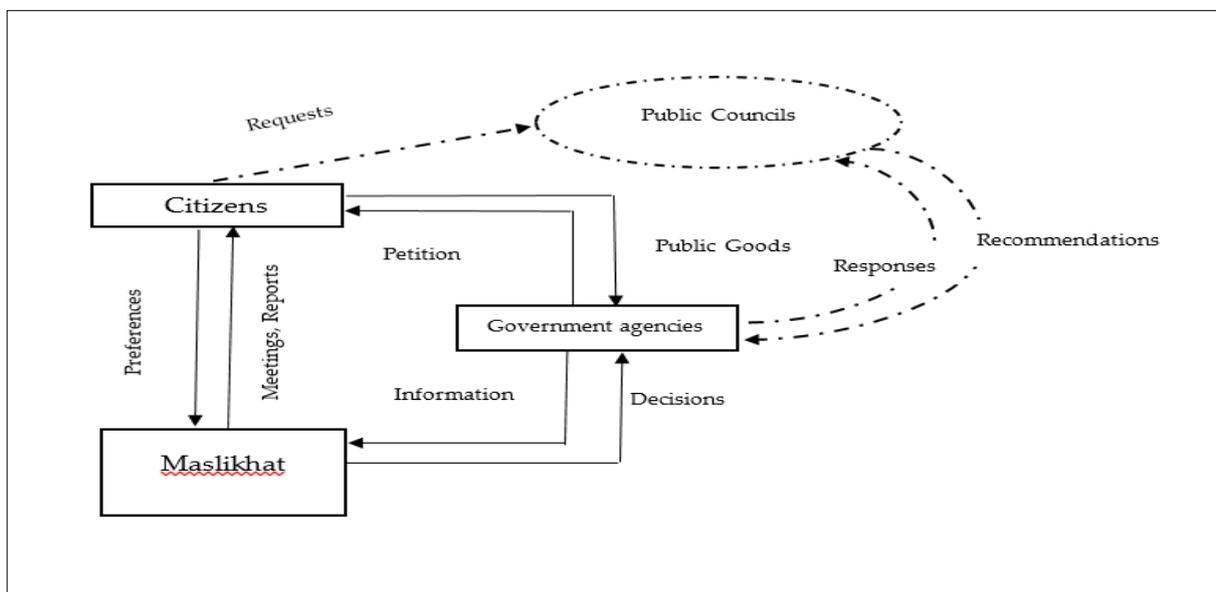
The solution to this problem may be to jointly draw up a work plan and a meeting agenda, taking into account the opinions and initiatives of the council members. It is important to

introduce mechanisms that limit control by government agencies and ensure the independence of the work of the councils.

According to experts (Baisbai, 2021; Vajda, 2023), despite the fact that the activities of public councils and Maslikhats is regulated by two different legislative acts, it is observed that the separate functions of these two institutions are duplicated. Councils and Maslikhats may consider the same issues. At the same time, the number of appeals to public councils is higher than to deputies (Vajda, 2023).

According to the legislation, councils are called upon to express the opinions of civil society on socially significant issues (Zakon, 2015), and maslikhats are called upon to express the will of the population (Zakon, 2001). Councils are formed by government agencies, and maslikhats are an elected body. Accordingly, graphically, their interactions with each other can be visually shown as follows (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Public councils in the system of citizens-politicians-government agencies relation



To solve the problem, it is necessary to create specific mechanisms to ensure the harmonious functioning of maslikhats and public councils. It is important to focus the work of public councils on specific public needs, taking into account the opinions of citizens and openly discussing their decisions.

Thus, the analysis of five factors influencing the effectiveness of public councils revealed that two factors are key. The first is the formation of public councils by government agencies themselves. The second is partly the duplication of public councils of deputies' activities.

In order to understand the role of public councils in the political arena, we tried to analyse stakeholders by compiling a matrix of their importance and influence. Through expert discussions, we identified seven groups of stakeholders: civil society, government agencies, the quasi-public sector, the business community, the media, international organisations, and the scientific and expert community. Then we assessed the degree of their interest and influence on the activities of public councils (Table 2).

Table 2. Main stakeholders

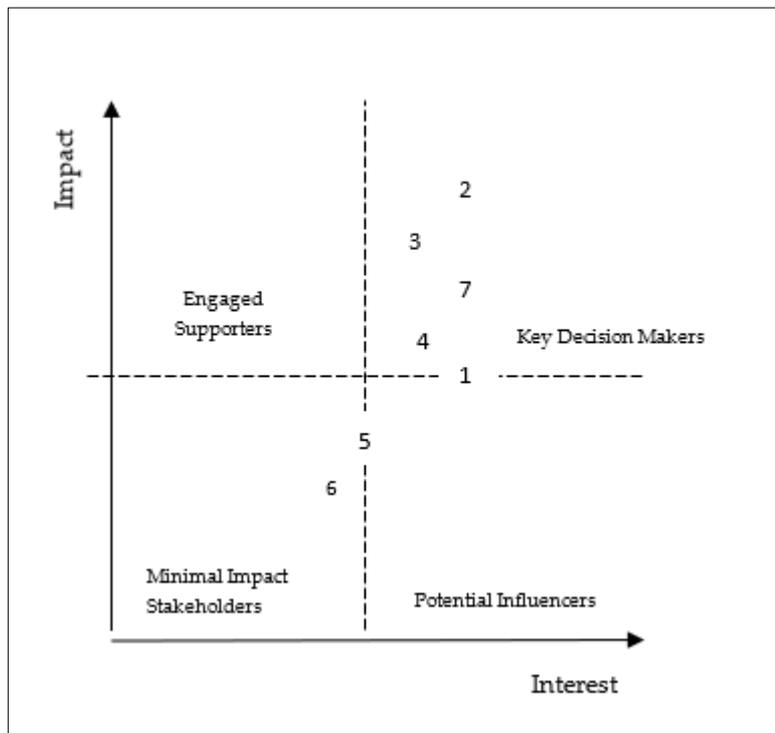
Stakeholders	Impact	Interest	
<p>1. Civil society Public organisations that offer proposals aimed at protecting the interests of the population. Citizens are the main beneficiaries of the councils' decisions. They can express their opinions and suggestions at council meetings and public hearings. Activists are citizens who participate in public processes and submit their proposals to the activities of the councils.</p>	5	7	The interest of the civil society is high, but the influence is moderate. They actively participate in public hearings, but their opinions/suggestions may not always be heard.
<p>2. Government agencies Central and local government agencies, structures designed to hear the opinions and suggestions of the public</p>	9	7	Government agencies play a leading role in the work of public Councils. Their influence is very great because they are responsible for the creation and organisation of the work of the councils. In addition, they are interested in matching the needs of society with government policy.
<p>3. Quasi-public sector National companies may take an interest in the economic decisions of the public councils and make suggestions.</p>	8	6	This sector has high influence, but medium interest.
<p>4. Business community Individual entrepreneurs. Decisions of public councils can affect their business environment. Chambers of Commerce are involved in discussing economic reforms and business-related issues.</p>	6	6	The influence and interest of the business community are at an average level. They help public councils solve socio-economic problems by financing their initiatives.
<p>5. Mass media Journalists increase the transparency and accountability of public councils by covering their work.</p>	4	5	The mass media has a low degree of influence, but at the same time moderate interest. Although they play an important role in strengthening the authority of the public.
<p>6. International organisations Donor agencies can provide financial and methodological support to some Council projects. Foreign partners help to compare and improve the work of public councils with international experience.</p>	3	4	International organisations have a low degree of influence and an average interest.
<p>7. Scientific and expert community Experts provide professional advice when making decisions with advice.</p>	7	7	Their influence and interest is high. They play an important role in improving the recommendations of the councils.

Research centers provide analytical and statistical data to improve the effectiveness of public councils.			
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Based on the above data, the influence and interest matrix (Figure 5) indicated that the key players included government agencies, the quasi-public sector, the business community, and the scientific and expert community. At the same time, civil society found itself on the borderline between key players and potential advisers. Furthermore, despite the fact that the mass media writes a lot about the activities of public councils, they found themselves on the border between players who have minimal impact and potential impact. And international organisations found themselves in a zone of minimal impact.

For the effective work of public councils, it is important that each stakeholder harmoniously fulfils their role. The joint work of all groups contributes to improving the efficiency and effectiveness of public councils.

Figure 5. The matrix of influence and interest of the main stakeholders



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Over the years, the Kazakh model of public councils has evolved into an important instrument for strengthening civil society and serving as a platform for public discourse. The activities of public councils have garnered significant attention from the media, bloggers, civic institutions, think tanks, and scholars, reflecting a strong interest in their role and function.

Despite their achievements, public councils continue to face several challenges that hinder their ability to fully realise their potential as a genuine representative voice for the people. This study identified and analysed five critical issues: lack of public awareness, concerns regarding council independence, low engagement of council members, the formalistic approach of government agencies to council recommendations, and the overlap of functions with maslikhats.

A key conceptual explanation for these challenges is the top-down approach adopted by government agencies in the implementation of the "listening state" framework. The state initiated the formation of public councils based on international models, but it retained control over their composition and largely determines their agenda. In this framework, the government remains the dominant actor, while citizens assume a more passive role.

One of the most frequently debated issues in this context is the independence of public councils. To ensure their effectiveness, it is essential that council composition and agenda-setting processes incorporate the opinions and proposals of council members. Moreover, the influence of government agencies over independent decision-making should be minimised. Additionally, council decisions and activities should be widely publicised to enhance transparency and accountability.

It is also crucial to clearly delineate the functional roles of public councils and maslikhats to ensure their efficient collaboration and avoid unnecessary duplication of responsibilities. Furthermore, modern technological solutions, such as crowdsourcing, should be leveraged to enhance the effectiveness of public councils. Beyond serving as advisory bodies to government agencies, public councils should also actively engage in organising initiatives and events that contribute to evidence-based decision-making in the public interest. Strengthening the role of public councils will facilitate a more constructive dialogue between civil society and government agencies, ultimately leading to improved governance and public administration.

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