



AZERBAIJAN

BACKGROUND

Fuelled by oil and gas exports, the Azerbaijan economy was one of the fastest growing economies in the world in the 2000s, with GDP per capita increasing over 1,000 percent between 2001 and 2011. Combined with low unemployment, particularly when compared to neighbouring countries in the region, Azerbaijan saw a rapid improvement in living standards. However, in recent years this explosive growth has fallen away, with low oil prices in 2015 lowering export incomes. What impact this will have on development efforts and the political climate remains to be seen.

With support from the international community, Azerbaijan has launched a number of

programmes on judicial and legal reforms to strengthen the rule of law and respect for human rights. To date, the Government has improved the infrastructure of the justice sector, which includes construction of over 20 court buildings and facilities, as well technical renovations and the refurbishment of many others. The improvements to physical infrastructure are yet to be matched by improvements in the judicial system itself.

During 2015, Azerbaijan continued to build on its successful 'ASAN Service Centre' model for service delivery using one-stop shops. The ASAN Service Centres functioning in Baku and four other cities have dramatically reduced bureaucracy, waiting times and opportunities for rent-seeking. A mobile service is also provided

for citizens in rural areas. In recognition of these efforts, ASAN received the 2015 UN Public Service Award.

Despite these successes, major challenges remain for Azerbaijan. Human rights organizations and civil society activists continue to report restrictions on their activity, with media outlets and political opposition facing similar challenges. Corruption also continues to be perceived as an issue, with Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index placing Azerbaijan significantly behind other countries with similar levels of income, even though reports in 2016 pointed to some improvements in the area of customs and public service delivery. Furthermore, the protracted conflict with Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan remains unresolved. Although a ceasefire was signed in 1994, people continue to be killed in cross-border violence.

ASSISTANCE AND IMPACT

In efforts to build civic engagement and inclusiveness, in 2015 UNDP focused on working with youth and women as active members of civil society. One of UNDP's key results was the involvement of 300 young people in policy debates on the Sustainable Development Agenda using Model UN clubs established in six Universities. After attending a summer school, the youths debated a broad range of topics such as natural resource management, social inclusion, and gender equality.

The Model UN in action



Photo by: UNDP Azerbaijan

Improving gender equality was also a goal as UNDP established two additional pilot Women's

"Our priority is educated youth able to represent the country with dignity and contribute to further development and progress at local, national and international levels"

– Mr. Azad Rahimov, Minister of Youth and Sport of the Republic of Azerbaijan at a Model UN opening ceremony

Resource Centres in the regions of Neftchala and Masalli. Serving as platforms for the economic and social empowerment of rural women, the centres were used to train women on basic professional skills, how to start a business, and how to write a business plan based on the International Labour Organization's methodology.

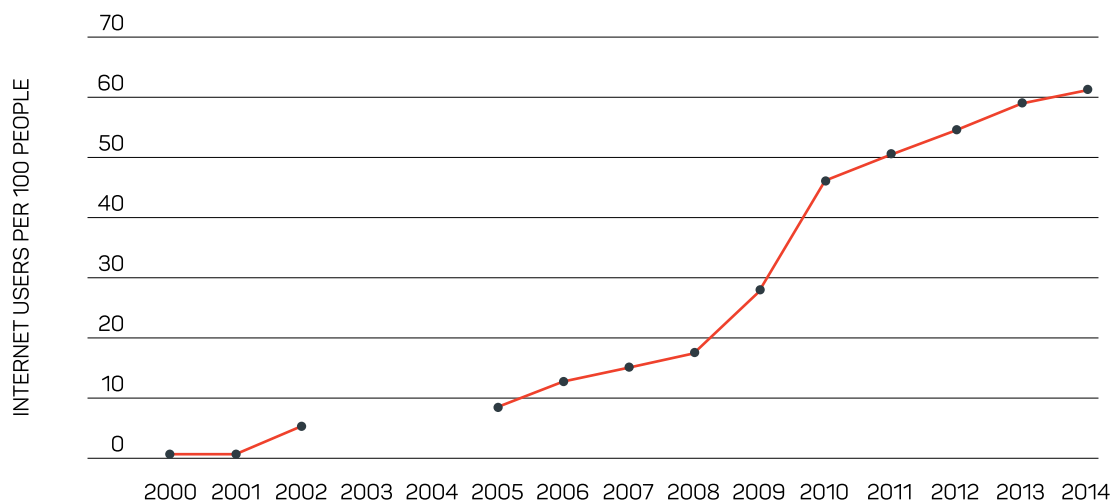


Opening of the Women's Resource Centre in Neftchala

Photo by: UNDP Azerbaijan

In efforts to boost the capacity of public institutions, UNDP supported implementation of the National ICT Strategy that was adopted in 2014. This included awareness programmes for over 600 civil servants on e-Governance solutions for public administration, and training on topics such as e-participation and open data. In addition, over 450 students, staff of high-tech parks, and start-up employees were trained on how to use and benefit from the e-Government portal. This work, in combination with large increases in the number of internet users, has contributed to a large rise in the number of users of e-Government services from 1 million in 2014 to 2.5 million in 2015.

INTERNET PENETRATION IN AZERBAIJAN - 2000 TO 2014



Source: World Development Indicators, The World Bank¹

UNDP also assisted in the establishment of a Strategy and Training Unit (STU) in the Civil Service Commission, with the goal of creating a single train-

Working to support civil society organizations working on democracy and human rights, since mid-2016 UNDP has been contributing to a

ing centre for civil servants. UNDP supported trainings for STU staff on a range of topics, including human resource management and communication skills. This training was enhanced through the exposure of STU staff to similar institutions in Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania and Ireland. With the abolishment of the Civil Service Commission in early 2016, work to establish the Civil Service Training Centre will be continued by the Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Azerbaijan.

EU-initiated programme under the framework of the Eastern Partnership. This programme will help to build the capacity of these organizations and strengthen their role in promoting socio-economic rights of vulnerable populations by supporting a range of activities, including training programmes, seminars, conferences, advocacy, legal aid, analysis, research, monitoring and reporting.

Key results



300 young people engaged in Model UN policy debates on resource management, social inclusion, and gender equality



Over 600 civil servants educated on innovative solutions for public administration



2.5 million users of the e-Government services in 2015

¹ The World Bank, "Internet users (per 100 people)". Available from <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.P2?locations=AZ> (accessed 1 September 2016)

CHALLENGES, LESSONS LEARNED AND THE WAY FORWARD

Due to the impact of low oil prices, 2016 was a difficult year for Azerbaijan's economy, as for the first time in almost two decades the country is expected to record negative GDP growth (-1.9 percent).² Adding to these difficulties is the ongoing tension with neighbour Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, where a short but serious escalation in violence in April 2016 reminded the world of the volatility posed by this protracted conflict. UNDP's main focus in 2016 is to continue implementing the new Country Programme that was approved for the period 2016-2020, as well as to encourage the inclusion of targets and indicators from the SDGs in national development planning.

With civil society continuing to operate in a restricted space in Azerbaijan, UNDP will continue support for increasing civil society engagement, and for the EU-initiated capacity building programme to strengthen organizations working on democracy and human rights. Specific focus will also be provided to help civil society organizations develop skills in addressing needs of vulnerable and socially-excluded groups including women, youth, people with disabilities, and former prisoners.

To continue building responsive and accountable institutions, UNDP is planning several initiatives. This includes advisory support in developing a new economic roadmap, reforming vocational education and building the capacity of the national statistical office. UNDP is also planning to partner with ASAN to organize an international conference on public service delivery solutions that will serve as a basis for the sharing of the successes of the programme with other countries in the region.

Finally, in continued efforts to promote the economic and social participation of women – particularly in rural areas – the successful Women's Resource Centre pilot will be replicated in additional regions due to the positive response and interest from new partners willing to support the project.

² The World Bank, "Azerbaijan". Available from <http://data.worldbank.org/country/azerbaijan> (accessed 7 October 2016)