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Citizens' Empowerment in the Republic of Moldova

Local Grants Programme for civil society organisations

Lessons learnt and recommendations

About the project

The 'Citizens' Empowerment in the Republic of Moldova' Action, financed by the European Union and implemented by the GIZ, in coordination with the 'Modernisation of Local Public Services in the Republic of Moldova' project, provided support to civil society organisations (CSOs) to ensure citizens' participation in decision-making processes at local and regional level, including in the governance of public investment projects.

The 'Citizens Empowerment in the Republic of Moldova' Action (herein after CSO Action) was implemented in the frame of the single Support Framework of the European Union (EU) in support to the Republic of Moldova (2017-2020) under European Neighbourhood Instrument.

The EU-funded Local Grants Programme (LGP) implemented within the Action, aimed at empowering citizens by participating actively and constructively in local decision-making processes on sustainable (economic, social and environmental) development and infrastructure of public services in their communities by: engaging citizens in development processes, monitoring and evaluation of policies and decisions, design and provision of local public services; raising public awareness of issues related to the provision of public services, energy efficiency and the environment; encouraging citizens to subscribe and pay for quality public services.

General context

There is a large developmental gap between the urban and rural areas of Moldova. Most citizens in rural areas lack access to basic water and sanitation and solid waste management services and many public buildings in rural areas, such as schools and hospitals, are not energy efficient. These deficiencies damage the environment and harm the health of the people as well as drain limited public resources.

Significant investment in local public infrastructure is required. To assure that the necessary investments respond to real needs of the citizens, it is important that they, men and women equally, in

Key information

Project title: Citizens Empowerment in the Republic of Moldova

Implementation period: 01/2019 - 12/2021

Implemented by: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, as commissioned by German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)

Financed by: European Union – 4.9 Mio. EUR
(including 3,75 Mio EUR in grants)

Political counterpart: Ministry of Infrastructure and Regional Development

Target beneficiaries: Citizens (including pupils) in the development regions North, Centre, South and ATU Gagauzia - as the ultimate beneficiaries of the action, Civil society organizations, especially at the local level, Mass media representatives, Networks of CSO

Project website: www.eu4civilsociety.md

particular vulnerable population such as older persons, poor persons, persons with disabilities, ethnic and religious minorities, participate meaningfully in decision-making on socio-economic development, local service delivery, and public infrastructure development in particular. The engagement of citizens during the planning, design, and delivery of services shall empower them to hold public authorities accountable and curb corruption. Moreover, citizens must be aware of related health, environmental and socio-economic issues to demand action from public authorities while fulfilling their obligations as clients of local public services.

Almost two out of three years of the project implementation, Moldova in general and civil society were affected by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Pandemic related lockdown and further restrictions had an impact on the civil society activities and particularly hampered participation of citizens in public life and decision-making. It had an impact on the timeline of several activities, particularly those requiring physical meetings, work with pupils in schools, as well as the delivery of trainings/ workshops. Nevertheless, with support from the partner CSOs, considerable results were achieved and contributed to set objectives. For key results achieved by the project please see the [CSO Action Final Results Factsheets](#).

Objective and area of intervention

The overall objective of the CSO Action is to empower citizens through constructive participation of CSOs in local, regional, and national decision-making processes. The project intervention targeted issues regarding sustainable development and local public services, including water supply and sanitation, solid waste management, energy and energy efficiency and its impact on climate change.

Citizens need to be encouraged to subscribe and pay for quality services. This requires understanding the purpose of cost-recovery tariffs as well as discouragement of activities such as illegal connections, manipulation of meters, or water and waste dumping. Similarly, citizens need to understand the health and environmental impact of illegal waste sites to agree to pay for waste removal in their communities. They must also be convinced of the impact of energy inefficiency on climate change.

Approach taken

To achieve the expected results, the Action applied a holistic capacity building approach to support the development of:

- a) the necessary capacities of citizens with respect to participatory planning and decision-making,
- b) the necessary institutional capacity of CSOs to ensure they can effectively apply their knowledge within the respective decision-making processes, and
- c) the adequate networking conditions and functional mechanisms for coordination and communication between CSOs and different actors across different institutional levels.

For this action, GIZ concluded grant agreements with four regional CSOs (one per development region – North, Centre, South and ATU Gagauzia), identified based on a “call for concepts” and an initial capacity, commercial and legal eligibility check. The tasks of these CSOs were to support in the implementation of the Local Grants Programme (LGP) within a two-year period through:

- specific and periodic capacity development assistance to local CSOs, related to improving citizens engagement in decision-making processes including monitoring of procurement, construction, and delivery of local public services,

- awareness raising campaigns for improving public service delivery, including with associated materials, and training for local CSOs to run these campaigns,
- sub-granting local CSOs, based on open call for proposals, for the implementation of smaller scale projects to support socio-economic and sustainable local development based on citizens' needs,
- creation of CSOs networks to exchange experiences and good practises on cooperation with local and regional authorities and to demand citizen-oriented service delivery.

Furthermore, a grant agreement was concluded with a media CSO to support the Action through developing and delivering sector related awareness raising campaigns, training mass-media representatives in reporting about socio-economic and sustainable development topics, and sub-granting to local media CSOs and media outlets for the implementation of smaller scale information and awareness projects.

To provide a platform for online application to grants for local CSOs, in line with scope of the Action and eligibility criteria, as well as to ensure fundamental principles of transparency, equal treatment and non-discrimination, GIZ developed a website for the Action's needs and requirements – www.eu4civilsociety.md.

For additional information and lessons learnt regarding the online application platform, please see document developed earlier in March 2021 – [GIZ Moldova Web platform SWOT and lessons learnt March 2021](#).

Lessons learnt

During the implementation of the Action, GIZ and its partner CSOs faced several challenges, but also encountered opportunities for successful achievement of its objective, as result the below lessons learnt and recommendations. The order in which the lessons and recommendations are presented do not entail a certain priority or importance – all are equally important and relevant.

Selection of partner CSOs

Lesson 1: For a successful implementation of the Local Grants Programme, it is important to identify and contract good partner CSOs with relevant experience in grants management, understanding of the project objectives and sufficient resources for timely implementations of the project

Recommendations:

- To ensure freedom to the CSOs to implement their projects in the regions, without too much GIZ involvement in processes and activities
- If additional interventions are requested by GIZ, to ensure necessary guidance and training is offered
- To ensure each partner CSO responsible for implementation of a sub-grating scheme has a focal point in the GIZ project team for support and guidance as well as for monitoring of programmatic and financial reports

Lesson 2: Prospective partner CSOs should be informed of and aware of the need to ensure own resources until final disbursement of funds, as to cover any GIZ requirements of Grant Agreement. According to GIZ rules for grant agreements, up to 10% of the grant amount is withheld and disbursed with the final request for disbursement.

Recommendations:

- To inform prospective applicants for project partners of any financial requirements and rules within the upcoming Agreement on funds retainer before the final disbursement; include the information in the announcement/call for proposals and explain the rules during any information sessions
- To hold due diligence meetings with pre-selected CSOs and ensure through review that necessary capacities and resources are available for the prospective retainer of funds
- To review the option to apply the retainer rule on the amount of the grant that is related to direct costs and exclude the costs related to sub-granting; another option could be to apply a 10% retainer on the last instalment to be disbursed to the CSO.

LGP launch and implementation

Lesson 3: Efficient and effective implementation of a Local Grants Programme, timely communication, and decision-making between GIZ and partner CSOs is ensured if an Operations Manual is put in place at the very beginning. Similarly, for efficiency in communication between partner CSOs and its grants beneficiaries to follow clear procedures for implementation of the local projects, an operations manual with tools for local CSOs grants beneficiaries is necessary.

Recommendations:

- To provide user-friendly and comprehensive documents and guidance on required GIZ procedures – operations and procurement, financial, communication, monitoring, reporting
- To set up a clear mechanism for coordination of activities at all levels – local, regional, national
- To provide clear guidance on indicators to be collected and overall results to which each partner or local CSO contributes
- To balance the amount of control and guidance as requested by the grants beneficiaries and as identified withing the monitoring processes
- To find the appropriate balance between monitoring meetings and reporting periods based on CSOs capacities and experience to implement the project
- To ensure any operations manual is developed in participatory manner with all envisaged parties

Lesson 4: If a particular geographical area/community and area of intervention is to be covered within the Local Grants Programme, specific priority criteria should be included in the Applicant's Guide

Recommendations:

- To carry out a needs analysis related to required area of intervention and analysis of criteria to be applied on targeted organisations
- To announce specific terms of reference/calls targeting the required geographical area, community, or group of citizens
- To offer partner CSOs more flexibility in setting the number and amount of grants to be awarded to local CSOs, based on regional specifics

- During the local project proposals evaluation to engage experts with experience in targeted areas of intervention – experts in WSS and SWM services, EE, engineers if infrastructure elements are accepted

Lesson 5: Project proposals which combine infrastructure elements and citizens awareness and engagement activities related to local public services, like WSS and SWM, facilitate better cooperation and strengthen partnership between LPAs and citizens/civil society, thus higher engagement of citizens in solving local issues, higher impact, and sustainability

Recommendations:

- To offer targeted trainings for local CSOs on how to identify the local issue, the roles of each stakeholder, and how to write a specific project proposal to solve the identified issue in cooperation with other actors
- To support local projects with clear objectives and targeting specific local issues and local services, which are implemented in partnership with several local actors – civil society, local authorities, local businesses etc.
- To support CSOs in assessing their capacities and limitations for implementation of specific local projects targeting local services; to offer guidance in understanding the responsibilities of CSOs (as right-holders) as opposed to those of LPAs (duty-bearers) in the implementation of projects for improvement of local public services and infrastructure
- To select project proposals which are backed-up by partnership agreements between LPAs and CSOs and clear roles and responsibilities by each of the parties, particularly related to any infrastructure elements and their sustainability
- To ensure LPA representatives are engaged in all activities organised by civil society organisations, particularly in activities related to public consultations, monitoring procurements, construction works etc.
- To organise subsequent calls for proposals in support of upscaling existing success stories and good practices at local/regional level

Capacities of CSOs

Lesson 6: Capacities created with CSOs at local and regional level, including related to organisational development and sustainability need continuous development. An equitable distribution of resources and launch of grants programmes at regional level provide for smaller competition and more opportunities for community-based organisations to benefit of resources and increase capacities.

Recommendations:

- To develop a needs-based capacity development programme for active citizens groups, local and regional CSOs
- For an efficient use of resources, to consider developing and providing a joint capacity development programme, common for all regions
- To award grants to local CSOs only after a round of capacity development measures
- To consider mechanisms for financial supporting of informal civil society/active citizens groups

- Besides trainings and webinars, to provide individual mentoring and coaching to CSOs, on both operational and technical aspects of project implementation. If needed, to support the local organizations in identifying and contracting qualified experts
- To support creation of a database with available human resources with specific expertise and experience, and facilitate networking among partners and grants beneficiaries to keep the list updated and enriched
- To secure in the grant budget a share of resources, up to 10% of total budget, for organisational development; to ensure that resources are used strategically and not only for procurement of equipment, e.g., for setting up internal rules and procedures, strengthening the staff project and financial management capacities, improving financial sustainability etc.
- To include in grant agreements and Operations Manual as mandatory any capacity development measures provided by GIZ or partner CSOs
- To revise during contracting the grant application form, if necessary, for ensuring a clear intervention logic, specific indicators, and smooth project implementation

Lesson 7: Local CSOs need targeted capacity development regarding project's intervention areas – understanding of local services of WSS, SWM and EE and the role of citizens for sustainability of services, knowledge on carrying out transparent procurement of construction works or equipment to improve local services

Recommendations:

- To carry out a CSOs and citizens needs assessment for a tailored and targeted capacity development in targeted areas of local public services
- To encourage implementation of local projects which combine *soft* and *hard* interventions – any experience and knowledge obtained within *soft* interventions to be applied and tested during implementation of *hard*/infrastructure elements
- To limit the CSOs responsibilities to *soft* interventions (awareness raising, information, citizen monitoring activities, participation in decision-making etc.) and leave the *hard* interventions (construction works, procurement of heavy equipment etc.) in the responsibility of local authorities, but also ensuring participation of all partners in the project activities (see recommendations for *Lesson 5* above)
- To foster networking of CSOs within and between regions for exchange of experience on citizens empowerment, participatory decision-making, oversight of infrastructure interventions, and awareness raising
- To include in local projects networking activities and study visits to other CSOs, local authorities and local service operators
- To carry out any awareness and information activities related to public services in cooperation with authorities and service providers
- To involve regional or national experts in the field of interventions to improve the quality and effects of results

Communication and outreach

Lesson 8: CSO Action, partner CSOs and LGP beneficiaries' communication and outreach is increased when creating a partnership with a media CSO as well as adopting a single communication and visual identity

Recommendations:

- To discuss and agree with partners key messages of the project to be promoted at the local/regional/national level, as well as for specific target groups (age groups, vulnerable groups etc.) and stakeholders – civil society, media, public authorities, business, academia etc.
- To ensure sufficient resources are allocated for project visibility and outreach; setting a minimum share of the budget, e.g., 10%, will ensure appropriate communication of key messages and visibility of all interventions and results
- To develop a joint visual identity, key designs and promotional materials to be used within the project implementation, but also with certain flexibility for communication and visibility for specific interventions
- To jointly develop communication and awareness resources, considering the different target groups – civil society, public authorities, children, older persons etc.
- To support partnerships between local CSOs and local/regional media outlets for a larger variety of communication platforms, and best outreach
- To provide trainings for media outlets, particularly to editors, on project topics and messages (impact of local services, responsibilities of different stakeholders for sustainability of local services etc.) to ensure the topics are always on the agenda and periodically reflected in media
- To identify a common communication instrument (project website, separate account on social media, etc.) for a better visibility and dissemination of information

Lesson 9: Innovative and efficient instruments for online citizens' engagement contribute to improving capacity of regional and local CSOs in the implementation of activities, knowledge sharing and networking, and also require less resources

Recommendations:

- To support procurement of information technology and communication (ITC) equipment and software to increase organisational capacities and efficiency in project implementation
- To ensure CSOs and citizens, particularly from vulnerable groups, have access to necessary ITC equipment and infrastructure, and know how to use online platforms; if available in the targeted community, to guide towards closest ITC infrastructure and provide training and coaching, if needed
- To balance organisation of offline and online meetings and events – networking, trainings, direct assistance and mentoring for partner CSOs and grants beneficiaries should not be done only online

Implementation timeline

Lesson 10: Setting up and implementation of a grants scheme through partner CSOs takes time. To set up all implementation mechanisms as well as review and test the key assumptions and targets for implementation of the CSO Action and the Local Grants Programme, at least a 6-months inception period is needed.

Recommendations:

- To plan at least four months for screening and contracting partner CSOs and other month for setting up all implementation mechanisms
- To consider that screening and contracting local grants beneficiaries, that have good reputation and established trusted relationships with the local citizens and the public authorities they work with, might take up to six months besides the technical evaluation of proposals, it is useful to organise due diligence meetings with prospective CSOs and site visits to confirm any proposed cooperation agreements
- To thoroughly consider and calculate the implementation period of local or regional projects, as any requests for grants agreements extensions implies considerable time, financial and administrative resources
- To link the reporting of any staff and experts' costs to the share of implemented project activities, particularly for local projects, thus to avoid use of finances only for salaries and ensure timely and efficient implementation of the project
- To envisage an inception phase for the interventions and implementation of the grants scheme by partner CSOs at the regional level; the overall implementation of a grants scheme should preferably take 3 years

Lesson 11: Projects with objectives of citizens mobilisation, empowerment for action, and change of behaviour require more effort and time

Recommendations:

- To support local projects that envisage citizens mobilisation, engagement in local actions, improved cooperation with public authorities only if the implementation is planned for more than one year; the longer and consistent the interventions – the greater the impact and sustainability of *soft* interventions
- To provide additional training and coaching to the local NGOs in specific fields of their projects (such as environment protection, community mobilisation, awareness on responsibilities for sustainable local services etc.), as to improve the quality of their interventions; to support the local organisations in identifying and contracting qualified experts
- To support interventions targeting children and youth, especially in cooperation with education institutions and departments, as agents of change and sustainability
- To support in-country study visits for learning good practices of citizens participation in local development, cooperation between civil society and local authorities, cooperation with local media
- To support local and regional networking and exchange of good practices of citizens engagement in local development

- To organise additional training for supporting networking among the CSOs to improve their understanding and their role in a CSO network and increase their participation in it
- To leverage on efforts and resources of different donors and partners for an additional impact of the project at any level

Sustainability

Lesson 12: Ownership over the results and sustainability of any interventions, *soft* or *hard*, is obtained when there is cooperation between all local stakeholders - local authorities, citizens, community-based organisations, media, businesses

Recommendations:

- To encourage local citizens groups to seek partnership with CSOs from neighbouring communities for guidance and support in writing project proposals and applying for grants
- To encourage partnerships with CSOs with experience in targeted area of intervention for better experience sharing and longer follow-up after finalisation of the local project
- To promote success stories of CSOs to increase trust between local authorities and CSOs, particularly in communities where civil society is weak
- To include as mandatory interventions and activities with engagement of local authorities and local service providers, regardless there is no co-financing from their side
- To ensure that any local project with infrastructure elements include costs for expertise in targeted local services / intervention area
- To include in project proposals the needed means and activities that ensure the sustainability of key benefits deriving from the project outputs (e.g., educational activities for pupils and parents)
- To ensure that project interventions have a sustainability plan means and activities that can ensure the sustainability of key benefits deriving from the project outputs (i.e., evaluation of the impact on the local citizens and mitigation measures, if needed).

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