



PROJECT EVALUATION STUDY „INCREASING LOCAL GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY TROUGH PARTICIPATORY POLICIES IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA”

Abstract

The present research report is an evaluation study of the project “Increasing local government transparency through participatory policies” administered by the National Center for Assistance and Information of NGOs in Moldova. The purpose of the study consists in: analyzing the impact of the activities carried out by the initiative groups, created at community level; determining the change of the level of participation of community members in the decision-making process and of the compliance by the local public authorities with the legal framework regarding the transparency in the decision-making process in the 10 communities involved in the project (Chetrosu, Anenii Noi district; Copceac, Gagauz Autonomous Territorial Unit; Costești, Ialoveni district; Drochia; Dubăsarii Vechi, Criuleni; Glodeni district; Gura Bîcului, Anenii Noi district; Leova; Mereni, Anenii Noi district; Stefan Vodă). Before carrying out the project, the opinion of the society was also examined so as to get to know the issues related to ensuring the transparency process of the LPA.

Various quantitative and qualitative research methods, techniques and tools were used in the study. The sociological survey based on a questionnaire was applied to the citizens from the 10 localities participating in the project. In total, 1,000 questionnaires were distributed, 100 in each locality in the first stage (before the project started in 2018) and the same number after the completion of the project activities (in 2020). The target group consisted of persons of over 18 years of age. The interviewers were offered a list of the streets where the questionnaires were to be distributed following a random choice. The samples are representative according to the socio-demographic variables: age, sex, level of education. The sociological survey based on the questionnaire was also applied to the representatives of the LPAs from each community (mayor, deputy mayor, secretary and local councilors), in total being conducted among 78 respondents in the first stage and 104 in the second stage in 2020. 1 DFG was carried out with representatives of the initiative groups before the project implementation and semi-structured interviews after the completion of the project (5).

The participation of citizens in the process of making decisions of public interest and informing them about the progress of things in the community, in which they live, makes a significant contribution to the development of a prosperous society. But this is largely dependent on the relationship the citizens have with the LPA. The comparative results of the study showed that the proportion of the population that qualifies the relationship between citizens and mayoralty / local council as 'good' and 'very good' increased by 20% from 2018 to 2020.

The partnership between citizens and administration depends on the way citizens have access to the information that influences their lives. When measuring the level of information of the population in relation to the initiatives of the mayoralty targeting the citizens and the level of confidence in the decisions of the local public authorities, the Index of the Dominant Opinion (IOPD) was calculated. It determines the share of the dominant opinions in relation to certain phenomena, processes and is calculated according to the formula: $(p-n) * (100-ne) / 100$, where: p – is the share of the positive opinions, n - the share of the negative opinions, ne - the share of the neutral opinions. The index ranges from -100 to +100. The closer the index is to 100, the more positive the opinions / perceptions / attitudes are.

At the level of the entire sample, in 2018, the value of the IOPD, related to the level of being informed regarding the initiatives of the mayoralty concerning the citizens was positive (3.57), and that of the level of trust in the decisions of the local public authorities was negative (-3.53). By 2020, both indicators had already negative values, -1.7 and -3.8 respectively. This aspect shows that, following the implementation of the project and carrying out the activities of population's training, they already more objectively determine the extent to which they are informed about the initiatives of the local authorities. *"Before these initiative groups were formed, some of the citizens believed that the mayoralty is transparent, but after they learned how transparency should be, they realized that we are no longer so transparent"*.

The results of the study showed that the proportion of respondents, who appreciated that the LPA always informs them about the draft decisions to be discussed at the Local Council, increased from 7.6% in 2018 to 14% in 2020, and of those who are informed 'sometimes' or 'very rarely' from 43.8% to 54.8%. Thus, the proportion of those who are not informed decreased by more than one third (34.7%) in 2018, to less than a quarter (23.2%) in

2020. In 2018, a very small number of respondents (16.3%) pointed out that the representatives of the Local Council invite them to attend its meetings, in 2020 their proportion increased to 40.6%. Both in 2018 and 2020, the most common ways used to notify the population are the placement of announcements and notices on boards in front of the town/village hall, distributions of personal invitations and the publication of announcements in the media. In 2020, it is observed that besides these three modalities, it is also practiced to display the notices on the website of the mayoralty and on the social networks.

In 2018, systematically, the Local Council made at least an annual activity report that was presented to the community only in 25.9% of cases, and local councilors met regularly with citizens only in 11.4% of situations. In 2020, their proportion of the latter decreased to 7 and the number of those who estimated that the Local Council makes at least an annual activity report that it presents to the community increased up to 29%.

According to most respondents, the decisions regarding community development in 2018 were made by local councilors - 44.9%, followed by the mayor - 41.3 %, businessmen - 7.5%, ordinary citizens - 3.9%, someone else - 1.1%, and 1.1% consider that no one makes the decisions. In 2020, the same hierarchy is maintained, except that the share of those who consider that citizens also make decisions related to community development has increased but not essentially. In particular, the answers were distributed as follows: councilors 51.5%, mayor - 34.7%, businessmen - 6.8%, citizens and others - 5.8%.

In 2018, out of the total number of respondents only 36.9% stressed that they can influence the decision-making process in the locality where they live (total answers of 'to a large extent' and 'to some extent'), while in 2020 their proportion was of 39.2% .

An important aspect that has been registered is that the share of participants in consulting the locality budget, distributing the locality budget, attracting investments, elaborating the community strategic plan, winning grants for the locality and creating conditions for business has increased from 2018 to 2020.

In 2018, only 14.3% of the total surveyed population has ever submitted LPA proposals for improving the situation in the locality. Only in 21% the proposals were discussed and implemented, in 36.7% they were discussed, but were not implemented, in 3.9% they were not discussed, but they were implemented and the rest of the situations were neither discussed nor implemented. In 2020, the proportion of respondents who submitted LPA proposals at least once increased to 49.5%. However, the proportion of proposals that were discussed and implemented increased, but not essentially. Thus, 22.6% of the proposals were discussed and implemented, 22.8% were discussed, but not implemented, 5.9% were not discussed, but implemented and in the other cases they were neither discussed nor implemented. Analyzing the profile of the citizen who submits APL proposals to improve the situation in the locality, it has been stated that most often this is a woman, of young or adult age, who lives in the rural area and has higher education.

When asked why they did not submit LPA suggestions for improving the situation in the locality, most mentioned, both in 2018 and 2020, the lack of confidence that the suggestions will be considered (24.2% and 23.7 %, respectively), followed by those who stressed the lack of time - (19.4% and 20.3% respectively). During this reference period, the percentage of respondents who mentioned that they did not know that they can submit suggestions diminished from 15.4% in 2018 to 9.6% in 2020, but also of those who pointed out that they do not get

involved from 14.7% to 12.8%. However, the proportion of those who believe that LPA is responsible for everything in the community has increased from 9.2% to 13.1%, of those who do not submit suggestions because they are very satisfied with the LPA from 7.2% to 12.6% and those who mentioned that the LPA does not accept suggestions from citizens from 5% to 8%, which makes some of them feel neglected and ignored.

The reason most often invoked by the representatives of active citizens' groups regarding the non-involvement of citizens in solving community problems refers to the predominance of the aging population. *"We invite them several times, but only people who have something to solve such as businessmen and intellectuals come"*. Another factor is that the population believes there is no need to get involved in this process. *"More than 6 years ago, people were more active because there were more problems, they could even call the television, but not now. Many problems related to infrastructure, roads, bridges, wells, development of social services have been solved. Respectively people have no claims, they feel comfortable and let the APL to do its work. At the meetings of the local councils there are only persons who have problems of land privatization."* Unexplained indifference was mentioned quite often. *"No more than 50 people out of over 6,000 inhabitants that the village has, come at the village meeting. People do not come even at holiday events. No more than 30 people came to a holiday event where mămăligă and steak was served. It is also difficult to mobilize the young people as they always have to study or work."*

The synthetic index was calculated in determining the main impediments citizens encounter in the decision-making process. We specify that the calculation of the synthetic index for each individual impediment, related to the total number of answers from the first choice, had the share of 1, to the answers from the second choice - the share was 0.75, and to the answers from the third choice - the share was of 0.5. According to these calculations, the main impediments invoked by the respondents in 2018 and 2020 are: lack of time, followed by the perception that the decisions must be made by well-trained persons and that citizens are not sufficiently informed.

Depending on the number of participants in different actions concerning the problems in the community and the involvement in solving the community problems, the typology of the citizens was elaborated, distinguishing three categories. **Active** (31%). Mostly, these are young people or adults, who are economically active and possess higher education. They appreciate the fact that they are informed about the LPA initiatives and frequently participate in various actions that address problems in the community. **Well-intentioned but unable to act** (58%). Most often these are women with varying levels of education. They believe they can influence the decision-making process at the community level. They occasionally participate in various actions that address problems in the community. The most frequently cited cause for not being involved in solving community problems is the lack of time. **Passive or resigned** (11%). Most often these are elderly people with a low level of education. They do not trust the decisions of the local public authorities. They do not participate at all in different actions that concern problems in the community. They are not involved in solving community problems due to the fear of conflicts, the belief that the LPA is responsible for everything in the community.

Comparative data from the 2018 and 2020 study show the increase of the share of respondents who are informed about the organization of the Local Council meetings, public

hearings, public debates and consultative meetings at the residence place, but also a non-essential reduction of the information regarding the organization of the Mayor's public reports.

With the increase of the level of informing the population about the organization by the LPA of the meetings of the Local Council, the public reports of the mayor, public hearings, public debates and consultative meetings at the residence place, the level of citizens' participation in these activities increased from 2018 to 2020. The reasons invoked in 2018, by those who did not participate in such activities were - lack of time (38.1%), ignorance about the fact that such activities are public (32.5%), 20.1% were not invited to such events, access to these meetings is allowed only to civil servants (3.8%) and other reasons (5.5%). In 2020, the same order of reasons is maintained, except that the proportion of those who did not know that the Mayor's reports, hearings, debates organized by the LPA are public, of those who considered that access is allowed only to officials, has decreased, and also of those who were expecting personal invitations to these events.

According to the opinions of the interviewed local public authorities, the most common ways of informing the citizens they use are: placing announcements in front of the Mayoralty, participating in council meetings, citizen hearings, organizing public reports and informing them through local councilors or other social actors in the community. During the last two calendar years, it has been noted that the proportion of respondents, who consider that public hearings, public reports and the information through the local councilors are no longer practiced, increased. The number of those who believe that citizens are informed through public announcements and public debates is growing.

From 2018 to 2020, the views of local public authorities who believe that the Local Council makes at least one annual activity report, which it presents publicly to the community, and of those who claim that local councilors meet regularly with citizens, almost doubled. In 2018, public hearings were announced in 55% of cases by posting announcements on boards at the Town/Village Hall, 71.8% by posting announcements on the Town/Village Hall site and 37.2% by displaying announcements in the media. In 2020, there are already some increases in these three aspects, namely up to 79.8%, 78, 3%, 40.4%. According to the data of the study, the number of opinions of the local authorities, who appreciated that the draft of the local budget is public, and can be consulted by any one, has increased from 88.5% in 2018 to 94.2% in 2020. In the process of establishing the needs of the community, more citizens were involved by organizing public debates 64.1% in 2018 and 73.1% in 2020.

In both reference years (2018 and 2020), the same deviations of the local public administration authorities from the legal requirements regarding transparency in the decision-making process (draft decisions are not always subject to public consultations) are maintained. The LPA does not use all the means provided by the law for informing citizens; LPA does not elaborate and approve internal rules for information, consultation and participation in the process of making and adopting decisions; LPA omits information about initiating the making of a decision. The same top of the main causes that lead to the non-implementation by the local public administration authorities of the legislation regarding transparency in the decision-making process are preserved: lack of financial, technical, human resources means for the implementation of legal requirements; the stipulations of the law on transparency in the decision-making process are not known to all LPA representatives; the mechanism for implementing the law is inefficient, such as the lack of a person to take care about this aspect.

The same proportion of respondents both in 2018 and in 2020 (almost 90%) stressed that they seek recommendations from the citizens of the locality related to different issues of general interest. However, in 2018 - the recommendations of citizens are taken into account 'a lot' and 'quite a lot' in 76.8% of cases, in the rest 'not too much' or 'not at all', and in 2020 - 82% and 18% respectively.

If in 2018, the main recommended measure to involve citizens in solving community problems was the suggestion to become as transparent as possible, then in 2020 it was proposed to organize discussions / debates to attract the population in this process. The proposal to seek the opinion of citizens in the most important decisions becomes even more imperative.

More than half of the citizens interviewed acknowledged that they are aware of the activities undertaken by the initiative group within the project. Of the total of the local public authorities 75% stated that they are aware of the activity of the initiative group in the locality that has carried out activities related to enhancing the transparency of the LPA. The causes of reduced knowledge about the activity of the initiative groups mentioned by the interviewed representatives are: insufficient publicity for the activities carried out within the project; the change of some members in the initiative groups; insufficient valorization of the name "initiative group" – *"We worked as individuals more. It is a loophole that the notion of initiative group has not been sufficiently exploited". "If you tell them about Natalia, Ion, Ludmila they know them, but if you tell them about the initiative group then they don't"*.

When the respondents were asked what activities were carried out by the initiative group in the locality where they live, the following were mentioned: installation of information boards (18.8%), publication of newsletters and brochures 14.8%, implementation of various projects (12.8 %), mobilizing citizens (11.7%), local radio (9%), organization of training seminars (8.6%), equipping the Mayoralty with video cameras, television (7.8%), creation of the cooperation plan between LPAs and citizens (7.1%), posting news on sites and social networks (6%) and the monitoring of LPA meetings (3.4%).

An important contribution of the project carried out concerns the improvement of the level of informing the population on the activity of LPA. Thus, 45% of the respondents pointed out that during the last two years they are better informed about this. This is recorded in the context in which 59.4% of the respondents mentioned that during the last two calendar years they received some brochures and leaflets regarding the activity of LPA. 70.6% appreciated that the information obtained regarding the activity of LPA is 'useful' and 'very useful', especially for the rural population. When asked if there are any changes in the attitude of the community towards LPA activity, 40.5% consider that the latter is much more interested. "As a result of the project, people began to come to council meetings, even people who have no interest. When people meet me, they ask when meetings will take place to watch them online. Online, we are watched even from England and the USA".

Three quarters of the local public authorities consider that due to the implemented project the population is better informed. 97% of them consider that the information obtained by the citizens within this project is 'very useful' and 'useful'. 65% of the local authorities participating in the study are of the opinion that the citizens have become more interested in the activity of LPA.

When the authorities were asked how they appreciate the collaboration between APL and the initiative group, 81.7% think it was 'good' and 'very good'. The main difficulties that

the authorities encountered in the collaboration with the initiative group were: lack of time (42.7%), restricted budget (14.5%) and interference in LPA work (7.3%). 32.7% mentioned that they did not face any problems in this collaboration. Among the suggestions offered by the local public authorities to the initiative groups were: organizing trainings for the civil servants of the Mayoralty and local councilors, consulting the LPA on the carried out projects and serving as model of transparency in their activity.

The study on the impact of the project revealed the increase of the citizens' interest for their involvement in the public and administrative life of the communities. This indicates that carrying out the activities within the project the population was made aware of the importance of participating in community development. Through the actions carried out, the awareness of the population was achieved in the sense of mobilizing them to get involved in the community life. The results of the study further indicate the need to increase the procedural transparency of the local public authorities and to better inform the citizens, especially through public debates. As a result, the actions of the administration would correspond to a greater extent to the needs and wishes of the citizens.



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