

## EVALUATION SUMMARY

### Internal evaluation of the project 'Business advocacy for peace'

#### EVALUATION THEME

1. Relations within and between communities
2. Building peace through economic development

#### INTRODUCTION

This evaluation assessed the effectiveness and sustainability of the 'Business advocacy for peace' project, the latest three-year phase of Alert's long running regional work on [economy and conflict](#) in the South Caucasus and Turkey. The project sought to strengthen the capacities of the [Caucasus Business and Development Network](#) (CBDN) to promote regional cooperation among small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and to energise policy debate on trans-Ingur/i trade regulation and public debate on the restoration of regional transport networks through new evidence and impetus. The geographical scope of the project included Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey, as well as Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorny Karabakh,<sup>1</sup> spanning four conflict divides. Findings and recommendations outlined below are feeding into a strategic review of the strand to inform and shape the design of a new phase from 2016.

#### BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

The project 'Business advocacy for peace' forms the latest stage of the economy and conflict strand of peacebuilding work carried out by Alert in the South Caucasus and Turkey over the past 12 years. Running from January 2013 to July 2015, this phase included components funded by the European Union, the British government's Conflict Pool, and the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The goal of the project was as follows: *South Caucasus CSO networks are empowered to engage with national, regional and international actors, and have an impact on national and regional policy-making processes.* The project team pursued two specific objectives, outlined below together with the corresponding outcomes anticipated:

**Objective 1)** Strengthened capacities of CBDN to promote regional cooperation among SMEs

*Outcome a)* CBDN's economy-based peace constituencies (SMEs, sectors, local, regional) have been widened and participation has been extended to new partners

*Outcome b)* The CBDN network is strengthened and its impact in terms of its capacity to deliver economy-based peacebuilding initiatives in the region is heightened

**Objective 2)** New evidence and impetus energise policy debate on trans-Ingur/i<sup>2</sup> trade regulation and public debate of the rehabilitation of regional transport networks

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<sup>1</sup> Disclaimer: the framing of the geographic areas is used for clarity and does not indicate any political view on the conflicts in the South Caucasus.

<sup>2</sup> The Ingur/i River is the physical representation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict divide.

*Outcome c)* A better understanding and enlivened debate between the conflict parties with regards to possible regulation of trans-Ingur/i economic relations

*Outcome d)* Specialised research on topics of regional importance, including transport infrastructure analysis, increasing understanding and informing debates currently based on partial evidence

The geographical scope of the project covered the South Caucasus and eastern Turkey. Activities were organised under three areas of work:

- Regional dialogue for key business sectors and outreach to promote regional economic cooperation, in partnership with CBDN;
- A regional cost–benefit analysis of the restoration of transport links across the Caucasus; and
- Cross-conflict research into unregulated trade across the Ingur/i River and the case for trade regulation in the Georgian-Abkhaz context.

## METHODOLOGY

An internal evaluator was chosen for this exercise to facilitate internal learning and build the evaluation into the broader process of strategic review of the South Caucasus economy and conflict strand. The process included a comprehensive review of project documents and 15 interviews with project stakeholders, followed by analysis and triangulation of the data. Interviewees included Alert staff, international consultants, CBDN partners, individuals engaged in the trans-Ingur/i and regional research, and civil society leaders external to the project. Due to the wide geographical scope of the project and regional variation, the evaluation was conducted remotely, which posed limitations to the range of stakeholders accessed. Care was taken, however, to ensure gender balance in the interviews and capture perspectives from across the region.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Close **monitoring of the context** and adaptation of activities enabled engagement of civil society actors without harm despite the pressures of a politically volatile period regionally.
- **Good relations between the project team and local actors** enabled informed analysis, neutral facilitation and effective navigation of sensitive topics.
- The use of a **regional format** helped to mitigate political sensitivity around research topics.
- In the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict context, research on quantifying trans-Ingur/i trade and mechanisms for regulating trade in other conflict contexts **opened up channels of dialogue**, and increased the circle of those in relevant positions in the respective administrations receptive towards the case for regulation of trade. Now there is potential to further support political dialogue on the topic and stimulate debate.
- The study of the Sochi–Yerevan railway line led to **interest among key advocacy targets and more informed discussion** in Abkhazia, Georgia and Armenia, while the results of the Gyumri–Nakhichevan study necessarily remained more muted due to political sensitivities in the Nagorny Karabakh context. There, cross-divide professional relations and individual attitudinal change were the key benefits of the study.
- The distribution of research outputs and their use by participating researchers in academic circles supported sustainability. However, in a rapidly changing context, **continued influence on prospects for regional integration will require the production of new evidence on the topic**. The positive reputation of the publications lays the ground for target group receptiveness to future publications.
- The CBDN network was strengthened by the skills and energy of new participants, which contributed to **more professional promotional practices and resources**. However,

***sustainable engagement of the constituencies in cross-divide or regional initiatives was not increased*** by the new capacities gained.

- CBDN capacity was built through ***relationships and lines of communication created between business representatives from divided communities***. Short-term, these enable knowledge sharing and cross-divide understanding, in spite of isolation. Longer term, sustained networks and resources will support the renewal of relations between the societies when this becomes politically viable.

## LESSONS

- ***Follow up of international and local advocacy targets*** needs to be systematic and repeated regularly to overcome high turnover of posts and ensure advocacy achievements are maintained.
- ***Translation of research reports*** into local languages would have increased the reach of advocacy efforts, as Russian is not read by all target stakeholders. This should be budgeted for future publications.
- ***Cross-divide processes involving joint outputs in the Nagorny Karabakh context*** are time-consuming due to the need to negotiate political sensitivities in language. Time for this should be factored into design.
- ***New CBDN participants should be engaged locally*** based on their areas of interest before being introduced to the regional network.
- ***More systematic data collection and analysis for monitoring and evaluation purposes*** would increase understanding of the effectiveness and impact of activities, facilitating evidence-based project design.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### ***Regional research***

- In future, the project team should develop a ***strategy for advocacy, communications and engagement with media*** at the design stage of the project, linked to research dissemination and risk mitigation plans, and be regularly reviewed.
- ***Flexible strategies for implementation in challenging political contexts*** should be factored into the design from the start. Advocacy aims should be differentiated according to context.

### ***CBDN***

- Follow-on work on CBDN's engagement of SMEs should be anchored in a strategy for ***sustainable and scalable initiatives connecting businesses regionally, with tangible benefits*** for local communities. Where legal barriers prevent cross-divide for-profit partnerships, regional causes, such as environmental protection, could be explored.
- CBDN would benefit from ***more outreach to local and international NGOs and CSOs*** to support information-sharing, and partnership and network growth. Collaboration with specialised organisations could fill gaps in sectoral expertise and increase recognition locally.
- It is recommended to ***develop a new core area of work under the leadership of new CBDN representatives***, increasing their ownership of the network's activities and investment in its future.
- For further programming, Alert and CBDN partners need to ***consider whether regional public outreach is strategic in the current context***, when risks around political sensitivity are high on one side of every conflict, except in the case of Turkey–Armenia.
- A ***gender analysis*** of CBDN target groups across the region could provide useful insights on entry points for further engagement of economic actors in different sectors.

### ***Project management***

- Follow-up projects should build in time and capacity at inception and review points for ***inclusive development of a theory of change and monitoring and evaluation plan***, including means of systematically soliciting and collating feedback from advocacy targets. Baseline studies should include input from local actors and assess CBDN brand awareness of target groups.
- A ***more advanced media tracking system*** should be established to monitor not only local media references to the research, but broader topical media coverage. This would enable sharper analysis of change in debate due to the project and help identify new entry points.