

Evaluation summary

Initiative for youth-led civic dialogue and action project, South Caucasus – Internal evaluation

June 2017

Evaluation theme

Conflict sensitive development and humanitarian programming

Introduction

This summary outlines the findings of the internal mid-term evaluation of the Initiative for youth-led civic dialogue and action project. The project took place in the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict context and in selected third countries between September 2015 and December 2018, and the mid-term evaluation was published in June 2017. The project supported youth participation in civic initiatives and critical thinking on various socio-political problems, including the conflict, in respective contexts to encourage youth to influence social change and promote a culture of peace.

The evaluation assesses the strength and relevance of the project's theory of change; assesses project effectiveness and progress towards expected outcomes; documents feedback and lessons learned to date by partners and participants; and provides recommendations to adapt and improve activities in the second half of the project.

Background to the project

The project was intended to promote civic initiatives in the Georgia-Abkhazia and Georgia-South Ossetia conflict contexts. However, due to developments in South Ossetia between project design and implementation it was impossible to operate there. Therefore, the project deepened focus on the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict context.

The overall goal of the project was “by November 2018, a new generation of potential leaders will have mobilised, actively participating in and influencing pro-peace social change through cross-divide dialogue with peers within their own societies.”

The specific objectives of the project were:

1. Participants have developed knowledge, skills (critical thinking, debating, advocacy, etc.) and values that are important for civic leadership and activism in their respective community.
2. Participants have formed bonds and maintained relationships with peers from across the South Caucasus.

3. Participants have become actively engaged in local discussions, civic initiatives and policy dialogues at a local level and across the conflict divides.

From the early days of the project, it became clear that the central objectives, especially those relating to inter-group relations across the conflict divide, are understood and prioritised differently by partners and participants on both sides of the Ingur/i due to the specificity of local needs, perceptions and societal pressures. This uneven emphasis by partners on the different elements in project design was identified as an important area for further understanding and discussion with partners and participants during this mid-term review.

There were 4 levels of activity designed to achieve these objectives: civic education courses, conflict-analysis workshops in both societies; regional meetings that brought young Georgians and Abkhaz together alongside their peers from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorny Karabakh; small grants for civic initiatives in both locations.

Methodology

This evaluation focuses on documenting progress towards project outcomes and feedback from partners and participants to improve project management. It assesses changes in the context and the ongoing applicability of the theory of change. The team employed qualitative data collection and analysis methods as agreed with Alert's partners. These included focus group discussions with 55 project participants (25 in Tbilisi, 30 in Sukhum/i), participant observation through 5 sit-in sessions (two seminars in Tbilisi, three in Sukhum/i), and 23 partner and key informant interviews.

The focus of the mid-term review was on the following areas:

1. Assessing the strength and relevance of the theory of change (ToC) underpinning the project.
2. Assessing project effectiveness and progress towards expected outcomes.
3. Documenting feedback and lessons learned to-date by partners and participants.
4. Providing formative recommendations to adapt and improve activities in the second half of the project.

The review also explored unanticipated and unintended outcomes, positive and negative, in relation to the overall partnership, participants and partners capacity and the sustainability of project outcomes.

Summary of findings

- The project is making positive progress towards its outcomes.
- Opportunities for young people to engage in civic activities, e.g. advocacy and rights promotion, exist on both sides of the Ingur/i. That said, there are more barriers to youth participation in civic activism in Abkhazia as there is a more restricted space for civil society.

- There is will among young Georgians to meet with Abkhaz and discuss conflict issues. Some on the Abkhaz side have a preference for a regional format (i.e. involvement of Armenians, Azerbaijanis and Karabakhi-Armenians).
- All participants and stakeholders see a strong need to continue civic education initiatives as these fill gaps in current curriculums and expose participants to alternative perspectives.
- Students' interest in taking part in third-country events is very high, the prospect of being selected to attend continues to serve as a motivation for year 2 participants.
- Participants on both sides are employing civic education skills learned on the courses in discussion clubs and small grant initiatives directly, as well as in other civic activities outside the course.
- One of the least well-received lectures was on gender. The content, which delved into feminist and queer theory, and criticised patriarchy caused a stir among course participants and staff. Gender as a topic was dropped in the year 2 course and the abandonment of 'gender' as a topic would suggest that the ability to engage constructively with challenging content is perhaps not as developed as stakeholders report.
- The project's theory of change is still fit for purpose. The logical framework amendments in 2016 better reflect the current context than the one written in 2012. However, the implementing partners do not use the logical framework for activity planning or monitoring.

Lessons

- In year 1 there was a perceptible learning and skills gap at the third-country event in The Hague, which did not allow dialogue to take root as deeply as possible. All partners observed this clear imbalance in the level of experience, preparation and interest in certain topics between the participants. To avoid this happening in year 2, older and more experienced participants were recruited and only the most motivated and best prepared were invited in order to effectively advance discussions and topics.

Recommendations

- Acknowledge the asymmetry of interests on different sides of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and manage expectations accordingly.
- Conduct periodic reviews of outcomes, outputs and indicators together with implementing partners to ensure they remain robust against changes in context and progress.
- Diversify participants in the courses and the third-country events, where possible recruiting more participants from areas outside of Tbilisi and Sukhum/i and from minority groups. Future events should have more solid agendas and involve fewer trainers to ensure full participation of young people.
- Introduce more course content on the role of media in creating and promoting conflict narratives.

- Ensure the importance of gender is understood at all project levels. The topic should be included in all course curricula and reporting should have a gender-sensitive approach that is intersectional, comprehensive and relational, and goes beyond aggregation by sex.
- Where course content has been deemed controversial, do not simply remove it from the curriculum. Controversy offers grounds to delve into a topic and have rational, constructive discussion.
- Alerts should maintain the regional format for the third-country events. They should be more goal-oriented to promote more targeted information sharing and dialogue between Georgians and Abkhaz.
- Ask participants to reflect on new knowledge and skills gained, as well as attitudinal shifts, leadership capacity and social capital to provide additional data to triangulate partners' quarterly reports and the mid-term review results.
- Routinely document and share success stories which relate to higher-level outcomes and impact, particularly measurement and reporting on personal transformation over time.