

Evaluation summary

The European partnership for the peaceful settlement of the conflict over Nagorny Karabakh (EPNK3) project, South Caucasus – External evaluation

July 2019

Evaluation themes

1. Conflict sensitive development and humanitarian programming
2. Governance and state-citizen relations

Introduction

This summary outlines the findings and recommendations of a final evaluation of the EPNK3 project in the South Caucasus. The overall objective of EPNK3 was to contribute to a peaceful settlement of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorny Karabakh through coordinated initiatives in support of both local and international efforts to bring about peace and stability. The project ran from May 2016 – August 2019 and the evaluation was finalised in July 2019.

The evaluation found that despite the volatile context (four-day war at the onset of the project in 2016, and then the Armenian Velvet Revolution in 2018), EPNK3 achievements have been significant. Planned outputs were achieved by the end of the no-cost extension (May – August 2019), and evidence shows that these outputs have contributed towards intended effects which will provide increased opportunities to push the peace agenda further.

Background to the project

EPNK is a civil society initiative funded and supported by the EU with five member organisations (Conciliation Resources, Crisis Management Initiative, International Alert, Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation and LINKS) that works with local partners in the South Caucasus on a wide range of peacebuilding activities. It seeks to build mutual trust, understanding and confidence in the settlement process of the Nagorny Karabakh (NK) conflict.

The project started in 2010 “as the only cross-conflict civil society intervention that involves all concerned societies.” It offers a direct platform for the EU Special Representative (EUSR) and other EU actors to regularly engage with civil society actors from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorny Karabakh, and provides trusted spaces to discuss and reflect on the opportunities and challenges for peacebuilding activities in the region.

Building on the results of EPNK1 (2009-11) and EPNK2 (2012-15), EPNK was in its third phase (EPNK3 May 2016 – August 2019). It started in the immediate aftermath of the April 2016 escalation of violence. Its overall objective "is to contribute to the peaceful settlement of the conflict around Nagorny Karabakh and the prevention of further violence, in particular by strengthening the capacity of the civil society and grass-root communities (including IDPs) to undertake peacebuilding activities and to better inform the official peace process."

To this end, the project "will support diverse groups within the societies in their peacebuilding and negotiation efforts at the level of official actors (Track 1), dialogue and peacebuilding efforts at the level of civil-society representatives (Track 2) confidence building at the grassroots level (Track 3), and build links between them."

Methodology

An evaluation matrix was used to divide key questions on effectiveness, relevance, management and sustainability into more manageable sub-questions and topics. Data and information were collected through initial and detailed briefings by Skype with the Project Manager, a thorough review and analysis of project documents, and semi-structured key informant interviews via video conferences (including NK key informants), and during a field visit (in Baku, Yerevan and Tbilisi) in April 2019.

To guarantee the accuracy and validity of the evaluation's conclusions, special attention was paid to: triangulating between multiple sources of evidence to draw the main findings for the evaluation; giving all interlocutors/key informants the opportunity to express themselves openly while maintaining their anonymity, and making sure that none of the findings can be attributed to any specific interlocutor (except when informed consent was given); conducting all aspects of the evaluation in a neutral, impartial and independent manner; making sure that conclusions are based strictly on findings, and that recommendations are based clearly on conclusions.

Summary of findings

- In light of the volatile context, EPNK3 achievements have been significant. Planned outputs were achieved by the end of the no-cost extension (May – August 2019), and evidence shows that these outputs have contributed towards intended effects.
- Addressing gender as a cross-cutting issue in the South Caucasus context remains a challenge for cultural and political reasons. The consortium has undertaken concrete steps to gain deeper understanding of the gaps, challenges and opportunities in making gender mainstreaming and gender sensitivity an integral part of their activities.
- EPNK3 has progressed towards reaching track 1 international actors and connecting these actors with track 2. On the other hand, there are few signs of progress in "engaging" track 1 national actors, who can politicise peacebuilding work by conditioning continuation of the project upon demands outside of the peacebuilding mandate and vital conflict sensitivity.
- EPNK3 addresses key causes and drivers of the NK conflict in different and complementary ways, by challenging conflict narratives and rebuilding broken

relationships and by building opportunities for connections between track 1 and track 2 actors.

- EPNK3's management approach is considered more pragmatic and solution-oriented than in previous phases. The project has shown a certain degree of adaptation (monitoring and evaluation, and reporting on results has been strengthened). However, the current format and modus operandi are not conducive to strategic decision-making, lessons learning and adaptation to volatile context changes, even if they do offer a small degree of cross-learning and networking opportunities.
- Empowerment is a very important issue which should be addressed in a future phase through the right mechanisms of participation and with clear objectives, whilst bearing in mind certain persistent political constraints.
- The biggest factors that would influence and ensure sustainability and future local ownership would be a change in the general public's attitude and a positive perception of peacebuilding initiatives by national authorities.
- Multi-layered, inclusive peacebuilding initiatives such as EPNK are much-needed in the long-term, and their third-party facilitation is crucial for sustainable dialogue meetings and cross-border projects. EPNK's multiplier effect is already noticeable as local participants have started operating more independently.

Recommendations

- As long delays are generally not well-perceived by stakeholders in the region, minimise the time between the end of the EPNK3 no cost extension (August 2019) and the beginning of a next phase.
- Collectively design a project-wide engagement strategy for key stakeholders (national authorities, international actors, key personalities, target groups, etc.). The strategy should be regularly reviewed and adjusted during implementation.
- Continue strengthening the project's monitoring and evaluation and reporting frameworks with: a) Common indicators for specific objectives and an outputs dashboard, b) Decisions on a common gender reporting framework (i.e. cross-cutting gender indicators) to which local partners should also adhere, c) Decisions on how data should be disaggregated and reflected in a table in the quarterly reports to track data by strand and the project as a whole (gender, age, location etc).
- Develop appropriate indicators and data collection methods to measure changes in attitudes, behaviours, relationships or practices among direct or indirect beneficiaries.
- Consider allocating resources for training on integrating gender perspectives into the work of local partners and ensuring that the gender perspective is considered in all activities.
- Consider carrying out joint analysis of assumptions at the project level to complement each strands' assumptions at the onset of the project and when there are context developments.
- Allocate time and resources for strategic discussions and collective decision-making at the project level and between the project and EU stakeholders.

- Provide a greater role and participation of local partners, including at the design phase. The project design should include clear objectives and resources relating to building capacities and expertise in view of greater local ownership in future.
- Explore ways to support/work with the young generation of activists that are hesitant to engage in formal projects and donor/recipient relationships. This support may be sharing literature or best practices in peacebuilding or exchange with other groups of activists elsewhere. This exploration should be conducted with the younger generation of local partners, some of whom are in close contact with these activists.
- Finally, consider the provision of “extra-flexible” funding within the project’s overall budget that would allow for new initiatives/quick reaction in times of contextual changes that offer opportunities.