Evaluation summary
Reweaving the Ukrainian social fabric: supporting community-led peacebuilding and advocacy project – External evaluation
September 2020

Evaluation theme

Conflict sensitive development and humanitarian programming

Introduction

"Reweaving the Ukrainian social fabric: supporting community-led peacebuilding and advocacy" project operated from October 2018 to October 2020 and aimed to increase the resilience of Ukrainian society against the impacts of conflict and social tensions, and to enhance its capacity to mitigate future conflict-related risks. The project was implemented by International Alert in partnership with Thomson Media in Ukraine, targeting civil society, regional and local media, local authorities, and decision-makers in national- and local-level institutions.

The evaluation was conducted in September 2020 to ascertain the extent to which this project has achieved its intended outcomes. The study analyses the effectiveness of the project activities and the impact and sustainability of the results achieved. The evaluation provides International Alert and the EU with consolidated lessons learned and recommendations to improve future initiatives.

Background to the project

Ukraine has a weak national identity to bond its diverse citizens, who feel more connected to local identities than national ones. Alienation has increased since hostilities began in 2014 and is antagonised by polarising rhetoric, the movement of internally displaced people, dissolving social cohesion, restrictions on freedom of expression, among others.

The "Reweaving the Ukrainian social fabric" project works directly with civil society, regional and local media, local authorities, and decision-makers in national- and local-level state institutions to build methodological skills, identify problems and develop solutions that informs conflict sensitive programming. It has also provided small grants to civil society organisations (CSOs) to implement local peacebuilding actions. The overarching theory of change for the project is:

IF civil society and media from across Ukraine are able to design and implement conflict-sensitive peacebuilding programming and solution-orientated reporting, and demonstrate to local communities and local and national authorities the effectiveness of this approach, complemented by improved relationships between media and civil society and stronger civil society networks across Ukraine, **THEN** there will be a more conducive, supportive environment for cross-country peacebuilding and advocacy on conflict issues from the local to the national level, contributing to social cohesion among communities within the diverse contexts of Ukraine.

The overall goal of the project is to increase the resilience of Ukrainian society against the impacts of conflict and social tensions, and to boost its capacity to mitigate future conflict-related risks.

At its outset, the project had three intended outcomes:

1. To build the capacity of an informal network of grassroots CSOs from different areas of Ukraine to generate robust local conflict analysis and to identify peacebuilding priorities and opportunities alongside local authorities (LAs);

2. To design and implement locally led peacebuilding actions, bringing diverse and sometimes opposing groups together constructively, improving their perceptions of the other, and strengthening social cohesion; and

3. To enable grassroots CSOs from across Ukraine to work together and with local and regional media to inform and potentially influence public discourse and decision-makers at numerous levels on common conflict-related issues arising from local conflict analyses and peacebuilding actions.

Methodology

Evaluators undertook in-depth interviews with key stakeholders and project beneficiaries, conducted questionnaires and assessed public discourse for indications of change. In total, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted with key stakeholders in Russian, English and Ukrainian, and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with project beneficiaries and Thomson Media representatives. An electronic questionnaire was sent to 61 CSO representatives and 13 local authority representatives. 45 responses were collected from CSOs and 10 from LAs.

The Most Significant Change Methodology (MSC) was applied as one of the evaluation tools to better capture the results and implemented a 'story' approach to measure 'how' change happens and 'why'. Sentiment analysis was conducted on 10 articles to capture the public discourse towards conflict sensitivity. This technique searches large quantities of data sourced through public Internet and social media sites to identify the recurrence of key words and phrases.

Summary of findings

- The project was perceived by participants as creating a foundation to strengthen informal networks between CSOs, identify emerging activists and support capacity building in conflict analysis.

- 61 grassroots CSOs were engaged in conflict analysis and conflict sensitivity training and 97% indicated that their conflict sensitivity practices had changed because of the training. 12 representatives of local authorities also participated in the training and valued the enhanced interaction with CSOs.

- 20 organisations received training and grants to implement local peacebuilding initiatives. These initiatives strengthened social cohesion by facilitating avenues for citizens from different backgrounds/ethnicities, increasing confidence of vulnerable women and children, introducing child-friendly justice tools, creating an intercultural environment, establishing effective communication platforms between internally displaced persons (IDPs), CSOs and government agencies etc. This made a considerable contribution to building relationships between IDPs, local community members and different ethnic groups, changing attitudes and fostering positive attitudes towards one another, thereby reducing the risk of conflict.

- 36 CSO representatives were provided with intensive training to improve their advocacy capabilities. This was partnered with financial support to implement advocacy actions in their respective communities. In total, six grants were disbursed targeting youth, children, and ethnic minorities.

- In addition, Thomson Media conducted four 4-day workshops on video production for up to 20 CSO representatives to equip them with the knowledge and skills for basic storytelling. This has, to some extent, been able to influence public discourse through equipping local civil activists with skills and empowering them to make their voices heard.

- The ongoing interaction with International Alert was an important learning experience for CSOs which strengthened their reporting and management skills. Organisations reported that this made them better prepared to work with new funders and taught them how to communicate better with donors.

- The project team was the main driving force behind the reliability and flexibility of the support provided. The understanding that the project's modalities were subject to adaptation and flexibility represented a key advantage.

- The timeframes for implementation given to CSOs was not always realistic, especially the advocacy elements where local authority involvement was essential and time was required to build relationships. This could lead to only partial achievement of the desired results in this area.

- Generally, relationships between participants seemed cordial. However, there was one severe disagreement related to the preservation of Communist history. While this seemed to be a generational gap and was not brought to the attention of the invited trainers, it does make an example of the complicated cultural and historical environment in Ukraine and the different ways these are interpreted by CSOs.

- Most of the participating CSOs have not established new relevant partnerships and remain in regular contact only with those they already knew before the training. Ultimately, International Alert could have played a stronger role in the unification of CSOs.

Lessons

- The project would have benefitted from better use of the logical framework as a management tool to capture changes made (or not made) during implementation.

- To some extent, workshop content had to be staggered in line with a given CSOs' development level to ensure engagement/participation in training sessions.

- Even though the International Alert team conducted intensive training on advocacy issues, most surveyed participants identified the need for more of this training. Therefore, further capacity-development measures should be planned.

- It is important to recognise that increasing resilience to conflicts is a long-term process that requires patience and perseverance. Policy change can be effective here, but people's mentalities also need to change, and this takes longer. Therefore, the ultimate results will take time to emerge.

- Unless further support is provided to strengthen the existing CSO network, its sustainability may be jeopardised.

- Monitoring and evaluation was weak for most of the CSOs. Although a few CSOs used pre- and post-training test results as an indicator of the impact of training, most of the monitoring focused on whether activities had been implemented and counted the participants involved in those activities. There were very few examples of understanding whether their work was having an impact, what this impact was and how it had been achieved.

- The selected CSOs demonstrated good practices in their advocacy work, particularly by securing the genuine involvement of beneficiary communities in articulating their needs to local authorities. However, the advocacy work itself was only moderately effective because it did little to analyse or tackle systemic policy issues. International Alert, therefore, has supported these CSOs in becoming more representative of their local communities, but there is still some way to go before they can be considered effective representatives of local priorities.

Recommendations

- Track the extent to which training is being absorbed by recipients more effectively.

- Undertake capacity building of local CSOs in monitoring and evaluation and clearly define reporting frameworks to ensure integration of aspects such as gender. One of the possible solutions could also be adding a logical framework in each grant proposal to better capture measurable results.

- Women made up approximately 80% of project beneficiaries. It might be worth exploring this issue in greater detail to learn why men are less engaged in these kinds of projects in order to adapt any future activities to encourage more male participation. Currently, there is a risk that men are being "left behind" in the integration process.

- The duration of advocacy projects should be extended to enable CSOs to establish cooperation with local authorities and make lasting changes. However, if donor policies and procedures do not allow this, International Alert should cooperate with CSOs to agree on priorities, envisaging more achievable goals and objectives.

- Due to the overwhelming number of programme activities, the staff were not always able to gather quality data in a timely manner. Therefore, it was recommended by many of the interviewees that a programme-related staff position be introduced or that a separate person be made responsible for monitoring and evaluation.