



Update of the In-depth Assessment of Existing and Emerging CSO Initiatives and State of Civic Space in Moldova

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1 ACRONYMS

CSOs - Civil Society Organisations

CSAs - Civil Society Actors

DG NEAR - Directorate-General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations

EaP - Eastern Partnership

EU - European Union

GDPR - General Data Protection Regulation

GESI - Gender Equality and Social Inclusion

KIIs - Key Informant Interviews

LAGs - Local Action Groups

OCAT - Organizational Capacity Assessment Tool

OGP - Open Government Partnership

FSTP - Financial Support to Third Parties

MEAL - Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning

MHPSS - Mental Health and Psychosocial Support

PIN - People in Need

PTSD - Post-traumatic stress disorder

2 INTRODUCTION

This update of the in-depth assessment (initially developed in 2021) was produced within the scope of the European Union (EU)- funded project “Resilient Civil Society in the Eastern Partnership Region”, implemented by People in Need (PIN). The project aims to strengthen the role of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) as resilient, inclusive and trusted governance actors advancing the democratization process in the Eastern Partnership region. It targets a range of grassroots and emerging CSOs that demonstrate a clear commitment to:

- Representing right-holders’ needs and are oriented on achieving real changes that benefit their constituencies.
- Values of peace, freedom, equal rights and human dignity and accountability and transparency in their work.

The assessment aims to update the understanding of the civil society landscape in Moldova. It focuses on the context and needs of civil society, emphasizing new, grassroots actors. The assessment also examines their goals and challenges, particularly given current shifts and disruptions in the region. Furthermore, it explores how these changes affect men's and women's participation in civic initiatives. The results of this updated assessment will further shape the project's approaches, especially the capacity development, financial support priorities and activities focusing on creating collaborative connections.

The document provides a brief context analysis for the period 2021–2023, detailing the developments and trends within the civil society landscape. Following the context analysis, the document presents survey data and key informant interview findings that align with the assessment aims. It concludes with tailored recommendations for project implementation team, addressing the unique needs and challenges identified for CSOs in Moldova.

3 METHODOLOGY

The data collection for this study employed a multi-method approach to assess the development and capacity needs of CSOs in Moldova. It included a rapid desk review of existing studies, a structured survey distributed electronically to various CSOs, and semi-structured key informant interviews with key stakeholders. The methodology for the CSO survey incorporated a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the current state, challenges, and opportunities for CSOs. This questionnaire covered various aspects of CSO operations, including organizational demographics, operational environment, funding sources, capacity development needs, gender specifics and advocacy engagement. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with selected informants who had a comprehensive understanding of the civil society landscape in their respective countries and experience in grassroots CSO development. A semi-structured interview guide was used to ensure consistency while allowing for in-depth exploration of specific themes, covering topics such as the state of civic space, major challenges, gender equality, CSO-government relationships, and recommendations for enhancing CSO effectiveness.

PIN extended an open invitation to Civil Society Actors and Organizations to contribute to the assessment. A survey questionnaire, developed on the Google Forms platform (also accessible on mobile electronic devices) was utilized to gather data. The questionnaire was available in both Romanian and English and was intended to be completed by a designated representative from each CSO. A total of 20 Moldovan grassroots-level CSOs filled out the questionnaire. Additionally, 2 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with civil society professionals to provide in-depth insights into Moldova's civic landscape. The selection criteria for KIIs included individuals with comprehensive knowledge of civil society in Moldova and experience in grassroots CSO development.

Data analysis involved both quantitative and qualitative methods used by PIN’s MEAL specialist. Survey responses were analysed to identify trends, common challenges, and opportunities across the CSOs, using descriptive statistics to summarize the data and provide a clear picture of the CSO landscape. Insights from the KIIs were analysed thematically to complement the quantitative data, offering a

richer, contextual understanding of the issues faced by CSOs and the strategies employed to navigate complex environments.

Throughout the data collection process, it was explicitly communicated that participation was voluntary. Participants were informed that all collected information would be solely used for the needs assessment, adhering to PIN's personal data protection policies and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) to guarantee privacy and data security.

4 **MOLDOVA**

4.1 **Brief country civil society context**

From 2020 to 2023, the civil society environment in Moldova evolved under the influence of political changes, the COVID-19 pandemic repercussions, and geopolitical crises, particularly the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

In 2020, Moldova's CIVICUS Monitor rating was upgraded from 'obstructed' to 'narrowed', reflecting an improvement in the civil society environment. This reclassification marked a significant shift from previous years, indicating progress in the legal and operational context for CSOs. The "Narrowed" rating persisted from 2021 to 2023, denoting a more supportive environment compared to the previous "Obstructed" period.

According to the 2021 - 2022 Freedom House Nations in Transit publications,¹ Moldova had an unchanged overall 'democracy' score of 3.11 (7 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 1 the lowest), compared to a score for "civil society" of 4.75. It is noteworthy that the score for 'civil society' was the highest among all "democracy" score components. In 2023, the Freedom House 'democracy' score for Moldova increased to 3.14.

According to the USAID CSO Sustainability Index 2020 - 2022, Moldova scored 3.7 out of 7 points (1 the most enhanced level of sustainability to 7 - the most impeded), which represents an improvement, compared to the previous years.

Despite improvements, challenges remained, such as bureaucratic hurdles and occasional government pressure, but the overall ability of CSOs to operate, advocate, and assemble saw notable progress.

The overall environment for CSOs was influenced by significant political instability and the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The parliamentary elections in July 2021 brought the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) to power, which took a majority of seats. PAS's pro-European and reformist agenda aimed to create a more favorable environment for CSOs, particularly regarding governmental cooperation and access to information. However, these promises have yet to translate into tangible improvements, including access to information and transparency.²

CSOs faced challenges amid political instability and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The political crisis marked by the change of Government stalled some legal initiatives aimed at improving the CSO environment. For example, the Law on Local Action Groups (LAGs)—entities designed to facilitate local development through community-driven projects—was passed in April 2021, allowing LAGs to access funding from the state budget. However, in 2021, no LAGs have been registered according to the new law.³ Otherwise, according to CSO Meter, the legal framework functioned poorly in the areas of philanthropy, hate crimes, public procurement of social services, and social entrepreneurship, with legal amendments proposed by CSOs in past years remaining pending. Financially, CSOs struggled due to insufficient state support and shifting donor priorities during the pandemic. Notably, the percentage designation mechanism—allowing taxpayers to direct 2% of their income tax to CSOs—saw a revenue increase, however, it has been reported that this system is benefiting primarily larger-sized organizations.

The year **2022** was dominated by the ramifications of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, leading to significant security threats for Moldova. The influx of 580,000 Ukrainian refugees, of whom 89,000

¹ https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/NIT_2021_final_042321.pdf

² CSO Meter 2021: Moldova Country Report

³ The situation improved significantly in 2022, when 41 LAGs were registered.

remained in Moldova by the end of the year, posed a considerable challenge. The government managed the crisis, including the energy crisis caused by increased energy prices and reduced supplies, while continuing its European integration efforts. In June 2022, Moldova's status as a candidate for EU accession alongside Ukraine provided a new direction for development, which was expected to benefit civil society engagement and reform efforts.

In 2022, Moldova's CSOs responded to new challenges, primarily the humanitarian crisis following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This influx of refugees prompted a robust response from CSOs, who extended their activities to provide essential services such as transportation, accommodation, material aid and counseling. Many CSOs adapted by expanding their activities to address the needs of Ukrainian refugees, demonstrating their flexibility and responsiveness.

Legislatively, there were positive steps in several areas. Amendments to legislation on philanthropy and the introduction of new funding opportunities in response to the refugee crisis improved slightly the access to financial resources for CSOs. Online submission for CSO registration was introduced, streamlining the process.⁴

The total number of registered CSOs continued to grow, reaching 12,456, including new LAGs and international branches established to assist with the refugee response. Efforts to improve digital rights included the initiation of the Digital Transformation Strategy 2023-2030.

In 2023, Moldova continued to grapple with the consequences of the Russian invasion, dealing with ongoing energy, economic, and social crises. The state of emergency persisted, underscoring the continued security threats and the government's priority on safeguarding the nation. A significant development was the change of government in February 2023. The new administration maintained Moldova's European integration path. Efforts were also directed toward strengthening national security and countering Russian influence, especially in the information domain.

In 2023, Moldova's CSO environment benefited from ongoing reforms aligned with the country's EU accession goals. New laws on access to information and whistleblower protection were adopted, alongside amendments to anti-money laundering legislation.⁵ These efforts aimed to enhance transparency and strengthen the legal framework for CSOs.

Positive developments were noted in areas such as state support, state-CSO cooperation, and digital rights. The adoption of the CSO Development Programme 2024-2027 and the resumption of the 'Cooperation between Parliament and Civil Society' conference highlighted increased state engagement with civil society. However, the final adoption of the CSO Development Programme 2024-2027, which occurred while public consultations were still ongoing, raises concerns about adherence to legal decision-making procedures and the potential omission of some recommendations.⁶

International donors remained the primary source of funding for CSOs, but changes in funding focus led to shortages for many of them.

Between 2021 and 2023, Moldova's civil society environment showed a transition from stagnation and crisis adaptation to legislative progress and structural reforms. While significant challenges remain, particularly in the area connected to practical access to funding, the period saw improvements in state-CSO cooperation, and the legal framework, fostering a more robust and active civil society.

However, judging by the geopolitical evolutions defined by prolonged severe crisis in Ukraine, active repression of civil society in Georgia, as well as intensified efforts of autocracies to cooperate with each other⁷, it can be assumed that Moldova will continue to be subjected to further pressure and attacks from Russia with the aim to deter its EU accession and erode its civil society landscape. Hence Moldova's civil society should bolster its resilience by enhancing advocacy, diversifying funding sources, and strengthening regional and international alliances to counteract potential pressures and support its EU accession efforts.

⁴ CSO Meter 2022: Moldova Country Report

⁵ CSO Meter 2023: Moldova Country Report

⁶ <https://csometer.info/updates/moldova-government-adopts-cso-development-programme-2024-2027>

⁷ https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/NIT_2024_Digital_Booklet.pdf

4.2 Survey and Interview Results

4.2.1 Operational Environment, Perceived Challenges and Opportunities

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) reveal that CSOs in Moldova face growing financial instability primarily due to inadequate public funding. This impairs their sustainability and effectiveness, limiting their ability to address essential social issues. Compounding this problem are the difficulties CSOs face in exploring alternative revenue streams, such as social enterprises or online crowdfunding. CSOs, therefore, remain heavily reliant on external donors, which exposes them to political rhetoric about foreign agendas and erodes public trust. Additionally, the lack of collaboration among CSOs, influenced by a competitive environment created by the donors, prevents them from pooling resources and working together, thereby weakening the collective impact of the civil society ecosystem in Moldova. Despite these challenges, there are positive indications from recent surveys on public perception. According to a survey by IData for the CONTACT Center,⁸ over half of surveyed Moldovan citizens and private company representatives trust CSOs and recognize their potential to drive societal development. This trust reflects the alignment of CSOs' objectives with public expectations, as a significant proportion of Moldovans and companies are willing to support CSOs financially. Indeed, many CSOs plan to diversify their funding sources, recognizing their current heavy reliance on external donors. The survey also points out areas needing improvement, such as fundraising activities and internal fundraising capabilities, and highlights the need for better transparency and information sharing within the non-profit sector.

Looking more specifically at surveyed smaller, grassroots level CSOs, their focus areas are diverse. Newly registered CSOs in Moldova focus on three main areas: socio-economic and community development, where they support rural development and disadvantaged groups; environmental action, emphasizing ecological protection and sustainable agriculture; and cultural preservation and tourism development, which involves promoting cultural heritage, sports, and social tourism to preserve cultural heritage and stimulate tourism growth. Surveyed grassroots CSOs operating for over three years are focused primarily on participatory democracy, human rights advocacy, and legal support, providing free legal aid, promoting gender equality, and enhancing transparency in governance. They also prioritize media literacy, combating misinformation, and promoting community development through infrastructure projects, entrepreneurial education, and empowering women and youth. Additionally, these CSOs prioritize education reform, advocate for educational policies, and provide psycho-social support to vulnerable families and refugees, aiding their integration and adjustment.

The survey results detailing CSOs' perceptions of **their operational environments** provide a nuanced picture of the challenges and opportunities they encounter. 25% perceive their environment as supportive, fostering conducive conditions for their activities. Meanwhile, 40% find the environment challenging yet manageable. This suggests that despite facing obstacles, these CSOs have developed strategies to navigate difficulties effectively. Their ability to manage challenges reflects a resilient approach to operating amidst adversity. However, 10% describe their environment as either hostile or restrictive while 25% defined it as uncertain and volatile, indicating significant barriers and instability impacting their operations. Factors such as economic fluctuations, political instability, legal restrictions, societal resistance may contribute to this unpredictability, making it challenging for CSOs to plan and sustain their initiatives. These findings underscore the diverse and dynamic nature of the environments in which surveyed CSOs operate.

In terms of any changes in CSO activities or priorities due to recent shifts in the political or social landscape, the data provided suggests that a portion of the surveyed CSOs have experienced changes in their activities or priorities, due to recent shifts in the political or social landscape.

- 11 CSOs, comprising 55% of total responses, affirmed experiencing adjustments due to these shifts.

⁸ <https://contact.md/sondaj-pestre-50-la-suta-dintre-moldoveni-au-incredere-in-osc-uri/>

- 7 CSOs, constituting 35% of total responses, reported no changes in their activities or priorities in response to the evolving landscape.
- For 2 CSOs, representing 10% of total responses, assessing the impact of recent shifts proved challenging, leading to an uncertain stance on whether changes occurred.

The indicated reasons for changes in activities or priorities by the surveyed CSOs can be summarized as follows:

1. **Influence of Local Public Authorities.** Some CSOs have noted the authorities' openness to collaborating with civil society. As a result, joint action plans are being developed and implemented in the field of social assistance and support for people in need. On the other hand, one CSO indicated that their strategy has been adapted to maintain the integrity and position of 'Watchdog' in society, including about the current government, even if it could affect the amount of future governmental support.
2. **Donor influence connected to GESI.** Within the framework of organizational development, there has been recognition of the need to implement the principles of non-discrimination, tolerance, gender equality, and inclusion within the organization.
3. **Refugee assistance.** The CSOs strengthened their capacity to deal with refugee response by studying international documents governing the work of the voluntary sector in providing humanitarian support to refugees, adjusting organizational policies, mechanisms, and procedures, and initiating partnerships with local, regional, and national organizations, among other actions.

It will be important to allocate sufficient attention to analysing how changes in context and operating environment are affecting grassroots CSO operations, as part of the project's capacity assessment workshops, so that they can make timely and calculated strategic decisions.

In terms of CSO **funding sources**, the survey data indicates that 60% of CSOs rely on grants from international donors. This suggests a significant dependency on external funding, which can impact organizational sustainability and autonomy. The low percentages for corporate sponsorships (10%), donations/crowdfunding (10%), and membership fees (10%) highlight a limited diversification in funding streams, which may pose risks during economic fluctuations or changes in donor priorities.

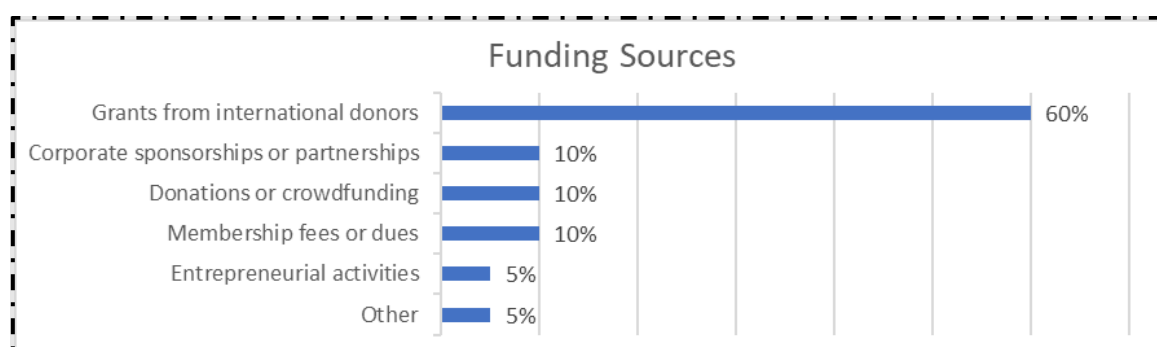


Chart 4. Surveyed grassroots CSOs funding sources

Overall, this data is indicative of CSOs' vulnerability to shifts in international donor priorities and funding availability. It underscores the importance for CSOs to diversify their funding sources to enhance resilience and sustainability amidst varying external conditions.

It is noteworthy the absence of state funding from the above chart, which can be explained by bureaucratic procedures and stringent eligibility criteria posing barriers, especially for smaller grassroots CSOs. Additionally, based on the data provided, the limited reliance on corporate sponsorships, donations, crowdfunding, and membership fees among CSOs in the surveyed group, suggests a potential lack of a robust philanthropic culture within the local context. This may stem from various factors, including economic conditions, variable local public trust in CSOs, low awareness about social issues, and weak incentives for charitable giving. Developing a more robust philanthropic ecosystem could benefit CSOs by providing more stable and diversified funding streams, enhancing

their ability to adapt to changing circumstances, and fostering greater community engagement and support for their missions.

Indeed, in terms of **the main challenges** faced by the surveyed CSOs, the most reported by 65% respondents (13 CSOs) is limited funding opportunities. Particularly this affects the possibility to implement larger-scale projects that last at least 24 months and have a wider impact on target groups. KIIIs reported that usually, grassroots CSOs projects last for only a few months or up to a year which places them in an unproductive space of constantly seeking funds with no certainty about the future. In addition, the reported absence of government support to strengthen the sustainability of local and regional CSOs worsens this problem. As a result, difficulties arise in recruiting qualified staff/volunteers and acquiring sufficient resources to develop and sustain organizational capacities, particularly in the area of financial management, which was the second largest challenge reported by 15% of surveyed CSOs (3 respondents).

1 CSO reported experiencing a lack of equality in resource distribution, emphasizing the disparity in funding opportunities between organizations in the capital city and those in regional areas, despite the advantages of access and deep context knowledge that the rural CSOs would bring. The by-product of this is fierce competition between CSOs for limited resources which may undermine the credibility of the sector and hamper collaboration, ultimately diminishing public trust in civic engagement.

This points out to systemic challenges in funding distribution within Moldova's civil society, suggesting a need for greater equity and transparency to ensure all organizations, regardless of location, can thrive and contribute effectively to societal advancement while ensuring transparency, accountability and compliance related aspects.

Despite a myriad of challenges, the data highlights several key opportunities perceived by grassroots CSOs in Moldova for conducting their activities. The most recognized opportunity is increased access to funding, noted by 45% of the CSOs surveyed. This can be explained by stability of some funding sources due to Moldova's course towards European integration as well as prolonged crisis in Ukraine. Additionally, supportive government policies (15%), expanded networks and partnerships (10%), and volunteer/community engagement (10%) are seen as enabling factors. Some opportunities connected to technological advances for outreach, social media and press platforms, and advocacy and policy influence can be leveraged to a larger degree.

4.2.2 Gender Equality

According to PIN's previous report (2021), 2 out of 3 members of the civil society sector are women in Moldova. According to the conducted interviews as part of that report, women are also more involved in volunteering. However, this has not always meant that local women's authentic voices and issues were prominent in the CSO agenda.⁹

The gender composition of the currently surveyed grassroots organization's teams confirms the above-mentioned trends.

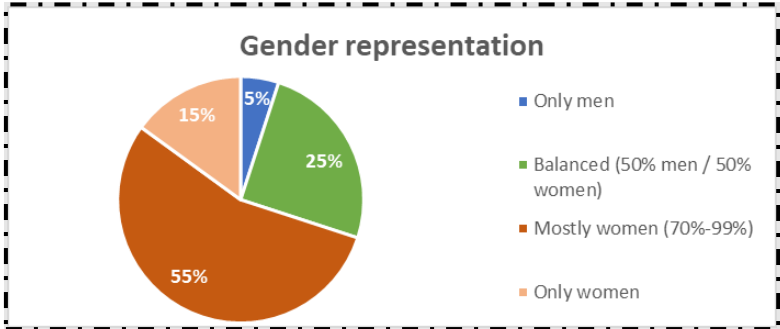


Chart 5. Gender composition of the surveyed CSO teams

⁹ UNDER THE SPOTLIGHT: A Close Look into the Established and Emerging Civil Society Actors in Moldova and the South Caucasus, People in Need, 2021.

The primary highlight from the data is that a substantial portion of the surveyed CSOs (70%) reported a team composition where women outnumber men. This indicates a notable trend towards female representation within this sector.

The data indicates that recent disruptions have differentially affected the participation of men and women in civic initiatives within the surveyed CSOs, revealing a diverse range of impacts on gender involvement in these activities. Specifically, 35% of CSOs report a decrease in participation for both genders due to economic instability or limited resources, while 30% observe no significant change. Interestingly, 20% have seen increased participation by women but decreased by men, possibly due to shifting societal norms or priorities, and 10% report heightened involvement from both genders driven by a greater sense of urgency. This indicates that recent disruptions have led to varied and complex shifts in civic engagement patterns among different demographics. Also, this underscores the need for mainstreaming gender equality in CSO governance and operations, fostering more nuanced and inclusive approaches to address varied participation trends and ensure equitable engagement across all demographics, especially the participation of women in power positions.

4.2.3 CSO Capacity Development

In essence, the grassroots CSOs surveyed acknowledge the significance of capacity assessment and development programs in elevating professionalism, competitiveness, and project effectiveness. Despite encountering various challenges such as limited activity duration, time constraints, financial constraints, and shortage of qualified human resources, there remains a strong willingness to actively participate in such initiatives and advocate for them to promote organizational growth and maximize impact.

The CSOs who underwent an organizational capacity assessment reported the following type of progress achieved: review and/or development of their mission, objectives, policies, procedures, and tools, along with an annual operational plan, while expanding initiatives for self-financing. This shift has resulted in a higher number of implemented projects, amplified community impact, expanded partnerships, and an increased reach to target groups. This has been reinforced by enhanced professional development for staff, especially in areas related to working with specific groups such as refugees and individuals with disabilities. Additionally, efforts to strengthen the team, attract new members and volunteers, acquire essential equipment, and improve donor reporting quality have bolstered the organization's effectiveness and collaboration. These advantages are worth highlighting to the new cohort of grassroots CSOs the project will be focusing on, to strengthen their understanding of the process and justify their invested time.

The main capacity development needs among CSOs are **fundraising**, identified by 70% of respondents; **financial management**, noted by 60%; **community engagement**, with 55%; and **project management**, highlighted by 40%. **Strengthening organizational management**, chosen by 40% of respondents, is also crucial, covering governance, strategic planning, and policy/procedure development. Additional needs include advocacy, gender analysis, stakeholder and policy engagement.

This indicates a significant emphasis on enhancing fundamental organizational and technical capacities in CSOs, particularly in fundraising, financial management, and community engagement, reflecting a need for more robust organizational infrastructures to navigate funding landscapes, financial accountability, and community involvement effectively.

The four primary operational needs of CSOs are **effective communication** (85%), covering marketing, website maintenance, and public relations; **administrative costs** such as staff salaries and office rent (85%); **testing new funding models** including crowdfunding and corporate social responsibility (50%); and **strengthening Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning systems (MEAL)** for assessing project impact (45%). Additional needs include HR management and retention, organizational development, financial management, technology and infrastructure, research and thematic expertise, and well-being strategies.

This highlights a critical need for comprehensive support in communication, operational sustainability, and innovative funding approaches, alongside effective project evaluation and internal management

practices, indicating that CSOs must diversify their operational strategies to ensure resilience and growth amidst evolving challenges.

4.2.4 Advocacy, Policy Dialogue and Stakeholder Engagement

Collaboration between CSOs and government authorities plays a pivotal role in societal development and addressing pressing issues. Nevertheless, insights from KIs suggest that this collaboration frequently encounters hurdles as reflected below:

- There are quite strained relations between CSOs and authorities. Some of the reasons behind this include: divergent interests, lack of communication, differing priorities, and perceived power imbalances.
- The exclusion of CSOs from the decision-making process is exacerbated by the selective invitation of only a few organizations to participate. This practice further marginalizes CSOs that are not invited, creating a sense of unfairness and diminishing the diversity of voices and perspectives in decision-making forums.
- At times, the legislative projects debates are solely for show, serving the purpose of mere formality rather than genuine engagement or meaningful dialogue.
- The fear among government officials of what CSOs may uncover and report to citizens is a significant barrier to transparency and accountability. This fear often stems from concerns about potential criticism, scrutiny, or exposure of wrongdoing within the government. As a result, officials may seek to limit the involvement or influence of CSOs in decision-making processes and public discourse, hindering the advancement of open governance and democratic principles.
- The lack of political awareness among officials regarding various issues that CSOs are more knowledgeable about represents a significant challenge. This gap in understanding often leads to policy decisions that may not fully consider the expertise and insights provided by CSOs, ultimately undermining the effectiveness and inclusivity of governance processes. By disregarding the perspectives and expertise of CSOs, officials risk making decisions that are not well-informed or representative of the needs and interests of the broader society.

Based on the above information, public authorities should develop inclusive mechanisms to ensure diverse CSO participation in decision-making. Establishing clear communication channels is crucial for understanding CSO perspectives, building trust through open governance and authentic dialogue, and incorporating CSO expertise in areas where officials may lack awareness. CSOs need to advocate for their systemic inclusion in policy dialogues, develop communication strategies to bridge gaps with government officials, enhance their internal capacity for effective participation, and foster cooperative relationships with government bodies, emphasizing mutual goals to reduce adversarial perceptions and build trust.

The analysis of CSOs' participation **in advocacy and policy dialogue** shows that while 15% are actively engaged, 50% participate to some extent, and 10% have limited involvement, indicating varying levels of readiness and capability. However, 25% of CSOs do not participate, suggesting opportunities for increased engagement, provided this aligns with their mission. Key barriers include lack of funding (30%), weak or lack of skills in how to conduct advocacy activities (20%), time and staff capacity constraints (15%), lack of relevant partners (15%), small organization size (10%), and lack of engagement mechanisms (5%).

This indicates a need for targeted capacity development, funding, and structural mechanisms to support broader and more effective advocacy participation by CSOs in Moldova whose missions are in line with such activities.

Key barriers impeding surveyed CSOs from conducting effective **consultations, outreach, and engagement with citizens and marginalized communities** include limited financial resources (45%), lack of capacity or expertise (15%), low motivation or interest among community members (15%), time constraints (10%), administrative burdens from donor tasks (10%), and language or cultural barriers (5%).

These barriers suggest a critical need for enhanced financial support, capacity development, and streamlined administrative processes to improve CSOs' ability to engage effectively with communities and constituents and build more robust accountability systems in this regard.

As per KIIs, it is worth noting that small CSOs without partnerships are less likely to succeed, as they lack extensive knowledge of how to influence politics or the financial and time resources needed. This highlights a significant disparity in the ability of CSOs to engage effectively in policy-making processes. Small CSOs often struggle to navigate the complexities of political influence due to limited resources and expertise. This underscores the importance of collaborative efforts and resource-sharing among CSOs to enhance their collective capacity to advocate for change.

A few recommendations as per the KIIs, through which CSOs can impact policy-making procedures are reflected below:

- Educating society to cultivate civic engagement and providing citizens with sufficient knowledge to influence policy-making processes is crucial. By prioritizing collaboration with society rather than solely focusing on the state, there's an opportunity to exert more pressure on public institutions during policy development. Working together with citizens empowers collective action and fosters a sense of ownership over decision-making processes, ultimately leading to more responsive and inclusive policies that better reflect the needs and aspirations of the populace.
- Forming coalitions among CSOs to represent themselves vis-à-vis the state is an effective strategy for enhancing their collective voice and influence in policy-making processes. By joining forces, CSOs can pool their resources, expertise, and networks to advocate for shared interests and amplify their impact on government policies and decisions. This collaborative approach not only strengthens the advocacy efforts of individual CSOs but also fosters solidarity and unity within the civil society sector, ultimately leading to more inclusive and responsive governance.

Grassroots CSOs in Moldova face significant obstacles in engaging effectively with both the government and their target communities, primarily due to limited financial resources, inadequate expertise, and reduced capacities. These barriers restrict their ability to influence policy, conduct meaningful consultations, and participate in advocacy. To overcome these challenges, grassroots CSOs must focus on building internal capacities, securing diverse funding sources, and developing effective outreach strategies. By fostering alliances and improving communication, grassroots CSOs can strengthen their collective impact, ensuring that their voices contribute more significantly to societal development and policy-making processes. Moreover, enhancing civic education and forming coalitions can empower grassroots CSOs to play a more influential role in advocating for inclusive and responsive governance, ultimately leading to more effective and equitable societal outcomes. However, caution must be exercised to avoid overextending resources in pursuit of collaboration, which could dilute organizational focus and operational efficiency. Furthermore, navigating political sensitivities in advocacy efforts is essential to preserve credibility and effectiveness, particularly in local contexts where CSOs face scrutiny or regulatory challenges.

4.2.5 CSO Cooperation and Resilience

The significance of collaborating with another civil society organization on joint advocacy actions or outreach activities is widely recognized among respondents:

- 15 respondents (75%) regard collaboration as very important, underlining its critical role in addressing shared challenges, amplifying messages, and advancing common objectives.
- Additionally, 5 respondents (25%) view collaboration as important, further underscoring the value of working together to achieve mutual goals.
- Notably, no respondent expressed that collaboration is not important, indicating unanimous acknowledgment of its significance.

The data underscores a widespread agreement among respondents on the pivotal role of collaboration among CSOs for successful advocacy and outreach endeavors. It highlights that coordinated efforts are indispensable for effectively tackling shared challenges, amplifying messages, and attaining mutual

goals. To this end, grassroots CSOs must prioritize cultivating effective communication skills to articulate objectives and strategies clearly, engage in active listening, and facilitate negotiations. They should also focus on building and sustaining trust with stakeholders to foster meaningful partnerships and engagement. Moreover, excelling in strategic planning is crucial for coordinating joint initiatives and ensuring systematic monitoring of outcomes and impacts. However, the effectiveness of collaborative efforts also hinges on navigating potential conflicts of interest and ensuring equitable distribution of resources and credit among participating organizations, which requires careful management and transparency throughout the partnership lifecycle.

In terms of approaches and strategies that the surveyed grassroots CSOs use to build their organization's **resilience and adaptability** in the face of future challenges, the following key clusters emerged as a result of the survey:

Strategic Planning and Risk Management

- Conducting risk analysis ensures preparedness for future challenges and establishes frameworks for enduring organizational health.
- Adopting long-term strategies such as the CSO Development Strategy and Local Development Strategy for 2022-2028 provides clear roadmaps and adaptability.

Team Development and Organizational Culture

- Focusing on continuous development, team building activities, participation in training sessions, and personal development activities enhances team skills and emotional resilience.
- Recognizing the role of each team member as crucial to project implementation builds a committed and effective team from the outset.

Community Engagement and Transparency

- Collaborating with organization members helps assess the impact of civil society activities on society.
- Conducting information campaigns effectively communicates organizational achievements and issues addressed.
- Organizing meetings with citizens and conducting surveys facilitates feedback gathering and informed decision-making.

Partnership Building and External Relations

- Developing partnerships with local public authorities enhances the capacity to influence and implement initiatives, broadening reach and effectiveness.
- Engaging in relevant capacity development, forming new partnerships, and participating in regional projects expands capabilities and networks.

The multi-faceted approaches to building resilience and adaptability among CSOs in Moldova—through strategic planning, financial diversification, team development, community engagement, and partnership building—indicate a strong commitment to sustainability and proactive problem-solving. This emphasis on comprehensive resilience strategies may point out a broader trend of professionalization, positioning these organizations to effectively navigate and mitigate emerging challenges.

The downsides of the discussed CSO strategies for resilience include their high resource demands, which may strain smaller organizations, and the risk of overextending themselves by trying to address too many areas at once, potentially compromising focus and effectiveness.

4.3 Recommendations for the Project

Capacity Assessment

- During the project kick-off meeting with the new cohort of grassroots CSOs, highlight the advantages of the capacity assessment and strategic planning stages to strengthen their understanding of the process and justify their invested time (an opportunity to revise their vision, mission, values, and planned activities in the light of the changing circumstances and needs of their constituencies, with an emphasis on resilience, adaptability, team well-being, gender equality etc.)
- even though the majority of respondents experienced shifts in their priorities, the data indicates an insufficient critical analysis of the factors that determine these shifts and their rationale. It will be important to allocate sufficient attention to analyzing the changes in context and operating environment affecting grassroots CSO operations, as part of the project's capacity assessment workshops (OCAT sections 1.1 *Purpose and context* and 4.3 *Change management*) and SWOT analysis as part of the Strategic Planning process).
- Highlight the importance of increasing the CSO team's awareness about choosing a specific donor/funding stream that should be aligned with CSO values and strategic priorities. Also, place a focus on diversifying funding sources and adding at least one more source in the next 2 - 3 years as a realistic goal.
- Given the dynamic and challenging operational environments faced by grassroots CSOs in Moldova, the strategic planning session should prioritize the development of adaptive strategies. This involves not only setting strategic goals but also identifying potential risks and uncertainties, such as economic fluctuations, political instability, and limited funding opportunities. Encourage CSOs to incorporate flexibility into their strategic plans, allowing for agile responses to changing circumstances. Emphasize the importance of monitoring and evaluation frameworks to assess the effectiveness of strategies and make necessary adjustments. This approach ensures that CSOs are prepared to navigate challenges while maximizing opportunities for impact in their communities.

Capacity Development

- To counter the heavy reliance on international donor grants, offer capacity development sessions on local philanthropic support, explore crowdfunding platforms, and establish membership fee structures. Additionally, prioritize financial management training to improve budgeting, reporting, and resource allocation practices.
- The data indicated the importance of enhancing strategic communication skills among grassroots CSOs, leveraging the current advances in technology for outreach purposes. Sample topics can focus on effectively conveying CSO mission, activities, and impact to diverse stakeholders, including donors, community members, and policymakers, crafting compelling narratives, using digital platforms for outreach and engagement, conducting media relations, and managing public perception. Additionally, mentoring sessions can provide practical guidance on developing communication approaches aligned with organizational goals and community needs. Mentors can offer insights into leveraging communication channels effectively, building CSO reputation, and adapting messaging for different audiences.
- Grassroot CSOs should participate in structured training workshops aimed at establishing functional MEAL systems. These workshops will cover the design of MEAL frameworks, methods for data collection, techniques for impact assessment, and the utilization of findings for organizational learning and strategic decision-making adapted for grassroots CSO capacities and their development stage. Practical guidance on implementing MEAL systems from PIN teams will enable CSOs to effectively measure project outcomes, demonstrate impact to stakeholders, and enhance program effectiveness over time.

Financial Support to Third Parties (FSTP)

- Allocate FSTPs for the maximum timeframes possible within the project to counter the phenomena of CSOs being forced to constantly look for funds which may impact the quality of their activities and accountability capacity towards constituents. For future projects, consider expanding the timeframe for FSTPs to at least 1 year to support grassroots CSOs in accomplishing their strategic goals and core operational functions.
- The importance of FSTP for collaborative initiatives among CSOs to enhance their collective voice and impact in policy-making processes was confirmed. By forming strategic alliances with other CSOs, they can pool resources, share expertise, and amplify their efforts, thereby increasing their visibility and influence in policy discussions.

Gender Equality

- Implement workshops and provide resources specifically designed to mainstream gender equality within CSO governance and operations, adapted to the characteristics and level of capacity of grassroots CSO. These sessions can focus on promoting inclusive decision-making processes, integrating gender perspectives into organizational policies and practices, gender-sensitive project planning, recruitment and retention strategies that promote diversity, etc.

CSO Cooperation and Resilience

- Focus the Collaboration Lab (Output 3, Activity 3.1) on developing communication skills, fostering trust, and building negotiation capabilities among CSO team members. Include practical exercises and case studies that highlight successful collaborations, emphasizing the importance of shared goals, mutual respect, and clear communication channels. During the event, address potential challenges such as divergent priorities and power imbalances, offering strategies to mitigate these issues through transparent decision-making and inclusive dialogue. By equipping CSOs with robust collaborative skills, the project can strengthen their collective impact and resilience in addressing shared challenges lasting beyond the lifetime of the project.
- Approach peer learning, networking, and collaboration opportunities within the project as an important frame for strengthening CSOs *resilience and adaptability* skills at national and regional levels. Given the significant emphasis on capacity development needs such as fundraising, financial management, community engagement, and project management among grassroots CSOs, creating a peer-learning network via regular meetings can effectively address these challenges. This would enable CSOs to share good practices, lessons learned, and successful strategies in areas like fundraising models, financial management practices, and community engagement tactics. By facilitating regular meetings, and workshops, and offering an opportunity for a collaborative project, CSOs will strengthen their collaborative competencies, tap into collective expertise as well as pool resources to build a supportive ecosystem to advance their missions.

5 FINAL CONCLUSIONS

Based on the data from Moldova between 2020 and 2023, several significant trends and challenges in the civic space and grassroots CSOs have been identified.

Moldova, during the that period, navigated political changes and external crises, including the fallout from the Ukraine conflict. While legislative advancements were made, civil society freedoms are threatened by geopolitical pressures. Financial instability due to reliance on external funding inhibits organizational autonomy and development outside the capital city. Gender representation is notable, though challenges persist in achieving women's representation in positions of power. CSO capacity strengthening, including advocacy capacity development, remains crucial for navigating complex environments and maximizing societal contributions.

Judging by the geopolitical evolutions defined by prolonged severe crisis in Ukraine, as well as intensified efforts of autocracies to cooperate with each other¹⁰, it is likely that Moldova will continue to be subjected to further pressure and attacks from Russia with the aim to deter its EU accession and erode its civil society landscape. Hence Moldova's civil society should bolster its resilience by enhancing advocacy, diversifying funding sources, and strengthening regional and international alliances to counteract potential pressures and support its EU accession efforts.

¹⁰ https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/NIT_2024_Digital_Booklet.pdf



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