

Management Response

To the external Evaluation Thematic Funds for Civil Society Participation and for Partnership Fund

1) Background

The portfolio of both Thematic Funds (TF) Civil Society Participation and Partnership, including Retained Activities (7), amounts to a total of 141 projects (out of 1'754 projects submitted) and CHF 26.8 million. This represents around 15% of the total Swiss Contribution of CHF 181 million for Romania. The Division New EU Member States, with the support of the SDC network Democratization, Decentralization and Local Governance (DDLG), mandated Monika Egger and Cosmin Briciu to conduct the external evaluation. A special focus was put on the potential and on effective results in improving public policy through strengthening of civil society voice and involvement in policy change in Romania. The evaluation focused on the outcomes in terms of changes in the life of beneficiaries, changes at institutional level of the Executing Agencies (EA), explored the impact in the wider society, and policy changes occurred that were directly or indirectly infused by the projects. The evaluation makes recommendations for a possible second Swiss Contribution.

The evaluation team underlined the quality and the easy access to data provided by KEK Consult, the Swiss Intermediate Body, as well as a very good response from the two Romanian partners, Romanian Civil Society Development Foundation (CSDF) and Romanian Environmental Partnership Foundation (REPF) (see page 7 of the report).

In Romania, the role of the Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) is on the one hand essential because of the low level of service provision. The CSOs deliver a high share of the overall and sectorial services for the population. In the social sector, for instance, CSOs represented in 2016 up to the half of the services for children, elderly, homecare and people with disabilities (see page 6). On the other hand, the Romanian legislation limits the participation of civil society in policy making processes due to the missing or barely functional public administration consultation structure and a deteriorating relationship between public authorities and civil society, especially since 2017.

The evaluation considers that the objective to strengthen civil society is important, while currently its meaning has shifted from supporting the development for a stronger sector to building the resilience of the sector in the rather adverse environment (see report page 13). Therefore, and as mentioned in the recommendations for the second Swiss Contribution (see chapter 5 below), there is a need of elaborating a broader approach in strengthening the civil society sector that will encompass the various civil society's roles, such as advocates and actors of governance as well as service deliverers. Civil society strengthening addresses broad issues for improving democratic processes and the quality of citizens' life.

The Swiss expertise and the flexible and innovation approach of these both TF contributed to the visibility and to the strengthening of the Swiss-Romanian bilateral relations (see report page 7).

2) General appreciation of Report and Evaluation Process

The Division New EU Member States in Bern and the Swiss Cooperation Office (SCO) in Bucharest acknowledge the receipt and approve the final report prepared by the evaluation team, which was received on 30.12.2018. Overall, the report is well written and corresponds to the ToRs and to the main evaluation questions defined in the frame of the inception report.

The level of comments and recommendations is strategic, which is compliant with SDC expectations. SDC acknowledges that the assessment is based on a good understanding of the projects and procedures. After having received the first version of the report, SDC drafted a list of questions, which have been answered in the final version of the report, as well as in a document annexed to the evaluation report. In addition of the general set-up, the evaluation team assessed 10 case studies.

A debriefing meeting was conducted on the 20.12.2018 at SDC with the evaluation team, the Head of the SCO, staff from the Division New EU Member States, DDLG and the Swiss Intermediate Body KEK.

3) Position towards main findings

SDC shares the recommendation to concentrate more on preparation for good partnerships and to higher weighting the quality of partners and to explicitly plan a pre-investment phase for exploring the partnerships. The evaluation recommends however to abandon the retained activities (page 3), see chapter 6. However SDC is of the opinion, that the retained activities have proved their impact on the national laws and strategies.

The evaluation team underlined that the gender issue was not established as a transversal cross-cutting theme across the TF, but gender equity was found in the management set up and at the level of EAs. SDC agrees that the issue should be more monitored within marginalized communities, where sometimes traditional patriarchal values are important (see page 9). Furthermore, a systematic mainstreaming of gender has to be applied in future projects.

According to the evaluation team, the programme implementation of the TF was challenged by a series of governmental legislative provisions tightening the conditions in which CSOs operate in Romania as well as by public discourse regarding the perception of CSOs activity changing considerably from tolerance to resistance.

Relevance

SDC shares the same conclusion that the needs for services in the social sector are still massive in Romania, as well as the lack of eco-friendly solution in the environment sector and the deficient and poorly structured policy dialogue in general. The implementation of both TFs coincided with negative developments that occurred in terms of government resistance towards NGOs and deterioration in regulatory frameworks. This demonstrates on one hand the relevance of the TF and on the other hand poses important challenges for the effectiveness and sustainability of the projects. The Swiss funding is considered relevant, it closes gaps in support which is otherwise not sufficiently available or less accessible in term of administrative burden as EU funds. The evaluation underlines that the projects financed are highly relevant for the needs and priorities in the Romanian context of growing and changing social needs, because of the result of increasing inequality and challenges regarding the rule of law. The relevance of these projects for Switzerland, lies in the organisation networks and knowledge expansions.

Effectiveness

SDC shares the evaluation team's point of view that the effective policy change is often hypothetical as the potential for real change highly depends on the will and openness of public authorities. The coaching provided by the SIBs and KEK to the EAs was very effective. At the same time, the evaluation highlighted that low budgets can produce impressive results.

- CSP Block Grant

SDC shares evaluation point of view of financing more projects of the same organisation contributed to consolidate the organisation. However, this option prevented more CSOs to benefit from the grant. Limiting the financing to only one project per call per organization should be considered in order to finance a higher number of good projects. The interesting observation was that larger budgets were often used for activating networks, carrying out large training sessions and in general mobilizing the human resources and stimulating integrated work. On the other hand, a small project was used for piloting models and testing intervention logics, with an embedded research function.

- Partnership Block Grant

SDC shares evaluation point of view regarding the lessons learned and acknowledge that reciprocal learning was made from the Swiss and Romanian side. According to the evaluation, Swiss partners heavily involved in the delivery of projects ended up in redefining and adjusting their own strategies in working methods as a result of transferring their experience into less familiar contexts. Enough time and effort in building the partnership are to invest.

- Retained activities (RA)

SDC shares the evaluation conclusion that the retained activities approach has to be revised, but does not agree with the conclusion that this approach consumed much more time and energy of SIB for support. Indeed the need for support for both approaches (retained activities and block grant) were underestimated. However, the block grant approach was very demanding in intense support to all CSOs, but also for the organisation of the call, the selection of projects and the contractual arrangement. At the end, the retained activities brought more significant long-term results than isolated small projects. It is worth mentioning the decisive contribution of the Swiss partner KEK as member of the SIB consortium providing the necessary support.

Efficiency

SDC shares evaluation's point of view, that high quality management is key for the success of the programme and that the SIBs successfully accompanied the grantees for strong project steering. In addition, SDC agrees that capacity building for EAs absorbed more resources than planned. It also agrees that the role and involvement of the central decision-making bodies in the public administration must be carefully set up in the future and addressed in the planning phase.

Sustainability

SDC agrees with evaluation's statement that there is a structural problem in respect with sustainability on the long run if public authorities do not fully ensure their cooperation and take ownership. Therefore, it would have been interesting to have evaluation team's suggestion on how to tackle this issue.

Impact

SDC shares evaluation conclusion that the long-term and fundamental changes brought by some projects are evident having an impact at people's lives and in profiling the inputs from the civil society for designing policies. SDC also agrees that the TF triggered a considerable mass of innovative yet solid and sustainable projects, which would be conductors for development if scaled up.

Swiss added value and Benefits to Swiss partner institutions

In many projects of both TF, the Swiss expertise was very appreciated regarding, for instance, the exchanges in green energy and natura parks, the strategy and policy support in several domains, as social or environmental, the quality check and the training sessions.

SDC considers the conclusion of the evaluation about the Swiss added value and benefit to Swiss partner institutions as very relevant. SDC believes that this level of satisfaction is mainly due to the SIB constant support to the Swiss and Romanian parties.

4) Management Response to the recommendations

Please, refer to the table in the Annex.

SDC (Division new EU Member States and Swiss Cooperation Office in Bukarest),

14.08.2019

Annex: Specific Recommendations and Management Response

| RECOMMENDATIONS | MANAGEMENT RESPONSE | | |
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| Recommendation 1: Relevance of the theme Strengthening the Civil Society in Romania Civil Society is an actor for development whatever the context is and we recommend SDC to further engage a Thematic Fund for CSS in Romania. Flexibility, reactivity, creativity and performance in managing projects are crucial assets in uncertain times. However we suggest SDC to select less and more precise subthemes (e.g. environment is too large) and to sharpen the formulation of expected results as changes in the wider context that the project should envisage. | Fully agree | Partially agree | Not agree |
| | <u>Response</u> SDC fully agrees with this recommendation, but the subthemes should be very well selected and clearly defined, with a view to avoiding too much frustration for the NGOs, which could not apply or whose applications are rejected. | | |
| | <u>Measures</u> Establish clear themes together with the Romanian partners, based on a good knowledge of the context. The excellence and opportunities shall remain as key criteria for project selection. | | |
| Recommendation 2: Planning for results Plan better in sharpening the formulation of planned results and make the ambition for having a larger impact a selection criterion. | Fully agree | Partially agree | Not agree |
| | <u>Response</u> We agree with the recommendation to sharpening the formulation of the planned results. As far as the impact is concerned we consider that long term, multi-level (micro, mezo, macro) projects implemented by a coalition of partners with complementary competences, with sufficiently large budgets, have more potential for a larger impact. Therefore only a reduced number of project could really have an impact. Considering the current situation of the NGO sector in Romania it is advisable to pursue the strengthening of the institutional capacity of the NGOs in order to achieve an increased impact. | | |
| | <u>Measures</u> At the programme/thematic fund level, the expected policy impacts in the perspective of strengthening CSOs' voice and legitimacy shall be clearly formulated. At project level, the planned results and project objectives will be better and clearer defined, following explicit requirement for project application. They should comply with programme overall objective. | | |
| Recommendation 3 A clear mapping of needs and services should be available before releasing the next financing. | Fully agree | Partially agree | Not agree |
| | <u>Response</u> The objective of the TF was to strengthen the CSP participation and not to increase the respond to the needs and services, which should be the Romanian Government task. | | |

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| | Therefore, we consider that financing innovative projects, or pilot projects was a good solution, which should continue. | | |
| | <u>Measure</u> Identify possible niches where pilot projects could be implemented. The results of these projects could be disseminated by other programs or by the state budget. In addition, an analyse of the context situation for NGOs is under elaboration together with the Embassies and SDC. | | |
| Recommendation 4 | Fully agree | Partially agree | Not agree |
| Plan more organically and realistically the theory of change behind the overall intervention, with overarching goals more in line with the support awarded and linked with the outcomes yielded at project level. This should be done in such a way as to not encourage unrealistic planning at the level of projects, aiming for spectacular outcomes with rather modest means and activities. | <u>Response</u> | | |
| | We agree | | |
| | <u>Measures</u> The theory of change regarding civil society strengthening to act as voice in policy processes could be further broken down in pathways for change that would imply some adaptations to the approaches taken by the programme. Indeed a single approach consisting mainly in providing grants to civil society as a means to strengthening and empowering them is not sufficient. | | |
| Recommendation 5 | Fully agree | Partially agree | Not agree |
| Stress the synergies among the TFs CSP and PF and the other Swiss cooperation intervention. The needs for capacity building, for instance, are similar (or even greater) in the public sector, which is reached via other programmes. | <u>Response</u> | | |
| | We agree | | |
| | <u>Measures</u> More support and coaching for capacity building should be ensured. | | |
| Recommendation 6: Partnerships | Fully agree | Partially agree | Not agree |
| The approach for institutional partnerships Romanian-Romanian and Swiss-Romanian is an asset to continue. Continue the Partnership Fund, but investing more in preparation for good partnerships (be it SWISS-RO or RO-SWISS) in order to ensure shared mutual understanding of the respective roles and responsibilities. | <u>Response</u> | | |
| | SDC welcomes the recommendation to continue supporting Swiss-Romanian partnerships. Indeed, for good partnerships, more preparation needs to be invested for shared mutual understanding of the respective roles and responsibilities. Partnerships contribute to strengthen bilateral relations and fruitful cooperation between the Partner State and Switzerland. They provide visibility in both countries and enhance mutual understanding. In addition, they increase the use of Swiss expertise and exchange knowledge. | | |
| | Acknowledging the importance of partnerships, it has been decided not to continue with the Partnership Fund as defined in the first Swiss contribution, but to expend this model to the | | |

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| | whole second Swiss Contribution by implementing partnerships to all projects and programmes where there is an added value to the specific needs of the Partner States and whenever it is possible. | | |
| | <u>Measures</u> Partnerships shall foster closer ties between the Partner State and Switzerland at national and sub-national levels as well as between cities, municipalities, universities, research institutions, schools, companies, non-governmental organisations, other involved institutions and people. Partnerships shall especially be encouraged in thematic areas in which there is a mutual interest and/or Switzerland may contribute with particular expertise, experience, models or technologies. With a view to facilitate a smooth implementation, identifying the partnerships before the financing of the projects is foreseen. | | |
| Recommendation 7 In order to strengthen the Swiss added value through Swiss partners a pre-investment in searching for the best possible partnering is however needed, mainly when building new relations. Guarantee that the theme of the project is a core competence of the Swiss partner. Track record on experience in international cooperation should be a criterion. | Fully agree | Partially agree | Not agree |
| | <u>Response</u> We agree | | |
| | <u>Measures</u> In order to create valuable partnerships within the Second Swiss Contribution, a stakeholder mapping is foreseen. Moreover, preliminary “matching phase” shall help the potential and interested organisations to identify and meet, with the objective to know each other and to discuss possibilities for joint activities. | | |
| Recommendation 8 Promote partnerships between experienced service provider NGOs with local administration to be replicated in regions with less capacities. | Fully agree | Partially agree | Not agree |
| | <u>Response</u> We agree with this statement since there are regions in the south of Romania where neither the CSO nor the local administration have the capacity to develop projects. | | |
| | <u>Measures</u> Create partnerships between experienced NGOs which could foster local NGOs and partnership between NGOs and Local administrations. | | |
| Recommendation 9: Block Grant versus Retained Activities Retained Activities were an adequate modality under the first enlargement fund mainly for Swiss internal policy reasons. For the Funds under the second enlargement fund we however suggest to concentrate on Block Grant approach by strengthening the Romanian | Fully agree | Partially agree | Not agree |
| | <u>Response</u> We don't agree with this statement since a predefined partnership between Romanian NGOs and Swiss partners can lead to projects with much more impact than small projects implemented by many NGOs spread out over the country. We have good examples which had real impact by changing laws and further on obtaining EU funds for the whole sector (i.e. | | |

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| initiative in partnering and to abandon the approach with prefixed retained activities under Swiss lead. | Sustainable Agriculture Models in the Mountain Regions) in Romanian, as well as in Bulgarian (Linking nature). | | |
| | <u>Measures</u> To continue the RA approach and include this in the two stages partnerships scheme as per recommendation 6. | | |
| Recommendation 10 | Fully agree | Partially agree | Not agree |
| We strongly recommend to higher weighting the quality of the partners (commitment, thematic competence, management competence, cultural competence) and to explicitly plan a pre-investment phase for exploring the partnerships. | <u>Response</u> We agree | | |
| | <u>Measures</u> See Recommendation 7 above | | |
| Recommendation 11 | Fully agree | Partially agree | Not agree |
| We recommend SDC to stay with the niche approach addressing important needs that are not yet covered. There is however potential for sharpening or focusing (e.g. health care for children, elderly; in remote areas, for left behind), without switching to a Programme Approach. The thematic areas should be established in such a way as to close gaps at the level of needs and areas that are not covered through other interventions (national policies + other financing programmes). | <u>Response</u> We partially agree with this recommendation since SDC is not a huge contributor and it is difficult to compete with EU funding. SDC is going to work not only in niche area in order to be complementary but is also going to intervene where it has an added value and expertise. | | |
| | <u>Measures</u> Before establishing the fields of intervention to carry out a survey and find the appropriate niches based on the Swiss comparative advantage. | | |
| Recommendation 12: Address territorial inequities | Fully agree | Partially agree | Not agree |
| An additional preselection criteria system should focus on correcting the territorial inequities, insufficiently addressed in the previous phase as most of the NGO capacity was concentrated in large cities with prestigious academic institutions. Thus, a regional or urban/ rural quota would be beneficial but would have to be accompanied by a rethinking of evaluation criteria to give small and / or emerging NGOs a chance. We suggest SDC to identify and strengthen NGOs, Associations, Citizens movements that engage in Civil Society initiatives in geographic isolated areas of Romania and encourage grass-route aggregation of NGOS in the regions where the number of | <u>Response</u> We fully agree with this recommendation; but we must be aware that this approach will need more effort and energy, since both CSO and Local Administrations are not used to work together. | | |
| | <u>Measures</u> Before setting up such a budgetary line, to identify well-experienced NGOs willing to put in place partnership projects with LAs mainly in the south of the country. | | |

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| local NGOs is assessed as insufficient to address the relevant thematic topics. | | | |
| Recommendation 13 Make an explicit effort to better reflect small urban centers. | Fully agree | Partially agree | Not agree |
| | <u>Response</u> We agree | | |
| | <u>Measures</u> Same as for Recommendation 12 above. | | |
| Recommendation 14: Special focus on capacity building and training Capacity building has proven being key for most of the EAs in Romania and should be given more emphasis. Even successful and already performed Romanian partners (EAs) absorbed more resources for capacity building and for improving their management and thematic expertise than expected. We suggest SDC to add a capacity building component (incl. training) in the Partnership Fund approach explicitly addressing the concrete needs and according necessary resources for addressing them (15% - 25%) | Fully agree | Partially agree | Not agree |
| | <u>Response</u> We fully agree with this recommendation, EAs need capacity building, but it should be done through coaching when implementing projects, which could be expensive. | | |
| | <u>Measures</u> To identify both Romanian and Swiss partner to be able to coach the EAs. ToRs for the Fund operator shall explicitly and realistically describe the type of support services to be delivered. The activities could assess communities needs/rights; collect data, analyze it and formulate policy change proposals; monitor policy implementation; advocate for the proposed policy changes; engage constructively with various state actors, the media, other civil society actors and other interest groups. | | |
| Recommendation 15 Add an explicit capacity building component and budget line for the SIB that has to assume the capacity building of the EAs. | Fully agree | Partially agree | Not agree |
| | <u>Response</u> We agree with this proposal but we also have to consider how difficult it is to find Operatorsable to manage the fund and monitor project and at the same time assume the training & coaching function. The capacity-building component may be entrusted to a specialised entity. | | |
| | <u>Measures</u> See Recommendation 14. | | |
| Recommendation 16: Special support for selective low performers | Fully agree | Partially agree | Not agree |
| | <u>Response</u> | | |

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| Identify and strengthen selected NGOs that are low performers in administrative and management issues, but specifically motivated and innovative in their engagement for improving citizens' rights and citizens' life through a special call or as special setting in the ordinary calls. (E.g. experienced NGOs are mentoring less experienced NGOs). | We partially agree with recommendation, because it could be very difficult to implement. | | |
| Recommendation 17: Institutional Set up SIB / IB The evaluation team suggests SDC two options for the institutional set up in the next phase: Option SIB: The institutional Set up with the three competences Swiss (KEK-CDC) - Social (CSDF) – Environmental (REPF) proved its excellence under phase 1 and opting for the same set-up stands for continuation and for putting into value the experience from phase 1 into phase 2. The evaluations team thinks that this is a valid option in light of the Romanian political context evolution, with still challenging governance issues, and acknowledge it is supported by most of the stakeholders interviewed, including the IB. Option IB: We however suggest SDC to also think on a next step to go in the institutional set up and to explore IB as a strategical option for the next phase and to willingly strengthening the Romanian bodies and enhancing their responsibility. We consider that Swiss expertise and support remains important, but not any longer in the form of leading the SIB, but in coaching and supporting the Romanian IB-bodies. This option would however enhance the involvement and workload for the SCO in Bucharest. | <u>Measures</u> This could be done in two phases a pilot phase where the model of intervention is designed and a second phase where the model could be disseminated. It will be difficult and risky to implement, but very rewarding. | | |
| | Fully agree | Partially agree | Not agree |
| | <u>Response</u> Both option are taken into consideration. For the Second Swiss contribution, first priority will be given to the IB (second) option, even if it requires more energy and the results could be at risk. However possible deterioration of working conditions for CSOs or too cumbersome administrative procedures may speak in favour of SIB (first) Option, especially if the overall objective to strengthen civil society shall prevail. . | | |
| | <u>Measures</u> Possible operator shall be identify inside and outside the administration, both in Romania and in Switzerland. An analyse shall then conclude of possible realistic options with acceptable risks and opportunities, to be negotiated with the Romanian NCU. | | |