

Implementation of the Partnership Principle in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries

Report from the hands-on pilot of the project
“Bridge Building Peer Reviews and Trainings”

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The report on the implementation of the partnership principle in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries includes findings from the hands-on pilot. The report was developed within the project “[Bridge Building Peer Reviews and Trainings - Mutual Learning Activities in BB countries](#)” (06/2021 – 03/2024). The content, analysis, opinions and recommendations contained in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the funding organisation.

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Executive Summary

Working in partnership with stakeholders is one of the key principles of the management of European Union funds. The rationale for working in partnership goes beyond the management of funds and includes an understanding that institutions working on their own cannot solve complex societal problems such as social inequality and the reduction of poverty. Partnership is key when aiming to improve social welfare policy delivery and is of high relevance for the EU accession countries of the Western Balkan and Eastern Partnership region. The report provides information on how the partnership principle is currently being implemented in the Bridge Building (BB) countries in this region that are working with the European Centre.

Although the BB countries apply specific partnership components such as open consultation mechanisms (Armenia) and multi-level governance (Kosovo), they frequently miss core elements of the implementation of the partnership principle as laid down in the European Code of Conduct on Partnership (ECCP). BB countries are thus invited to invest in improving the quality of partnership implementation by building stronger and more coordinated connections between different policy frameworks, institutional levels and sectors, and by developing effective collaboration in respective policy fields and at the interface of policy areas such as employment and social protection. Meanwhile, EU institutions are called upon to offer their partners, from both EU countries and EU accession countries, hands-on exchange possibilities within existing mutual learning programmes relating to employment, social affairs and inclusion such as the Mutual Learning Programme under the European Employment Strategy, so that experience sharing on partnership can be fostered across Europe.

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1 Introduction

Working in partnership with stakeholders is one of the key principles of the management of European Union (EU) funds. The partnership principle implies close cooperation between public authorities at national, regional and local levels, and with social partners, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other relevant stakeholders. Working in partnership is regarded as central to improving the delivery of social welfare policy and is of high relevance for the EU accession countries of the Western Balkan and Eastern Partnership region¹. It includes an understanding that institutions working on their own cannot solve complex problems faced by our societies such as the exclusion of certain societal groups from the labour market and from social life, the reduction of poverty and poverty risks of vulnerable persons, and inequality between groups as well as within and between regions. Joining forces between entities responsible for social welfare policies (and beyond), however, requires partnership skills and the sharing of learning about what works and what does not work.

The European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research (European Centre) has set a special focus on (potential) EU candidate countries and countries of the Eastern Partnership – the so-called Bridge Building countries (BB countries) – to assist in improving social welfare policies.² The BB countries encompass eleven states, namely Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Ukraine. These countries face manifold challenges which include fighting poverty, especially for vulnerable groups, and the ability to cope better with the health and social consequences of COVID-19.

The hands-on pilot – an activity implemented within the project *Bridge Building Peer Reviews and Trainings - Mutual Learning Activities in BB countries* (June 2021 - March 2024)³ – examined the implementation of the partnership principle in the BB countries. It was implemented in the second half of 2023 as a unique attempt to gather insights on corresponding practices applied by BB partners. The pilot also aimed to provide advice to the countries on how to enhance policy outcomes by strengthening cooperation mechanisms between stakeholders at both programme and project levels.

This report provides information on pilot findings. It is structured as follows: after the introduction, the methodology applied is described in chapter 2. Chapter 3 focuses on the current situation of the implementation of the partnership principle in the BB

¹ The Eastern Partnership (EaP) is a joint initiative involving the EU, its Member States and six Eastern European Partner countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, see: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eastern-partnership_en

² The Bridging Function, see: <https://www.euro.centre.org/aboutus/bridging>

³ Bridge Building Peer Reviews and Trainings: <https://www.euro.centre.org/projects/detail/4098>

countries based on practices provided by their respective BB ministries and other partners. This information is complemented by insights into EU practises regarding the implementation of partnership and the key lessons learnt by participants from reflecting on their approaches. The recommendations offered in chapter 4 include a checklist on partnership governance for BB countries. The report presents its conclusions in chapter 5.

2 Methodology applied

Since partnership was highlighted as a key concern in all BB Peer and Policy reviews⁴ undertaken within the project, the European Centre, together with its partners in the BB region, decided to focus on the implementation of the partnership principle within the hands-on pilot activity in 2023. An online Q&A session was held on 24 August 2023 with the aim of gaining a joint understanding of the objectives and tasks of the pilot as well as clarifying questions on the gathering of BB partnership practices and the template designed for this that was shared prior to the event by the European Centre.

In total, eight BB partnership practices were presented by BB partners, namely representatives of BB countries from ministries covering social welfare and invited international organisations such as the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The partnership practices comprise examples from Albania (2 fiches), Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo (2 fiches), Georgia and Moldova (see Annex).

An (online) mutual learning event was held on 24-25 October 2023. Participants detailed their experiences with regard to the implementation of the partnership principle and exchanged issues of concern with the partnership expert, Leda Stott, and practitioners such as Caroline Meyers from the European Social Fund (ESF) - Managing Authority of Flanders/Belgium. In addition, common challenges and potential solutions were discussed in order to support enhanced application of the principle within the programmes, projects and institutions of BB countries.

Following the mutual learning event, expert interviews were conducted with the European Centre's National Liaison Officials (NLOs) in Armenia, Kosovo and Moldova. The interviews aimed at further reflecting on the approaches applied, exchanging details on their practical implementation and guiding the BB countries towards improved policy delivery within and beyond their areas of policy concern.

⁴ A BB Peer Review is a mutual learning event implemented in BB countries where a BB host country presents a specific case (e.g. a reform or a policy intervention) to peers (i.e. other BB countries), which is followed by feedback provided by peers. A BB Policy Review is a mutual learning event on a specific topic which is discussed and reviewed by all BB countries.

The practices were analysed in depth in preparing the report and recommendations drafted including a checklist on partnership governance for the BB countries.

3 Status quo in the BB countries

3.1 BB partnership practices

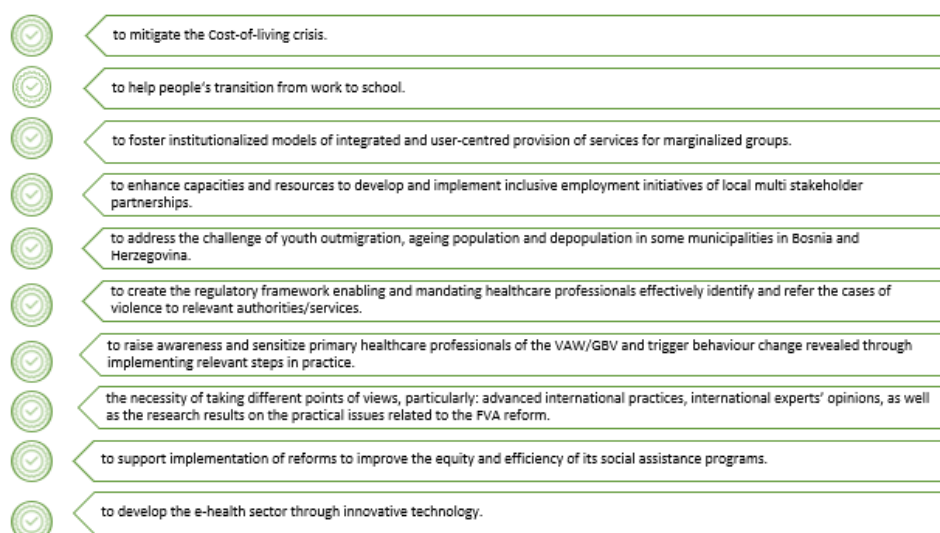
“Partnerships lead to lasting and sustainable change and help to create an institutional and community culture that addresses various social issues.”

Participant of the hands-on pilot mutual learning event

The eight practices that were jointly reflected upon by participants during the pilot implementation concern different policy areas and the interface of policies such as employment and social protection. They address key areas of concern for the BB countries such as poverty reduction, recovery from the COVID-19 crisis and gender-based violence (see Annex for details of the eight practices).

The rationale for partnership varies in the BB practices and includes working in partnership to mitigate the cost-of-living crisis; to help individuals during their transition from work to school, and to foster institutionalised models of integrated and user-centred provision of services for marginalised groups (see figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Rationale for partnership in the BB practices



Source: Own elaboration; PowerPoint slides presented at the mutual learning event (24-25 October 2023)

Most of the BB practices are driven by international donors such as the European Commission, UNFPA, UN International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and the

International Labour Organization (ILO). An example of a practice that was driven by a BB ministry and later received international donor support is the Moldovan programme: *Providing emergency financial assistance for the population affected by the crisis and integrating the response to shocks in the national social protection system of the Republic of Moldova 2022-2023*. The practice *Active Inclusion Integration Platform of the Employment Agency of the Republic of Kosovo and Department of Social Assistance Schemes* was reported to originally have been set up in response to an initiative of the European Centre.⁵

Generally, donor-driven initiatives are highly appreciated by BB ministries, because additional funding is provided in key areas of concern (e.g. poverty reduction). Nevertheless, they add administrative burdens, require changes to policy delivery mechanisms (e.g. adjustment of procedures, implementation of additional actions, etc.) and must be absorbed by the countries to ensure sustainability. An example of this kind of adaptation process is the *Family vulnerability assessment system's reform in the Republic of Armenia*. Here, the eligibility criteria for beneficiaries had to be replaced and aligned to the national context.⁶ Another example is the *Emergency Cash Transfers for the vulnerable population* in Moldova, where the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection insisted on applying its own rules for the defined categories of beneficiaries. Processes of this kind require clarification between stakeholders, including both BB stakeholders (e.g. ministerial working groups) and international donor(s). Dedicated administrative procedures must be set up and partners at relevant governance levels engaged in order to ensure successful implementation. Frequently, the integration of new practices into existing mainstream programmes is missing because the capacities (resources, know-how, etc.) needed to absorb new initiatives are lacking. The current situation of BB institutions also makes it difficult for them to absorb aid in the long term, something that is essential for ensuring the sustainability of interventions.

The eight practices show diversity regarding the engagement of different partners. While some types of partners are regularly engaged in the practices 'on the ground,' such as social workers, others are often missing. These include social partners, enterprises, academics, citizens and beneficiaries themselves. Accordingly, a lack of collaboration between partners from different backgrounds (state, NGOs, social partners, firms, academics, etc.) and from varying governance scales is observed.

In practising collaboration both challenges and successes were reported by pilot participants. The collaboration with a NGO conducting research was highlighted in

⁵ The project *Integrated Case Management for Employment and Social Welfare Users in the Western Balkans* was implemented by the European Centre in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the ILO and co-funded by the Austrian Development Agency (ADA) – please see: <https://www.euro.centre.org/projects/detail/205>

⁶ The criterion of checking the deposits of individuals at banks (used by the World Bank) had to be replaced by the condition of family vulnerability based on taxes since required data on deposits of individuals were missing in Armenia.

Armenia because evidence-based policy making followed. Interestingly, non-traditional partners such as youth organisations have been reported to be successfully engaged in programmes (e.g. *Youth Guarantee Kosovo*). Building effective collaboration with local actors, civil society, social partners and enterprises has, however, been challenging for BB participants. One reason for this might be the limited nature of the collaboration practised to date and the resulting lack of positive references for this. In this regard, one participant expressed the behaviour of local actors as ‘awaiting instructions from central level’ simply because they had not yet experienced collaboration as active partners.

An outstanding example of citizen consultation can be found in Armenia where the Unified Website for Publication of Draft Legal Acts⁷ allows citizens to review strategies and new laws before they come into force. Citizens can leave online comments on these drafts to which the administration later responds. The feedback is shared publicly and includes answers on why certain aspects are/are not taken up in laws, strategies and programmes. This is a leading practice within Europe since feedback mechanisms for citizens are frequently missing.⁸

Both informal and formal working groups (e.g. by order of the relevant minister) have been reported in the BB countries. The working groups sometimes include other state actors, especially civil servants from other ministries. In contrast to the implementation of funds within EU countries, the establishment of Monitoring Committees (MCs) is not a common practice. Some BB countries have set up working groups to monitor programme implementation under a specific legal act, such as the Monitoring Act in Moldova, while others, such as Armenia, involve the internal monitoring department of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.

Though all practices aim at fostering collaboration between stakeholders on a multi-level governance scale, the extent to which partners are engaged and are offered decision-making rights varies. Armenia reported joint decision-making between ministries and UNICEF within the programme for forcibly displaced people from Nagorno-Karabakh. When stakeholders from sub-national levels (e.g. regional, local) are involved in partnership practices, reports suggest that they have neither been endowed with decision-making rights nor with obligations other than those specified by law (e.g. mainly state actors at sub-national levels). Decision-making frequently remains with the respective ministry and hence lies at central level (e.g. the ministry

⁷ Unified Website for Publication of Legal Act’s Drafts (Armenian), see here: <https://www.e-draft.am/en/projects/4673/digest>

⁸ The recommendation for the establishment of such a mechanism is included in the DRAFT Proposal for a revised ECCP in the framework of EU funds which builds on recommendations developed by sub-group members of the European Community of Practice on Partnership (ECOPP) – see: https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/communities-and-networks/ecopp_en. To receive a copy of the DRAFT Proposal for a revised ECCP in the framework of EU funds, please contact the authors or send an email to EC-ECOPP@ec.europa.eu.

and even more specifically, the minister). Like many EU countries, a joint decision-making culture on a multi-governance scale is lacking in the BB countries.

Because examples of enabling decision-making rights for (non-public) partners at local level are rare, attention is given to the Moldovan programme *Providing emergency financial assistance for the population affected by the crisis and integrating the response to shocks in the national social protection system of the Republic of Moldova 2022-2023* and, more specifically, the programme component relating to *Emergency Cash Transfer*. Under this component, local commissions were set up that identified potential beneficiaries and decided on their right to access Emergency Cash Transfers. To ease decision-making by votes the partnerships had an uneven number of members and included representatives of the Mayor's Office, the Municipal Council, the territorial social assistance structure and civil society.

In some BB practices, such as in the case of the *Youth Guarantee in Kosovo 2023 – 2025*, partner roles are clearly defined. Most BB partnership practices, however, lack specification on the roles of different partners. This suggests an immature status of partnership where stakeholders are not engaged to the extent required, responsibilities of stakeholders are not adequately discussed/taken up, and accountability obligations are not clearly defined/fulfilled. Nonetheless, transparency rules have been reported. In complying with internationally agreed standards in minimising corruption, partners are made accountable for their decisions/actions regardless of their background (e.g. the type of partner, geographical scale). BB countries generally appear to have just started working with partnership as a governance mechanism and making use of the potential of enhanced collaboration. One pilot participant even went as far as to say that the successful collaboration practised with youth organisations in the above-mentioned *Youth Guarantee in Kosovo 2023-2025* might become a role model for other programmes.

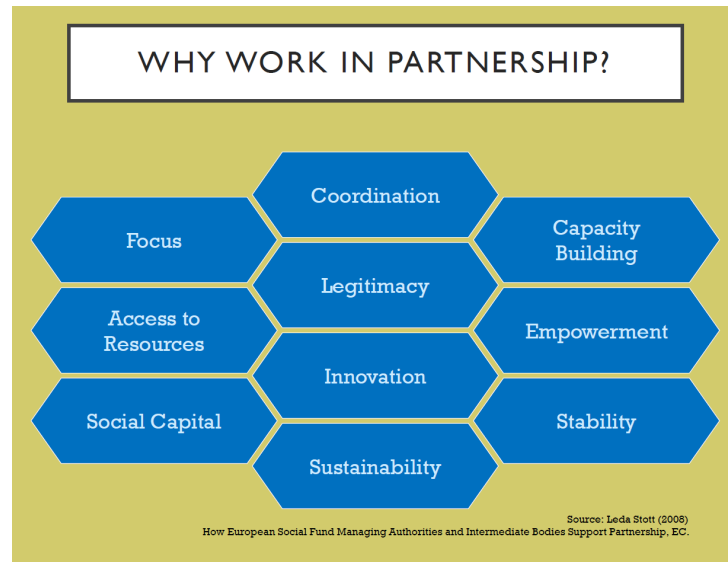
To enable participation in partnership, the capacities of all partners need to be raised in the BB countries. Building capacity within the institutions (e.g. the respective ministries) as well as beyond (other ministries; other partners beyond state actors), however, requires resources that the BB countries obviously often do not have. To address this gap, sharing information and acting in an open manner among civil servants has been adopted, for instance, in Armenia. In other instances, efforts were made to involve those who did not want to engage in partnership work at first instance. Participating BB civil servants also reported that they have sought to establish fruitful learning environments, internal standard procedures and rules that foster collaboration.

3.2 EU partnership practices

In the EU, many countries have been engaged in implementing the partnership principle for decades. The reasons for working in partnership within the EU are

manifold and include achieving a clearer focus, improved coordination, heightened capacity building, access to resources, legitimacy, empowerment of different stakeholder and target groups, the promotion of innovation, social capital, stability and sustainability (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Why work in partnership?



Source: Stott; PowerPoint slides presented at the mutual learning event (24-25 October 2023)

Within the EU funds, partnership refers to relationships between actors of different backgrounds, i.e. the private, the public and civil society sector. The core components of partnership work are (Stott, 2023):

- *Stakeholder engagement*: The engagement of different stakeholders is essential for promoting democracy through the participation of different social actors in decision-making.
- *Multi-level governance*: Partnership between different actors, sectors, and thematic areas can assist policy coherence through the alignment of objectives between different levels of governance (programmes and projects).

The European Code of Conduct on Partnership (ECCP) establishes a common set of standards to bring enhanced consultation, participation and dialogue with partners to the programming and implementing of European Structural and Investment Funds.⁹ The ECCP is regulated by law No 240/2014 which is intended to be revised in

⁹ The European Code of Conduct on Partnership in the framework of the European Structural and Investment Funds: <https://ec.europa.eu/esf/BlobServlet?docId=443&langId=en>

the upcoming years.¹⁰ Promising practices in implementing the ECCP comprise adequate consideration and implementation of the following core elements:

- *Representation* of stakeholders including diversity in partner selection and careful consideration of the timing and ‘fit’ of different inputs.
- *Transparency*: Guidance on input, opportunities, and expectations; documents in plain language and adequate time for document revision.
- *On-going partner involvement* with specific focus on the promotion of active and continuous forms of participation and approaches that integrate local voices.
- *Institutional strengthening* with the use of Technical Assistance (TA) and other means to support partners unable to contribute effectively and provide partnership skills training.
- *Review and assessment* including the use of innovative forms of partnership review and reporting on the added value of working in partnership.
- *Exchange and learning* that comprises creative avenues for mutual exchange and learning and the sharing of what works and what does not (see Stott, 2023).

Partnership, however, is not a clearly-defined term within the EU (Scoppetta, 2013; Davern et al., 2021). Collaboration between public actors and between actors from various backgrounds, which miss key components of partnership as defined in the ECCP, are not understood as partnership in the core sense applied in this report. For the sake of completeness and to provide further insights for BB countries, please see Scoppetta (2013) and find a brief description of some of the governance mechanisms used between public actors in the footnote below.¹¹

Partnerships can be set up to design and implement programmes AND encourage the implementation of the partnership principle at sub-regional levels through, for

¹⁰ Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) No 240/2014: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32014R0240&from=EN#:~:text=The%20aim%20of%20this%20Regulation,%2C%20the%20Cohesion%20Fund%2C%20the>

¹¹ Three main governance mechanisms used by public bodies can be distinguished here: 1) Institutional (*ministry-internal*) governance mechanisms of a ministry responsible for a particular policy. Here, the department/s in charge might agree to collaborate for the purpose of enhanced policy delivery. A working group within a respective ministry on horizontally addressed issues such as gender budgeting serves as an example here; 2) Governance mechanisms at central level (*between different ministries/public authorities*) to, for instance, better align policies and make the best use of synergies between state authorities at central level. An interministerial working group on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is an example of this form of collaboration; and 3) *Multi-level governance* mechanisms between public actors. These collaborations are established especially in federal states and include, for instance, the federal government, federal provinces, municipalities and cities working together to better align policies across different governance levels. An example of such partnership is a working group on fiscal equalisation. All three forms might serve as role models for wider stakeholder engagement in the BB countries.

example, partnership-funded programmes. Partnership at programme level engages different stakeholders from the public, the private and the civil society sector, and from different governance levels in technical working groups or Monitoring Committees (as practised within the EU with ESF+ Monitoring Committees). Whether or not the core elements of the ECCP are considered adequately within these governance structures requires examination of each specific case. Partnership, however, can also be set up at project level and engages different stakeholders to pool resources and work together to tackle complex problems (Stott, 2023). Countries such as Ireland are role models for setting up partnership structures at local governance scales. Examples of models in other countries at different governance levels include the Swedish Regional Structural Fund Partnerships (see Stott, 2019).

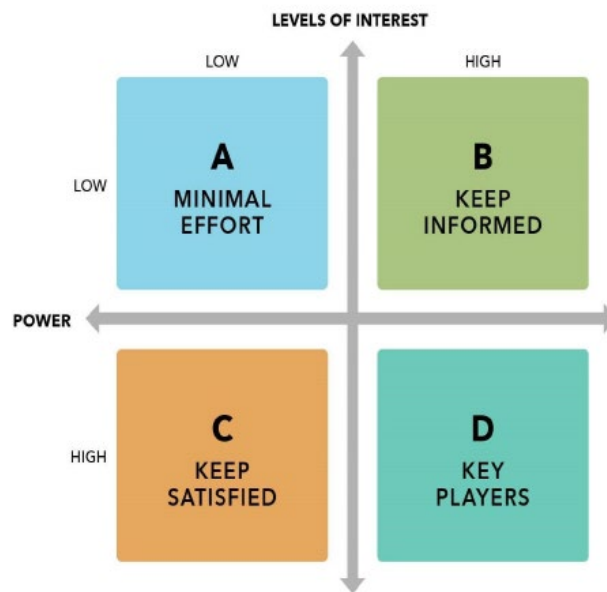
The ECCP calls for fair representation of partners, transparency of selection procedures, partner involvement in Partnership Agreements and programme cycles, strengthening of the institutional capacity of relevant partners, assessment of partner roles in partnership performance and effectiveness during the programming period, as well as exchange of experience and mutual learning across EU funds. According to Stott (2023), amongst the key challenges to implementing the ECCP are: a lack of awareness of the ECCP across the EU funds; box-ticking and a focus on compliance; a lack of flexibility/contextual understanding; poor efforts to involve more diverse partners; weak information channels; the absence of genuine stakeholder engagement throughout programme and project cycles; lack of capacity and practical difficulties of working in partnership (time, skills, etc.), and poor assessment processes.

To address these challenges, some promising EU partnership practices have been developed within the European Social Fund (ESF+). Guided by the ESF Managing Authority in Flanders/Belgium, for example, the implementation of the partnership principle is strongly promoted. The ESF+ Operational Programme (OP) 2021-2027 in Flanders aims to provide new insights on work in partnership and to make stakeholders co-creators in order to have more impact on the Flemish labour market (Meyers, 2023). In the Flemish ESF programme two strategies are defined for the 'social inclusion' pillar for which partnerships are key: the first strategy, 'inclusive entrepreneurship,' works with social partners to create the right business context for the influx and retention of vulnerable groups. In the second strategy, 'local partnerships for vulnerable groups,' the ESF Flanders facilitates connections between the Flemish Public Employment Service (PES) and local authorities in order to set up sustainable local partnerships with relevant service providers.

Stakeholders are involved in preparing the OP and project promoters are constantly consulted by the ESF Flanders, for example, when preparing calls for proposals. This is necessary since partnership is an obligatory mechanism when implementing projects. Stakeholder mapping is used by the agency and involves the use of a stakeholder map to provide a visual representation of individuals or groups with a vested interest in a project, product or idea. Stakeholder mapping helps the agency to identify key stakeholders, understand their influence and develop a strategy for

stakeholder management (see figure 3). To do this, the ESF Flanders applies the so-called ‘hierarchy of intensity of participation’ developed by the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2)¹². The involvement of different stakeholders can thus be clustered according to whether they should ‘inform - consult - involve - collaborate - empower’ with the development of appropriate activities for each form of participation.

Figure 3: How to create efficient partnerships?



Source: Meyers; Power point slides presented at the mutual learning event (24-25 October 2023)

Tips shared by Caroline Meyers for effective partnerships include ‘equal and mutual respect’ among partners; ‘the more concrete the better’ in terms of objectives; ‘better connections through zooming out and taking a real client perspective’; encouraging participation at all levels and ‘involving the work floor’; ‘not only talking about content but also about the process’; ‘achieving visible, small results with an understanding that “measuring is knowing”’; and ‘literally working on site’. Recommendations for action comprise thinking out of the box; making sure to work not only with the ‘usual suspects’ but also non-traditional partners; and making good and clear agreements (including at the financial level). Furthermore, Meyers advised that creating partnerships can be assisted via process guidance and support from critical friends who offer coaching alongside clarity about the goal of the partnership and the outcomes expected.

¹² Advancing the practice of public participation: <https://www.iap2.org/page/about>

3.3 Key Lessons learnt by BB countries

“As we are accountable to those we serve, it is critical to engage beneficiaries/vulnerable groups at all levels.”

Participant of the hands-on pilot mutual learning event

Pilot participants shared a common understanding that partnership is a key mechanism for delivering policies. Some even stressed that good results only can be achieved when engaging different stakeholders. The main partners identified for enhanced policy delivery comprised, from the public sector: the parliament, state agencies and other public authorities; from the private sector and civil society: businesses, research bodies, NGOs, youth-led organisations and women-led organisations. From the group of ‘other partners’, the following partners were highlighted: social partners, beneficiaries, individuals, activists, and international agencies such as implementing partners of EU funds. Having all levels of governance (central, regional and local) on board in a partnership and including the perspectives of beneficiaries in policy design and implementation was regarded as a success factor by participants.

Participants noted that the added value of working with diverse partners was that it enabled problems to be approached in different ways and addressed holistically, including from the perspectives of different policy mandates. It was also observed that more information is available and collective knowledge created, resulting in the possibility of amplifying diverse voices through different channels. According to BB pilot participants, connecting with different stakeholders strengthens capacities for collaboration. In the case of a multisectoral response to gender-based violence in Georgia, for example, reported added value included the improvement of the quality of services provided, the reduced risk of re-victimisation and increased trust by survivors in the capabilities of service providers.

In order for partnerships to work well, participants agreed that the tasks of each partner should be clearly outlined and the exchange of ideas and collaboration among partners ensured. The ECCP was recognised by participants as offering a valuable basis for enabling agreements to be achieved between partners. The main takeaways from the Flemish example for the BB context included:

- Technical staff should increasingly be involved in the partnering process. The same people dealing with partnership internally should also be those discussing the intervention with stakeholders at other governance levels.
- Efforts should be made to replace departing staff with people that have similar expertise. A consistent, trusted person who is familiar with a project's history is preferable for the partnership. Institutional support is also needed to prevent disruptions.

- Although institutional buy-in from stakeholders is required (and unfortunately often missing), individuals are the drivers for institutional buy-in.
- Internal ministerial processes for supporting partnership should be designed and set up well.

Participants noted that challenges in the BB countries extend beyond engaging with "new" partners like the private sector since the resources of "traditional partners" are progressively diminishing. When partners are involved in more than one partnership, challenges increase further. Preventive measures should thus be taken to avoid conflicts of interest among partners involved in decision-making processes. As taking on too many roles was reported to lead to conflicts, emphasis was placed on the need to streamline responsibilities within partnerships. Further challenges encountered in the BB countries revolve around securing commitment and fostering effective communication among the partners involved.

Significant hurdles were also observed in the varying cultures and procedures of different partner organisations. Differences in how ministries, international organisations and NGOs operate lead to challenges in communication and coordination between partners. The establishment of a code of conduct (i.e. the adjustment and application of the ECCP), was seen as a solution for navigating the challenges and establishing guidelines for cooperation and mutual understanding among stakeholders. It was further noted that mediators and partnership brokers¹³ should play a fundamental role in promoting partnerships. Partnership brokers, for example, could take a facilitative and coordinating role, acting as the glue to bring partners together, establishing common ground, navigating difficulties and guiding the collaborative process (PBA, 2019; Tennyson, 2005).

Both bilateral and multilateral agreements have been signed between partners such as ministries, international organisations and NGOs in the BB countries. Discussing and signing agreements between partners was recognised as being important for building horizontal ownership. While it was observed that trust between partners grows over time and through mutual respect, especially when partners have a history of collaboration, it was also noted that trust can be built when partners take responsibilities and deliver on promised commitments. However, they should also build capacities within their institutions to be able to act accordingly.

Capacity building for partnership within individual organisations, such as that practiced by the Flemish ESF Agency, was acknowledged as critical by participants. Such processes still need to be set up within the participating BB institutions. While building the capacities of all partners to work in partnership is required, it was also acknowledged that not all partners have similar capacities. NGOs, for instance, were

¹³ See, for instance, Partnership Brokers Association: <https://partnershipbrokers.org/>

reported to frequently lack necessary collaborative capacities and may thus require support to overcome this gap. Pilot participants also felt that funding institutions should take responsibility for preparing environments for partnerships to flourish. This might include building the capacities of their own staff, enhancing skills by offering training and implementing public relations activities to raise awareness of the need for enhanced partnership skills. Since partners such as municipalities frequently lack know-how in writing proposals involving collaboration, TA could be used to support this.

Key learnings from the pilot included: gaining knowledge about the existence of the initiatives in other BB countries and the EU; the need to apply the ECCP in the BB countries, and the importance of building systems for a comprehensive and coordinated response to issues of concern such as gender-based violence and poverty among vulnerable groups of society.

4 Recommendations

Partnership is an important mechanism for pooling resources and better adapting policies to the needs of the varying target groups of social policies. BB countries are implementing specific components of partnership work such as open consultation mechanisms (Armenia) and multi-level governance (Kosovo). However, since the practices scrutinised frequently miss some of the core elements relevant to the implementation of the partnership principle, as laid down in the ECCP, the recommendations below have been designed to assist in improving partnership implementation in the BB countries.

The following three key recommendations derive from the discussions and analysis undertaken during the implementation of the pilot. They include:

- 1) Application of the ECCP in the BB countries
- 2) Improvements in the quality of partnership implementation
- 3) Partnership skills and capacity building for partnership

Ad 1) Application of the ECCP in the BB countries

The implementation of the partnership principle is increasingly recognised by stakeholders as essential for ensuring social cohesion, solidarity and sustainable development in proposals for programmes and projects with potentially high leverage effects across a wide range of funds. Pilot participants, and especially representatives of BB countries, shared their interest in adjusting the ECCP to their contexts. The ECCP was recognised as a valuable basis for achieving agreements

between partners. In applying the ECCP in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership region, a joint basis can be built to support BB countries in preparing for the implementation of EU funds.

Ad 2) Improvements in the quality of partnership implementation

BB countries are called upon to invest in improvements in the quality of partnership implementation. Improved implementation involves stronger and more coordinated connections between different policy frameworks, institutional levels and sectors, and the development of effective collaboration in respective policy fields and at the interface of policy areas (employment, social protection, education, economy, health, etc.). Governments are requested to apply programmes in a collaborative manner in order to better align programmes and projects to partnership and to set up/improve exchange mechanisms between stakeholders at various levels of governance (multi-level governance). (Formal) agreements between partners should be developed that clearly define the responsibilities and tasks of partners and make them accountable for their actions. Agreements must be made transparent and openly shared with the public.

Ad 3) Partnership skills and capacity building for partnership

To adjust BB policy systems for the enhanced application of partnership, capacities need to be built and resources made available in the BB countries. Enhancing partnership skills and building capacity for partnership is regarded as key for improved policy delivery. Internal processes need to be set up to enable ministerial staff to gain know-how and partnership training should be offered to partners.

A successful introduction to, and application of, 'EU policy thinking' requires hands-on exchange between civil servants from EU countries and EU accession countries. While funding is available, for instance, within the European Union Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA), possibilities for exchange of experiences and know-how beyond expert knowledge (e.g. Socieux)¹⁴ are limited. The Mutual Learning Programme under the European Employment Strategy, implemented in the fields of employment, social affairs and inclusion¹⁵ should consequently be opened up to partners from candidate countries.

¹⁴ SOCIEUX+ EU Expertise on Social Protection, Labour and Employment: <https://socieux.eu/about/>

¹⁵ Mutual Learning Programme – Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1047>

4.1 Checklist on partnership governance

To foster partnership implementation, a checklist on partnership governance for BB countries is presented below (table 1). The list, which should be used as a discussion tool, comprises questions on key areas of partnership governance and aims to assist BB ministries and other (state) actors to reflect on their policy systems. The questions are derived from a variety of resources (see References and further reading) and should be adjusted to each BB context.

Table 1: Checklist on partnership governance for BB countries

Areas of concern	Questions for discussion	Yes / No	Remarks for enhanced action
ENABLING FRUITFUL PARTNERSHIP ECOSYSTEMS			
I. Purpose			
	<i>Is partnership considered by potential partners as the best option for meeting the purpose?</i>	√	...
	<i>Do partnerships assist in achieving the objectives of the programme, strategy or policy?</i>	√	...
	<i>Do all parties involved agree to work in partnership?</i>	...	
II. European Code of Conduct on Partnership for the BB countries			
	<i>Has the ECCP been adjusted and applied according to the needs of the country?</i>		
	<i>Are the key principles of partnership employed: representation, transparency, ongoing partner involvement, institutional strengthening, review and learning?</i>		
	<i>Have adequate absorption mechanisms enabling the sustainable implementation of partnership been arranged?</i>		
III. Partnership ecosystem			
	<i>Are the preconditions for supporting partnership met (e.g. rules for working together in an open manner)?</i>		
	<i>Have adequate collaboration mechanisms been set up at the various governance levels?</i>		
	<i>Are fruitful learning environments for partnership in place?</i>		
	<i>Are dedicated partnership support structures available to assist the development of partnership?</i>		
	<i>Are the experiences and knowledge of intermediary organisations used to support partnership promotion?</i>		
SPECIFY THE ENGAGEMENT OF PARTNERS			
IV. Type and roles of partners			
	<i>Are partners engaged in the analysis, design, and implementation of the programmes?</i>		
	<i>Have the potential partnership stakeholders been mapped? Are traditional and non-traditional partners engaged?</i>		

Areas of concern	Questions for discussion	Yes / No	Remarks for enhanced action
	<i>Are the incentives of different partners to work together understood by all in the same way? Have the needs and concerns of different partners been identified?</i>		
	<i>Is equal participation/representation of partners facilitated? Have actions been established to counterbalance power relations between partners?</i>		
	<i>Have guidelines for partners been developed that outline rules and procedures for working in partnership?</i>		
V. Agreements between partners			
	<i>Do (formal) agreements between partners exist? Do partners reflect and agree upon actions for a certain period (e.g. annually)?</i>		
	<i>Have the different roles and responsibilities of partners been clarified and agreed?</i>		
	<i>Do partners undertake their responsibilities adequately? Are partners made accountable for their actions?</i>		
	<i>Are joint decision-making rules in place? Have partners agreed on these and are they openly shared?</i>		
VI. Engagement with vulnerable groups of society			
	<i>Have the most vulnerable been provided with a voice?</i>		
	<i>Are there opportunities for those who frequently do not have a voice to become empowered?</i>		
	<i>Is clear language used so that those not capable of understanding technical/administrative terms are included?</i>		
VII. Openness and transparency			
	<i>Are the voices of each partner openly shared within the partnership?</i>		
	<i>Has the public been consulted on strategies, programmes, and policies? Have stakeholders been offered adequate time to review and provide responses on these?</i>		
VIII. Reflection and learning			
	<i>Are adequate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in place for both reviewing results and assessing how partners are working together to achieve them?</i>		
	<i>Are partnering processes jointly reflected upon and adjusted (where necessary)?</i>		
	<i>Are creative avenues undertaken for mutual learning and the sharing of what works and what does not?</i>		
CAPACITY BUILDING FOR PARTNERSHIPS			
IX. Capacity building within the institution (ministry or state authority)			
	<i>Have partnership capacities been built within the institution (e.g. ministry)?</i>		
	<i>Are there activities for enhancing partnership skills (e.g. trainings) within the institution?</i>		

Areas of concern	Questions for discussion	Yes / No	Remarks for enhanced action
	<i>Can the partnership serve as a role model?</i>		
X. Capacity building of partners			
	<i>Have the capacities of partners been assessed and mechanisms/actions set up to enhance them?</i>		
	<i>Are Technical Assistance and other means used to provide partnership skills training and to support partners unable to contribute effectively due to lack of capacity?</i>		

4.2 Suggestion for first steps taken by NLOs

“At their core, partnerships are about people. The value that each person brings to the partnership should not be overlooked.”

Participant of the hands-on pilot mutual learning event

The National Liaison Officials (NLOs) of the European Centre are encouraged to act as drivers for the application of the partnership principle in the BB countries. Together with colleagues from other departments they can establish first steps with the aim of clarifying and confirming a joint understanding of partnership and agreeing on the rationale for working in this way with the ministry and beyond. The first steps taken by NLOs should comprise:

- Carefully reading and adjusting the list of questions in the checklist (section 4.1) for discussion to the specific BB context.
- Arranging a reflection session with respective programme managers within the institution/ministry.
- Discussing and preparing for the implementation of first actions (including jointly defining milestones and outcomes to be achieved within the short and medium-term).
- Presenting, discussing and adjusting the actions with necessary hierarchical levels (with the aim of further adjusting and generating commitment from respective departments and policy makers within the institution and beyond).
- Implementing actions that include
 - Capacity building activities within the institution that comprise knowledge sharing on partnership, dealing with staff fluctuations and enhancing learning
 - Capacity building activities for other state partners at different governance levels

- Capacity building activities for external partners at different governance levels
- Setting up monitoring mechanisms to reflect on ongoing progress by applying the critical friends approach¹⁶ (e.g. invite external partners for the reflection sessions)
- Making the governance process transparent and informing the public about how the work is being undertaken.

5 Conclusions

The hands-on pilot within the project *Bridge Building Peer Reviews and Trainings* implemented by the European Centre in 2023 provided a unique attempt to gather insights from partnership practices in a selection of BB countries, especially from their respective ministries covering social affairs. The process of gathering and discussing these practices reinforced the high relevance of working in partnership for the EU accession countries. It also sought to provide advice to them on how to improve policy outcomes by strengthening cooperation mechanisms between stakeholders at both programme and project levels.

The results of the pilot show that BB countries are implementing certain components of partnership work, for example, open consultation mechanisms in Armenia and multi-level governance in Kosovo. However, the implementation of the practices shared often lack core elements of the partnership principle as laid down in the European Code of Conduct on Partnership (ECCP) and used in the European Union as the basis for multi-level governance and stakeholder participation in decision-making. As a result, more efforts are required to support partnership and enhance its contribution to improved policy delivery.

The ECCP was recognised by participants of the pilot as a valuable basis for reaching agreement between partners. The added value of working with different partners was viewed as enabling problems to be approached differently as well as holistically, albeit from the perspective of diverse mandates. The application of an adapted ECCP in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership region could therefore provide a joint basis for building the necessary support for BB countries in preparing for the implementation of EU funds.

To improve the quality of partnership implementation, BB countries are urged to build stronger and more coordinated connections between different policy

¹⁶ See Stott and Scoppetta (2011).

frameworks, institutional levels and sectors. The development of effective collaboration in respective policy fields and at the interfaces between them, such as employment and social protection, is also essential. Governments of BB countries are also encouraged to implement programmes in a collaborative manner with better alignment of programmes and projects to partnership and the establishment/improvement of exchange mechanisms that share learning about working in partnership.

As there is a great need for raising the capacity of partners in the BB countries to enable improved participation in partnerships, enhancing partnership skills and building capacity for partnership is essential for better policy delivery. Internal processes need to be set up to enable ministerial staff to gain partnership know-how and training offered for partners to enhance partnership skills. The National Liaison Officials (NLOs) of the European Centre have the potential to act as drivers for the application of the partnership principle in the BB countries. They can establish initial steps towards the improvement of partnership implementation, especially regarding capacity building activities, and act as role models for enhancing the understanding and practice of partnership. These activities may also be supported by hands-on exchanges between civil servants from EU countries and EU accession countries. The EU is thus called upon to engage with partners in the BB countries within existing mutual learning programmes implemented in the fields of employment, social affairs and inclusion, such as the Mutual Learning Programmes under the European Employment Strategy, so that the sharing and learning from partnership experiences can be fostered and heightened across Europe.

Finally, it is also important to position the importance of partnership in the global context as this is an important driver for collaboration among different stakeholders in BB countries. The increased international interest in partnership in the context of the United Nations '2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development'¹⁷ is an example of this. So, while the EU has led the way in demonstrating the importance of the partnership principle, joint actions among and between different individuals, organisations, sectors and countries at both national and transnational levels are crucial for a 'sustainable and healthy economy and environment' everywhere.

¹⁷ The Sustainable Development Agenda, see here:
<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda/>

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ANNEX



ALBANIA - Bridge Building partnership practice

Title	Interreg-IPA CBC Italy-Albania-Montenegro
BB country/locality	<i>Republic of Albania</i>
Governance level	The programme covers an area of 66,365 km ² in total between South-East Europe and the Mediterranean Sea with a population of 7,805,809 inhabitants. Albania makes up the largest part of this area (more than 40%) while the Italian Region of Molise makes up the smallest (4,437 km ²).
Partners	Ministry of Health and Social Protection, Albania and Council of Europe Development Bank (CEB)
Rationale/reason for the partnership	The programme aims at assisting participating countries to meet their national targets in each of the programme areas through fostered cross-border cooperation across the Mediterranean region.
Context for challenge	Albania is making limited efforts to align with EU standards, in terms of innovative services organisation, using digital platforms and sharing services among citizens. Significant progress still needs to be achieved.
Description of practice	<p>The PHASE project aims at developing the eHealth sector, for the benefit of citizens and Micro-, Small- and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs) through innovative electronic tools and procedures applied in Italy, Albania, and Montenegro. Its activities focus on efficient treatment of heart attacks, neurodegenerative and chronic diseases. The project will boost the creation and development of eHealth digital enterprises by providing non-financial services and increasing their competences. At the same time, it will work towards raising citizens' and public authorities' awareness about eHealth. The goal is to improve the overall health and the quality of life of citizens, by using ICT technologies to increase self-management of healthcare and diseases.</p> <p>The purpose is to establish a strong network with the aim of increasing MSMEs competitiveness, creating non-financial support that can change MSMEs behaviour in terms of innovation, cooperation at transnational level and opening of new markets. Results will be duly disseminated with targeted events.</p>
Evidence of the practice (if available)	eMS (electronic Monitoring System) – see: https://www.italy-albania-montenegro.eu/tools/eMS

The project is financed by:



What makes this practice a useful learning example?	<p>Cardiovascular and neurodegenerative diseases, an ageing population and the need to ensure high quality of life represent a crucial challenge for both the EU and the IPA countries. In this context, the programme aims at developing the eHealth sector for the benefit of citizens through innovative technological tools and procedures, applied in Italy, Albania and Montenegro. This is done not only by improving health services, both public and private, but also by promoting innovation for companies operating in the field of digital technologies and health services. In this regard, e-health will bring shortened distances and reduced barriers in the health sector. The development of the sector will be beneficial for the whole area, not only for the improvement of public and private healthcare services, but it can also contribute to boost innovation and competitiveness of MSMEs working in the fields of digital technologies and traditional healthcare services.</p>
More information	<p>https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/in-your-country/programmes/2014-2020/it/2014tc16i5cb008_en</p> <p>Interreg-IPA CBC Italy-Albania-Montenegro: https://shendetesia.gov.al/interreg-ipa-cbc-italy-albania-montenegro/</p> <p>Policlinico di Bari leads cross-border project to strengthen the telemedicine sector: https://phase.italy-albania-montenegro.eu/policlinico-di-bari-leads-cross-border-project-to-strengthen-the-telemedicine-sector</p> <p>https://www.italy-albania-montenegro.eu/</p> <p>https://interreg.eu/programme/interreg-ipa-cbc-italy-albania-montenegro/</p> <p>https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/in-your-country/programmes/2014-2020/it/2014tc16i5cb008_en</p> <p>https://www.adriatic-ionian.eu/event/from-italy-albania-montenegro-to-interreg-ipa-south-adriatic-cooperation-continues/</p>
Submission details	<p>Contracting authority at the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, Albania with registered address: Street Kavaja, Tirana.</p>



ALBANIA - Bridge Building partnership practice

Title	Modernisation of Social Assistance (SAMP)
BB country/locality	<i>Albania</i>
Governance level	Ministry of Health and Social Protection, Albania
Partners	Ministry of Health and Social Protection, Albania and World Bank
Rationale/reason for the partnership	The objective of Social Assistance Modernisation Project in Albania is to support the country's implementation of reforms to improve the equity and efficiency of its social assistance programmes. The project strengthens the implementation and performance of social assistance programmes. It supports the improved implementation of both the Economic Assistance Programme (EAP) and Disability Programme (PAK).
Context for challenge	The main challenge was to conduct a complete change in the approach taken in the evaluation of persons with disabilities. Previously the evaluation only covered health. The reform consisted of changing the approach to a multidisciplinary evaluation of the patient, taking into consideration social factors that people with limited abilities face. Taking these factors into consideration will result in a more holistic evaluation of the patient. Changing the assessment approach was a challenge in implementing the reform because the multidisciplinary system has not worked progressively throughout Albania. This approach brought progress in a new way of evaluation as well as attention to the number of difficulties incurred by patients when utilising the required services and revised payments.
Description of practice	The project objective of the Social Assistance Modernisation is to support the Government's reform agenda to improve equity, efficiency, and transparency of social assistance programmes. The project will focus mainly on the poverty targeted Ndihma Ekonomike (NE) programme and the disability assistance (PAK). The project activities consist of two interrelated components: 1) Strengthening the implementation and performance of Social Assistance Programmes; and 2) Technical Assistance to strengthen implementation capacity for Social Assistance Programmes.
Evidence of the practice/reviews (if available)	Please see UNDP, UN, SWISS DEVELOPMENT, Ministry of Health and Social Protection (Albania) (https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/al/edfd_b84b53b0d24c6c30e62b87531982bcc554fc927ab58debd93bfab812427e.pdf) as well as the review " Performance of Western Balkan economies regarding the European Pillar of Social Rights " (Regional

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	Cooperation Council; European Centre for Social Welfare Policy Research).
What makes this practice a useful learning example?	The practice was successful regarding the evaluation of persons with disabilities. They benefit from revised payments based on the degree of the difficulties. The coordination of beneficiaries' systems of different schemes also lead to the elimination of beneficiaries that receive double payments.
More information	<p>Information on the project, including the work of the working group can be found here:</p> <p>https://shendetesia.gov.al/modernizimi-i-asistences-sociale-samp/</p> <p>https://www.worldbank.org/en/search?q=SAMP+ALBANIA+&currentTab=1&x=9&y=6</p> <p>Information on developing opportunities, resilience and economic support stakeholder engagement plan can be viewed at:</p> <p>https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099040423080522819/pdf/P17885508c78f30a096db09810f0c32f93.pdf</p>
Submission details	<p>Ministry of Health and Social Protection (MoHSP)</p> <p>Social Assistance Modernisation Project, Mrs. Suzana Papadhopulli (Project Manager), Rr: "Kavajës", Nr.53, Tirana, ALBANIA</p> <p>Website: www.shendetesia.gov.al</p>



ARMENIA - Bridge Building partnership practice

Title	Family vulnerability assessment system's reform in the Republic of Armenia
BB country/locality	<i>Republic of Armenia (RA)</i>
Governance level	Central level
Partners	Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, International organisations (UNICEF and World Bank) and an Armenian research company (NGO)
Rationale/reason for the partnership	<p>The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of RA launched a new reform which considers crucial changes in the family vulnerability assessment (FVA) system. The reform covers the entire territory of Armenia and should have direct impact on the country's poverty and unemployment rates. In implementing the reform, the Ministry initiated a cooperation with international organisations (World Bank and UNICEF), which were assisting the Ministry in developing the new FVA strategy. The other partner in the reform was a research partner that collected and analysed the main data necessary for the development of new methodologies.</p> <p>The reason for the partners to join the partnership was the necessity that was seen in taking different points of views into consideration, learn from international experts' opinions and include advanced international practices as well as research results regarding practical issues related to the reform.</p>
Context for challenge	The main challenge of the partnership was related to the fact that the partners presented different spheres, both state/government, NGO and international community. It was difficult to bring together the ideas and agree on one suggestion that would be applicable to the Armenian context. Another challenge was caused by the fact that the Ministry as a governmental organisation must follow strict procedures and regulations that sometimes limit the possibilities of the partners (e.g. flexible communication and cooperation).
Description of practice and roles of partners	The main task of partners in the partnership referred to pulling together all resources for the crucial reform in the country's social protection system: the development of the new FVA system. A division of work between the partners was agreed whereby the international partners were responsible for cooperating with the ministry in choosing the main method of FVA, identifying criteria and fixing the new thresholds, based on the social-economic situation of beneficiaries in Armenia and on international advanced practice. The research company, in close cooperation with the ministry and international organisations, was responsible for developing the research methodology and

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	<p>conducting the research, the results of which will help to justify or adjust the new methodology or thresholds or criteria of the FVA reform.</p> <p>The cooperation also considered working together in other directions demanded by the new reform.</p>
Evidence of the practice/reviews (if available)	<p>The main outcomes of the research were:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Draft of the FVA strategy developed. 2. Research methodology, correspondent to the main tasks and objectives of the reform designed. 3. Research conducted by the research company based on the methodology designed. 4. Strategy adjusted to the main results of the research (in progress).
What makes this practice a useful learning example?	<p>This partnership was chosen for the following reasons:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. It presents an example of multisector cooperation. 2. The main difficulties were related especially to working in collaboration. 3. The partnership succeeded because the main objectives were achieved.
More information	<p>Please contact the Ministry (see below) for the study protocol provided in English language.</p>
Submission details	<p>Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs Armenia, Yerevan</p> <p>Ms. Yevgine Vardanyan, yevginevardanyan@gmail.com</p> <p>10.10.2023</p>



BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA - Bridge Building partnership practice

Title	Policy and Practice Community (PPC) on youth and intergenerational support in Bosnia and Herzegovina
BB country/locality	<i>Bosnia and Herzegovina</i>
Governance level	The partnership is implemented at the local/municipal level in Banja Luka and Sarajevo.
Partners	The partnership was developed by UNFPA Bosnia and Herzegovina with Canton of Sarajevo and City of Banja Luka. The PPC was endorsed by the Ministry of Education.
Rationale/reason for the partnership	<p>The partnership was developed to address the challenge of youth outmigration, ageing population and depopulation in municipalities in Bosnia and Herzegovina.</p> <p>Cities need better solutions for young people so that their potential can be unleashed to support not only themselves and their families, but also the communities they live in.</p>
Context for challenge	As part of the UNFPA's Demographic Resilience Programme , the UNFPA, in partnership with municipalities of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH and RS), are advancing policies on inclusive cities where every young person's potential is leveraged to support improvements in human capital, demographic resilience and achievement of the SDGs.
Description of practice	<p>Canton Sarajevo and UNFPA propose to structure and implement the "Local Community Improvement Lab" that aims to engage multiple layers of the community – students, school administrators/alumni, parents, older persons – in a problem-solving process, ultimately leading to community-driven solutions. At the same, and in accordance with the broader commitment to foster intergenerational solidarity within Sarajevo, a sequence of community-engaging activities is scheduled to mobilise public local interest and support. These community-building events will underscore the importance of partnerships between school alumni, children, parents, and local residents in improving their local communities.</p> <p>Initial consultations with the Sarajevo Canton and the Ministry of Education and Upbringing have pinpointed the Ilidza municipality as a priority area, owing to its sizable youth population, expanding urban layout, and aging educational facilities. Subsequent discussions further identified the 5th Elementary School in Ilidza as the optimal focal point for community engagement. This choice is informed by the school's</p>

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	<p>considerable community influence as well as its pressing challenges, such as deteriorating infrastructure and limited extracurricular offerings.</p> <p>The City of Banja Luka is implementing "Educational Renaissance: Community Coming Together" focused on strengthening the municipality's educational infrastructure, fostering a strong sense of community and intergenerational support.</p>
Evidence of the practice/reviews (if available)	<p>The PPCs serve as an experimental venture for both UNFPA and the Cantonal Government of Sarajevo and the municipality of Banja Luka. They are being implemented now and the results will be available at a later stage.</p>
What makes this practice a useful learning example?	<p>By adopting this recurrent approach, the Ministry and the Cantonal Government of Sarajevo aim to accomplish dual objectives: enhancing community infrastructure while also fostering a robust sense of community ownership and engagement in problem-solving activities.</p> <p>The "Educational Renaissance: Community Coming Together" PPC offers a sustainable and adaptable model/pilot that can be replicated by the City of Banja Luka as well as other municipalities in Bosnia and Herzegovina.</p>
More information	<p>Links to the PPC concepts notes:</p> <p>Canton of Sarajevo PPC</p> <p>City of Banja Luka</p>
Submission details	<p>Ainur Kanafina, Programme Specialist in Population and Development, UNFPA Eastern Europe and Central Asia, kanafina@unfpa.org,</p> <p>Samid Sarenkagic, UNFPA BiH Country Office, Programme Analyst, Youth and Peace, sarenkagic@unfpa.org</p>



GEORGIA - Bridge Building partnership practice

Title	Primary Healthcare System Response to gender-based violence/ violence against women
BB country/locality	<i>Georgia</i>
Governance level	The regulatory framework created within the scope of the project will have implication nationwide, however, the project was piloted in one of the regions of the country, the Kakheti region.
Partners	The project was implemented in cooperation with the Ministry of Health, Labour and Social Affairs of Georgia and the State Care Agency, LEPL under the ministry. The project targeted primary healthcare professionals as the primary responders to the (alleged) cases of violence against women (VAW)/gender-based violence (GBV).
Rationale/reason for the partnership	<p>The healthcare system is one of the most important tiers of the multi-sectoral response to VAW. Health system and health-care providers play a critical role in terms of identification, assessment, treatment, crisis intervention, documentation, referral and follow-up of GBV cases.</p> <p>The project seeks to create the regulatory framework for enabling and mandating healthcare professionals to effectively identify and refer cases of violence to relevant authorities/services, thus strengthening the multi-sectoral response to VAW/GBV. Moreover, the project sought to raise awareness and sensitise primary healthcare professionals of the VAW/GBV and trigger behaviour change revealed through implementing relevant steps in practice.</p>
Context for challenge	<p>The United Nations Population Fund, 2022, Gender Equality in Georgia: Barriers and Recommendations, accessible at: https://georgia.unfpa.org/en/publications</p> <p>The UN Women, Country Gender Equality Profile of Georgia, 2021, accessible at: https://georgia.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/11/country-gender-equality-profile-of-georgia_georgia#view</p>
Description of practice	UNFPA CO Georgia in cooperation with the State Fund for the Protection and Assistance of the (Statutory)Victims of Trafficking in Human Beings (hereinafter referred to as AtipFund), has been implementing a programme Healthcare Response to VAW/DV since 2013. The efforts have yielded significant institutional changes in the system, including, but not limited to, adaptation of the medical forms for identifying and referring cases of VAW/DV to special services, elaborating Standard Operation Procedures for healthcare professionals, allocating state

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	funding for the services of victims of sexual violence, etc. The aforementioned SOP and the medical forms have been piloted in PHC units in a number of municipalities of Kakheti region and at the selected pilot healthcare facilities in Tbilisi. The forms were rolled out nationwide since 2020.
Evidence of the practice	N/A
What makes this practice a useful learning example?	The project is a good example of cooperation between the state and the UN. It demonstrates a good example of joining forces to assist the country in responding to international commitments assumed on the basis of international treaties. Moreover, it showcases the example of coordinating actions between the UN agencies, in this case UNFPA and UN Women, within the framework of their respective mandates.
Submission details	Mariam Bandzeladze, UNFPA CO Georgia, bandzeladze@unfpa.org , Georgia, 10.17.2023

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KOSOVO - Bridge Building partnership practice

Title	Active Inclusion Integration Platform of the Employment Agency of the Republic of Kosovo and Department of Social Assistance Schemes
BB country/locality	<i>Kosovo</i>
Governance level	Kosovo-wide in 37 municipalities Employment Offices and Centres for Social Work
Partners	Ministry of Finance Labour and Transfers, Kosovo, EARK/Employment Agency of the Republic of Kosovo (Municipal Employment offices), and Department of Social Assistance Schemes (CSW/Centres for Social Work)
Rationale/reason for the partnership	The Active Inclusion Integration Platform of the Employment Agency of the Republic of Kosovo and Department of Social Assistance Schemes is created to foster institutionalised models of integrated and user-centred provision of services for marginalised groups through the EARK and CSW's and to enhance capacities and resources to develop and implement inclusive employment initiatives of local multi stakeholder partnerships.
Context for challenge	<p>The following challenges are faced:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exchange of information between the CSW and Employment Offices • Refusal of jobs by the jobseeker and reflection of this in the system • Lack of feedback from the employer or the jobseeker • Use of the integrated system by staff and the need for additional training • Modification of CSW and EMIS systems with special emphasis on category two • Communication with clients and parties • Lack of cooperation with NGOs • Lack of cooperation with municipalities and other Institutions at central and local level
Description of practice	The Active Inclusion Integration Platform of the Employment Agency of the Republic of Kosovo and Department of Social Assistance Schemes is a module developed in both Employment Management Information System (EMIS) and Social Assistance System (SAS) to make possible that all social assistance beneficiaries are shown in green grid. EMIS communicates with SAS database and retrieves information on beneficiaries, including payment history. When the social assistance beneficiaries are offered a job opportunity and they refuse, EMIS will

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	<p>automatically update the records of beneficiaries in the SAS database, while in EMIS this will be shown in an orange grid. After the first refusal, the system will place the beneficiary at the end of the list while using the opportunity to offer job vacancies to other beneficiaries. If a beneficiary is offered a job opportunity the second time, and they end up refusing, based on refusal comment (which is selected upon refusal), EMIS will again update the SAS database with the second refusal and depending on the refusal reason, the beneficiary will be suspended from social assistance. Job proposals and placement in ALMP measures have been added as features for job offer refusals. Upon refusing a job offer, the beneficiaries' history is automatically updated, and they are shown in module grids (depending on refusals). Refusal information is also included in a web service developed for communication of EMIS & SAS. For all existing (and new) jobseekers, the SAS form is developed for transfer/registration from EMIS of jobseekers' education level, employment/unemployment statuses, ALMP measures history and job refusals. With this module in place and communication with the SAS database, jobseekers no longer need to get a physical copy of the unemployment document from the EA and deliver it to CSW, as CSW officials will be able to retrieve the unemployment document from the EMIS.</p>
More information	<p>The integrated policy approach applied for vulnerable groups of society with the Active Inclusion Integration Platform (AIIP) of the Republic of Kosovo that took place in June 2022. (see: https://www.euro.centre.org/publications/detail/4502)</p>
Submission details	<p>Employment Agency of Republic of Kosovo muhamet.klinaku@rks-gov.net, Director of Department for Labor Market</p>



KOSOVO - Bridge Building partnership practice

Title	Youth Guarantee in Kosovo 2023 - 2025
BB country/locality	<i>Republic of Kosovo</i>
Governance level	The practice is implemented at central level and local level with its two pilot regions Mitrovica and Feriza.
Description of practice	The aim of the Youth Guarantee (YG) is to set up national schemes through which young people can receive an offer of employment, education, traineeship or apprenticeship within a period of four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education, extending the age limit for targeted young people from 25 to up to 29 years and providing for better inclusion of persons from vulnerable groups, such as NEETs (people who are not in education, employment, or training), young women and people with disabilities. In order to implement the YG in Kosovo a broad partnership with various stakeholders is envisaged (see below).
Rationale/reason for the partnership	A large portion of young people experience a difficult transition from school to work. More concretely, the risk of becoming NEETs in Kosovo rises with decreasing levels of educational attainment (the probability of becoming a NEET for young people with primary and secondary education is respectively 13.6 and 11.8% higher than for young people with tertiary level education). Since 2018 NEET shares by educational attainment have developed in such a way that NEETs with primary education now comprise less than 30% of total group, while the rates of secondary educated NEETs now stand at slightly over 40%. The YG implementation plan is considered a catalyst to align Kosovo's youth employment policy framework to the principles of the YG, namely universal reach of all young NEETs under 30 years of age; policy coherence and coordination – based on broad-based partnerships – to “guarantee” a quality offer within four months, continued monitoring and optimal use of domestic and other financial resources.
Partners and their roles	<p>The Youth Guarantee (YG) scheme in Kosovo is operationalised through partnerships primarily between seven partners/group of partners. The institutional arrangements that have been established for the implementation of the YG in Kosovo have been agreed as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Ministry of Finance, Labour and Transfers as the <i>YG Coordinator</i> • The Public Employment Agency as <i>the main implementing partner</i> of the YG • The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology <i>responsible for early intervention</i> • The Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports • Civil society organisations <i>responsible for outreach</i>



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- Regional government authorities *responsible for implementation* on the ground
- Social partners as advising bodies

An *inter-ministerial commission* was established, chaired by the Ministry of Finance, Labour, and Transfers, which will convene regularly to coordinate activities, verify progress, and take corrective action if necessary. The *YG Coordinator*, the Ministry of Finance, Labour and Transfers, will be responsible for coordination and monitoring of the implementation of the reforms and specific interventions included in the YG implementation plan. The Ministry will have the task of leveraging resources for the funding of the YG service delivery system and will be entrusted with the mapping phase of the YG as well as with policymaking regarding employment.

The Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation will be responsible for managing the early intervention phase of the YG. This includes consolidation of the VET legal framework, revision of the VET funding formula, the alignment of VET programmes to occupational standards, wherever relevant, the further development of work-based learning, the provision of non-education development opportunities for VET teachers, the need for recognition of prior learning opportunities, the development of occupational standards for adult education and the upgrade of the Education Information System with a view to tracking students' performance, detecting early school leavers and allowing administrative data pooling. Special attention will be paid to the review of curricula based on evaluation and the future development direction in relevant areas such as rapid developments in the curriculum areas of life and work, career education and entrepreneurship. Furthermore, the Ministry is responsible for drafting the sub-legal act on career guidance and counselling services, defining quality standards of career counselling services and increasing the capacities of students at VET schools for career counselling and guidance services, including engagement of career advisors, training of career counsellors and the approval of the level four programme for qualification of career counsellors.

As implementing partners Municipal Educational Directorates are the bodies who will apply the adjusted legislation and will specifically contribute to the consolidation of mechanism for internal quality assurance. They will strengthen the role of coordinators for quality assurance and build the capacity of VET schools for implementing the quality cycle and for international cooperation, hiring advisors, implementing continuous professional development and network opportunities for VET teachers.

The Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport will be responsible for the outreach phase of the YG and for supporting and capacity building of youth organisations to identify, contact and engage young people who



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	<p>are detached from the labour market with a view to guiding them towards the YG service delivery system.</p> <p>The Employment Agency of the Republic of Kosovo will provide preparation services and quality offers of employment, continued education and training and traineeships to young people (15-29) registering in the YG scheme. Furthermore, the Agency will ensure the implementation of the reforms and of the initiatives required to ensure a strong YG service delivery system, in partnership with the Ministry of Finance, Labour and Transfers.</p>
Context for challenge	<p>The development of a strong delivery mechanism is one of the most problematic aspects of the design and implementation of the YG in Kosovo. To enable the delivery of the YG, the Employment Agency and other institutions will be required to take essential necessary steps which include revising the organisational and functional structure of the Kosovo Employment Agency at central level, revising the content and delivery modes of employment services and upgrading the service delivery model of the Agency (see details below).</p>
Challenges for engaged institutions	<p>To enable the delivery of the YG the engaged institutions will be required to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revise the organisational and functional structure of the Kosovo Employment Agency at central level; enact a new service delivery model to increase the effectiveness of services to clients; ensure more front-office personnel (caseworkers responsible for service and programme delivery) at the regional level; recruit registrars to deal with administrative issues (especially registration and de-registration); introduce a human resource development strategy to improve the quality of services delivered to clients and envisage the procurement of services, internal auditing, analysis, planning and monitoring. • Revise the content and delivery modes of employment services (individualised assessment, individual employment planning, employment counselling and career guidance) and substantially expand job placement services for which international evidence have proven time and again to be the most effective service among those offered to unemployed clients. • Establish an effective service line for employers (job task analysis to better formulate vacancy announcements, personalised screening and pre-selection of candidates, advice to comply with legal requirements, and e-accounts for medium and large size enterprises) to foster long-term relations with employers and promote the acquisition of job vacancies (beyond the general obligation of employers to notify). • Revise the portfolio of active labour market programmes. The return rates of active labour market programmes are well below the employment gains recorded in other countries. This may be



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	<p>due either to design features (duration, alignment with labour market demands, targeting approaches) or to implementation processes (poor matching between the characteristics of the beneficiary and the core feature of the programme; procedural requirements). The Youth Guarantee offers an opportunity to revise the design, targeting approaches, and delivery mode of the current portfolio of active measures and introduces new schemes that may also benefit the unemployed population, rather than only young NEETs and address emerging labour market needs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The service delivery model of the Agency will be upgraded to: (i) separate registration (administrative task) from the counselling function; (ii) introduce a statistical profiling system (see below); (iii) improve the format, implementation procedures and the monitoring of the individual employment plan prepared for the hard to reach unemployed; (iv) envisage group information and counselling sessions (e.g. on the services provided by the Agency; job vacancy portals; basic job search skills; labour market information); (v) expand job matching services, and (vi) establish specialised services for employers (to increase the capacity of the Agency to canvass job vacancies and expand the base of partner employers in active measures) and introduce a regular Employers' Survey. • Introduce a data-based profiling system to segment clients for priority assistance to address the unfavourable ratio between front-office staff and unemployed clients; as well as the establishment of a robust monitoring and evaluation system to continuously improve service and programme delivery, not only for young NEETs, but also for all individuals who register with the Employment Agency of the Republic of Kosovo to receive support. • Review and make amendments on the "Law on personal data protection" (No. 06/L-082) to allow for data exchange across the YG implementing institution (e.g. Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation, Employment Agency of the Republic of Kosovo). • Upgrade two ICT platforms, the ICT platform of Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation and of the Agency to comply with the requirements of the YG and EMCO indicator framework. The platform will include the indicators necessary for a pupil tracking system. The ICT platform of the Agency will be upgraded to allow the introduction of a monitoring system based on inflows and outflows and on the recording of young participants to the YG. The YG monitoring system requires that young NEETs registered for support be continuously monitored to verify their exit from the service delivery system (within 4, 6 or 12 months from registration) and their situation at follow-up, irrespective of the provider of the offer (Employment Agency, YG partner institution or open market offer). In addition, the Agency will explore which mix of
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	<p>administrative data (tax authority, business register, pension fund, education information management system) may provide a more reliable measure of the situation of beneficiaries at follow-up. This will also help with the work on the interoperability of databases with a view to digitalise administrative procedures (registration and benefit entitlement) and decrease the administrative burden on employment counsellors.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a cross-checking/data-sharing mechanism so that entities involved in the YG may access, track and have a more comprehensive view from NEET data across entities. • Develop a Human Resource Development Strategy which beyond recruitment and profiling, identifies the needs of the staff for training and may involve online and continuous learning.
Evidence of the practice	There are no reviews/evaluations of the practice available yet.
What makes this practice a useful learning example?	The Western Balkans Declaration on ensuring sustainable labour market integration of young people (15-29) ¹⁸ has been endorsed by Kosovo in 2021, thereby underscoring its resolve to: take concrete steps to gradually establish, implement and enhance, respectively a YG scheme, provide strong support for the implementation of a YG scheme, including by putting this initiative high on the political agenda and by allocating the necessary human and financial resources, use IPA funds to this avail, setting up inter-sectoral task forces involving relevant bodies, agencies and stakeholders, including the social partners, youth organisations and other non-governmental organisations, and developing or updating, respectively, Youth Guarantee Implementation Plans.
More information	Please see the Council Recommendation on A Bridge to Jobs – Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee (2020) ¹⁹ which replaces the Council Recommendation of 22 April 2013 on establishing a Youth Guarantee.
Submission details	Employment Agency of Republic of Kosovo, Mr. Muhamet Klinaku, Director of Department for Labor Market (muhamet.klinaku@rks-gov.net)

¹⁸ [Western Balkans Declaration on ensuring sustainable labour market integration of young people \(15-29\)](#)

¹⁹ [Council Recommendation on A Bridge to Jobs – Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee \(2020\)](#)



MOLDOVA - Bridge Building partnership practice

Title	Providing emergency financial assistance for the population affected by the crisis and integrating the response to shocks in the national social protection system of the Republic of Moldova 2022-2023
BB country/locality	<i>Republic of Moldova</i>
Governance level of the practice	Central and local level (Ministry of Labour and Social Protection/MLSP of the Republic of Moldova, territorial structures of social assistance, and local public administration/at City Hall level)
Partners	The partnerships established between central and local public administration, civil society and international development partners such as UN Agencies (UNWFP, UNFPA, ICNUR/UNHCR, UNICEF, IOM) are an example of fruitful cooperation between all governance levels.
Rationale/reason for the partnership	It is essential for humanitarian and development actors to work in a coordinated way with those supporting the government-led response to poverty, contributing to the government's objectives for integrating shock-responsiveness into the social protection system.
Description of practice	<p>Integrated emergency and development programming is at the heart of this tripartite project implemented by the UN Agencies (World Food Programme – WFP, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNHCR, IOM) in collaboration with the MLSP. It ran between October 2022 and August 2023. The Agencies have provided assistance and expertise across the region regarding the Ukraine crisis, comprising immediate emergency relief as well as advice and practical support for system-strengthening. They have also ensured that attention is paid to the deepening needs of Moldovan households affected by the emergency. The agencies collaborate with the government's Joint Crisis Management Centre as part of a coordinated response. Meanwhile, UNICEF, UNFPA and other actors have already been supporting several aspects of social protection system-strengthening for many years. The aim of the present initiative is not to duplicate or divert those efforts, but rather to expedite time-critical elements of building shock-responsiveness into the system.</p> <p>The activities were carried out under the leadership and coordination of the MLSP so that the design, implementation and monitoring of the emergency cash transfers were coherent with national systems and its capacity as well as with other social protection interventions and reforms. The joint project had two workstreams: (1) The <i>Emergency Cash Transfer Programme</i> for an estimated 56,000 crisis-affected households using social protection systems to the extent possible; and (2) <i>Technical assistance to the MLSP</i> to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, and inclusiveness of the social protection system, including building elements</p>

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	<p>conducive to future shock-response. The expected outputs are that emergency cash transfers are provided, access to services is facilitated, technical expertise and advice as well as data & analytics are provided, human resources are supported, trainings conducted, and capacities enhanced.</p> <p>MLSP and UN Agencies (UNWFP, UNFPA, ICNUR/UNHCR, UNICEF and IOM) joined forces in order to finance the programme. On 25.11.2022 the Memorandum of Understanding “Granting emergency financial assistance to the population affected by the crisis and integrating the response to shocks in the national system of social protection from the Republic of Moldova” was signed. Emergency Cash Transfers were implemented through the “Crisis Support Informational System” developed by the MLSP. For the implementation of the memorandum, MLSP approved the regulatory framework.</p> <p>The right to Emergency Cash Transfers was granted to families living in the territory of the Republic of Moldova, which include persons with disabilities and families with children (including pregnant or breastfeeding women). To establish the Emergency Cash Transfers, a local commission was set up that comprised next to the mayors an uneven number of members including representatives of the Mayor's Office, the Municipal Council, the Territorial Social Assistance Structure and civil society. The commission had the role of identifying potential beneficiaries and deciding on the right to Emergency Cash Transfers. About 56,000 families were identified; of those 55,746 families received a payment (99.5%). About 7% of the total population received financial support as a top-up to national assistance during the winter months. The single payment per family was about € 255 and the total amount of the programme was € 13 million.</p>
Context for challenge	<p>The Ukraine crisis has affected Moldova disproportionately, given its size, limited resources and the compounding effects of recent shocks, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the energy crisis. Of the more than half a million refugees who have transited through the country, some 90,000 remain. Despite high financial and economic constraints and the country's internal vulnerabilities, the government and people of Moldova have shown an impressive level of solidarity and mobilisation, with thousands of households hosting refugees and providing lifesaving support to provide food and other essential needs for displaced persons.</p> <p>Prior to the conflict, Moldova already faced significant challenges. Over a quarter of the resident population of 2.5 million lives in absolute poverty. Over the next months, an estimated 250,000 to 500,000 more may fall below the poverty line. The situation is exacerbated by energy price hikes and inflation, which accelerated to a 20-year high of 34% in August 2022. Of particular concern are the tens of thousands of people facing food and</p>

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	<p>nutrition insecurity, especially families with three or more children, pregnant and lactating women, people with disabilities and single-parent households, particularly those living in rural areas, which comprise most of the lowest income quintile with the least resilience. An assessment by the World Food Programme in May 2022 indicated that many of the most vulnerable households (those receiving social assistance) were adopting strategies such as buying lower quality food or reducing the size or number of meals eaten as well as drawing on savings (some two-thirds of respondents), borrowing money or selling their already limited assets.</p> <p>The MLSP takes the lead role in ensuring an adequate response to the refugee crisis. Concurrently, the Ministry is establishing an Energy Vulnerability Fund with extensive coverage to compensate households for high fuel prices during the winter. It has also embarked on an extensive reform of its social protection systems and programmes.</p> <p>The government's national and international partners are providing emergency assistance that addresses the most pressing needs and seeks to align these with national systems wherever possible. With the large focus of initial support having been directed towards refugees, there is an increasing emphasis on assisting vulnerable Moldovan households.</p>
Evidence of the practice/reviews	Please see: Moldova World Food Programme (wfp.org)
What makes this practice a useful learning example?	The practice is an excellent partnership example involving various levels of governance for the provision of cash assistance as well as technical assistance for strengthening digitalisation capacities and strengthening social services to increase the shock response capacity of local social assistance systems.
Submission details	<p>Republic of Moldova, Ministry of Labour and Social Protection</p> <p>Mr. Oleg Barcari, Head of the Department of Social Assistance for Low-Income Families and the Elderly</p> <p>October 2023</p>