Fostering Inclusive Policy Dialogue: Lessons Learned from EU4Accountability

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Executive Summary

This article examines the **outcomes and lessons learned from the EU4Accountability project in Moldova**, which aimed to foster social accountability and transparency within local communities. Through the collaborative efforts between local public administrations (LPAs) and civil society organisations (CSOs), the project funded **59 local initiatives from 2022 to 2024.**

The key outcomes of the project include improved transparency in decision-making processes, better-fit social policies addressing community needs, strengthened inclusion of vulnerable groups, and enhanced environmental protection practices.

Lessons from the local level showcase **achievements in participatory budgeting, capacity building, strategic development, citizen engagement**, and more, underscoring the importance of active citizen engagement and comprehensive capacity development for sustainable success. Successful collaborative efforts between CSOs and LPAs highlight the importance of formal collaboration frameworks, such as Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs), in establishing clear roles, responsibilities, and objectives.

Furthermore, a supportive legal and policy environment is essential for effective accountability mechanisms. Initiatives like the development of the Law on Access to Public Information demonstrate a commitment to promoting transparency and accountability in Moldova and represent an important step forward in Moldova's accession path. Indeed, as Moldova progresses towards EU membership, fostering an enabling environment for civil society as a key tenet of comprehensive and sustainable governance reforms becomes crucial for advancing democratic principles and European integration.

There is a clear way to enhance citizen participation and social accountability through concrete actions such as promoting participatory decision-making, facilitating access to information, investing in capacity development, and fostering inclusive dialogue around key policy issues at the appropriate level. By implementing these actions and promoting best practices, CSOs and LPAs can strengthen citizen engagement, promote transparency, and contribute to sustainable community development, ultimately advancing Moldova's European agenda and consolidating democracy against a challenging geopolitical backdrop.

Introduction

In the pursuit of supporting social accountability and transparency within Moldova's local communities, collaborative initiatives between local public administrations (LPAs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) have emerged as crucial mechanisms to promote democratic practices. These joint efforts aim to **empower citizens, improve budget literacy, and enhance decision making processes at the grassroots level**. Joint efforts in planning and evaluation help LPAs and CSOs, and are crucial for fostering social accountability and transparency throughout the policy cycle in line with the principle of subsidiarity, one of the cornerstones of the EU acquis communautaire. To that end, Multi-stakeholder platforms for participatory decision-making at the local level represent one of the most useful tools to address the lack of effective intermediary consultation mechanism that often impedes proper policy implementation.

This article examines the outcomes of the EU4Accountability project, implemented by the **European Partnership or Democracy, the European Association for Local Democracy (ALDA), and People in Need Moldova and funded by the European Union.** The project funded a total of 59 local initiatives aiming at fostering social accountability in Moldova for the period 2022-2024 and supported a national-wide policy dialogue process on public accountability and access to information. This article highlights key lessons learned and offers recommendations for advancing social accountability and local democracy in Moldova.

1. Impact on community development

Several examples of **successes from piloted accountability mechanisms** offer valuable insights into the effectiveness of collaborative efforts between LPAs and CSOs. Social accountability policies lead to the following outcomes:

- **Participatory budgeting:** CSOs and LPAs can collaborate to develop and implement participatory budgeting initiatives, allowing citizens to directly influence how public funds are allocated. These initiatives allow for a more efficient use of public resources and develop a stronger ownership by citizens over public investments and other community projects.

- **Transparency of decision-making:** Joint work on different issues affecting the community entails citizen involvement on a regular basis and enhances both civic education and public officials responsiveness, triggering the virtuous circle of transparency and accountability that results in an increase in citizens' trust in the decision-making process.

- **Better fit and inclusive social policies:** Through joint efforts, CSOs and LPAs implement better social policies, addressing pressing community needs such as healthcare access, education, and social assistance programmes. Through participatory

mechanisms, funds are managed by public authorities more efficiently, which results in improved service delivery and better outcomes for vulnerable populations.

- **Strengthened inclusion of vulnerable groups:** CSOs and LPAs can together integrate all citizens, including the most vulnerable groups, into the policy implementation process. By integrating socially responsive implementation frameworks, policies become better suited to the needs of all, including marginalised groups and women, thus promoting social inclusion and gender equality.

- **Better environment protection:** Collaborative initiatives between CSOs and LPAs have resulted in the formulation and enforcement of environmental policies aimed at protecting natural resources and mitigating the impact of climate change, notably in an intermunicipal context, which resulted in improved environmental stewardship and sustainable development practices at the local level.

All these efforts require strengthened bond between LPAs and CSOs as a prerequisite before creating positive changes within Moldova's communities.

To this end, formalising collaboration frameworks between LPAs and CSOs emerges as a pivotal factor for success. Through structured agreements like Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) and Joint Action Plans, both types of stakeholders can proceed to a clear division of labour, establishing practical cooperation modalities, delineating roles and responsibilities, and jointly defining common objectives. Within these collaborative frameworks, the alignment of goals and the shared commitment to transparency and accountability serve as guiding principles, fostering a culture of trust and mutual recognition and providing essential mechanisms for resource mobilisation, monitoring, and conflict resolution. **By ensuring transparent resource allocation and establishing robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, LPAs and CSOs can track progress, address challenges, and jointly adapt their strategies to evolving needs.**

2. Lessons from the local level

The following categories of results showcase the **wide diversity of achievements that public participation can bring about**. The following key insights are gleaned from the results of the small scale projects supported by EU4Accountability with European Union funding:

1. **Participation throughout the budget cycle:** Participatory budgeting was successfully implemented in 51 communities, allowing citizens to actively engage in decision-making processes around concrete budgetary allocations. Additionally, CSOs actively participated in numerous public hearings, advocating for transparent decision-making processes and amplifying community voices. To this purpose, CSOs conducted surveys to identify pressing community issues and inform responsive policy interventions.

2. **Peer learning and capacity development:** CSOs played a pivotal role in building the capacity of LPAs representatives, providing essential training and support on participatory methods and techniques. For example, CSOs provided to LPAs live transmission equipment to monitor the local councils' meetings. They also organised study visits for capacity building and knowledge exchange between LPAs and CSOs, including visits to Romania to learn from the best practices in the field. Election simulation games organised by CSOs have educated young people about civic involvement, encouraging their involvement in civic affairs.

3. **Facilitating Access to Information for citizens' engagement:** Informational panels were installed by several CSOs to facilitate the dissemination of crucial public information to the general public. CSOs also supported the development of municipalities' websites to promote transparency and accessibility, ensuring that all citizens – including those with disabilities – have access to relevant information. Newsletters developed and distributed by CSOs informed the population regarding local council decisions, ongoing developments, and community news.

Social accountability initiatives require a set of conditions for civic engagement and multistake-holder cooperation to be sustained.

4. **Strategic Development and Coalition-making:** Several associations developed or updated their strategies to best empower citizen participation in policymaking. Moreover, CSOs set up civil society fora where they could reflect together on how best leverage their common forces for community development. Advocacy coalitions enabled CSOs to coordinate on their engagement with LPAs and effectively establish labour division.

Besides promoting transparency and citizen involvement, **enhanced trust between CSOs and LPAs has also galvanised civil society's activism at large to participate in community development**. Notably, there has been a significant increase in citizen involvement in decision-making processes, facilitated by improved participation techniques. Furthermore, the creation of platforms for direct interaction between the community and LPAs has encouraged the active participation of all community members in political processes.

3. Key elements for sustainability

Social accountability initiatives require a certain **set of conditions for civic engagement and multi-stakeholder cooperation to be sustained**, ultimately paving the way for positive change in the local governance of Moldova's communities. The factors that enable the formation of such dynamics need to be nurtured and amplified.

- **Active citizens engagement and community mobilisation:** Successful accountability mechanisms prioritise and encourage active citizen engagement in decision-making processes, triggering the virtuous circle of open government. By actively involving citizens, LPAs can ensure that policy implementation aligns with community needs and priorities, strengthening their own responsiveness and, in doing so, fostering trust in public institutions. Empowered communities are more likely to engage in accountability initiatives and advocate for their interests.

- **Comprehensive Capacity Development:** Effective accountability mechanisms invest in comprehensive capacity building initiatives for stakeholders. If these are designed following a multi-stakeholder approach by which capacity development support is mindful of their roles and division of labour , CSOs and LPAs can empower each other to meaningfully improve policy implementation processes and the delivery of public services.

- **Systematic resources allocation:** Adequate, foreseeable, and sustainable resource allocation is essential for thesuccess of accountability initiatives. Reliable funding and resources enable CSOs, LPAs, and other stakeholders to plan, implement, sustain, and scale up accountability mechanisms in the long run, thus ensuring continued impact and the consolidation of the collaborative dynamics underpinning the virtuous cycle of open government.

- **Enabling environment for civil society:** A supportive legal and policy environment provides the foundation for effective accountability mechanisms, ensuring that the regulatory and policy frameworks are conducive to transparency, citizen participation, and accountability in governance processes. Under EU4Accountability, CPR Moldova supported civil society's contribution to the making of the new Law on Access to Information and worked closely with state institutions to improve the CSOs enabling environment in the Republic of Moldova.

Successful accountability mechanisms in Moldova's local communities thrive on active citizen engagement, robust monitoring, and clear communication channels, bolstered by comprehensive capacity building and an enabling environment for civil society.

These factors, along with transparent resource allocation and formal collaboration frameworks, promote inclusive participation, trust, and transparency, ultimately enhancing governance effectiveness and citizen empowerment.

4. Ways forward for social accountability in Moldova's regions

Technical, organisational and financial capacities are a core element of this collaborative approach and need to be jointly developed to ensure complementarity, result in effective mechanisms, and promote an efficient division of labour.

With the necessary skills and access to information, CSOs can pursue development strategies and actively monitor policy processes both at national and local level.

Meaningful participation in public affairs boosts their capacity to engage with their constituency and encourages grassroots activism. To this end, it is crucial to engage LPAs as partners in social accountability. By fostering inclusive dialogue and **collaboration, these partnerships ensure citizen participation and amplify community voices in decision-making processes.** This approach enhances governance legitimacy and fosters transparency and accountability within local administrations. The following **concrete actions can be implemented for CSOs and LPAs to enhance citizen participation throughout the policy cycle**:

1. **Promotion of Participatory Decision-Making:** CSOs and LPAs should actively engage citizens in participatory decision-making processes, including participatory budgeting, public hearings, community forums, and public consultations, to ensure that policies reflect the needs and aspirations of the community.

2. **Facilitation of Access to Information:** CSOs and LPAs should ensure that citizens have access to relevant information about policy decisions, budgets, and public services. This can be achieved through transparency measures such as open data portals, public meetings, and information campaigns, combined with awareness raising campaigns, civic education and budget & administrative literacy. CSOs can support LPAs in implementing the new Law on Access to Information and engage in proactive disclosure of information, while LPAs can support CSOs in making public information more understandable and thus accessible for the communities.

3. **Investing in Capacity Development:** CSOs and LPAs should invest in capacity building initiatives to empower citizens and stakeholders to effectively participate in policy development and implementation processes. This may include training programmes, workshops, and educational campaigns on civic engagement and advocacy. Joint learning among CSOs and LPAs fosters mutual understanding and collaboration, enriching both parties with diverse perspectives and innovative approaches to social accountability.

4. **Fostering Inclusive Dialogue:** CSOs and LPAs should create opportunities for inclusive dialogue and collaboration among diverse stakeholders, including marginalise communities, women, youth, and minority groups. By fostering inclusive dialogue,

policymakers can ensure that policies are inclusive and address the needs of all segments of society.

By implementing these concrete actions and integrating lessons learned from pilot accountability mechanisms, CSOs and LPAs can strengthen citizen participation in policy development processes and enhance social accountability in Moldova's local communities.

Promoting best practices, the exchange of experiences, and collaborative learning is central to this joint effort. Through mentorship and knowledge exchange, CSOs identify successful strategies for transparency and accountability within their communities. This culture of collaboration fosters solidarity among CSOs and strengthens civil society's collective voice. Through capacity building, promotion of best practices, and participatory decision-making, these partnerships pave the way for transparent governance, citizen empowerment, and sustainable community development. As these initiatives evolve, they demonstrate the potential of collective action in driving positive societal change.hance governance effectiveness, and advance its European integration agenda.

Conclusion: Supporting enabling environment for civil society and European integration of Moldova

Moldova's journey towards European integration hinges on the alignment of its policies and practices with European standards, particularly with regard to demo
cratic governance at the national and local level. **An enabling environment for civil society is central to this process**, as CSOs and grassroots organisations play a vital role in ensuring   democratic principles, transparency, and citizen engagement.

In this context, the EU's support for initiatives such as the development of the Law on Access to Information underscores its commitment to promoting transparency and accountability in Moldova. By **working closely with state institutions and civil society actors**, the EU helps create an enabling environment where CSOs can thrive and contribute effectively to governance processes. This collaborative approach not only strengthens Moldova's democratic institutions but also advances its European integration aspirations.

As Moldova continues on its path towards strengthening democracy, **it is imperative to further bolster the enabling environment for civil society and governance reforms**. This entails the adoption of policies and legal frameworks that safeguard the rights and autonomy of CSOs, promote transparency and accountability in decision-making processes, and foster constructive engagement between civil society, government institutions, and the broader community. By embracing these principles and values, **Moldova can consolidate its democratic institutions, enhance governance effectiveness, and advance its European integration agenda**.

Annex: Toolkit

- **A Guide on best practices for participatory budgeting** developed by Caroma Nord, to support local CSOs and LPAs in setting up frameworks for participatory budgeting at the local level. It is available here in Romanian language.

- **A Guide on access to information of public interest** developed by CPR Moldova to support citizens and CSOs' requesting information to public authorities, following the procedures of the Law no. 148 regarding access to information of public interest. It is available here in Romanian language.

- **Primării Transparente** - a civic tech tool to easily access LPAs documents and data developed by Implicare Plus. It is available here.