CITIZEN'S ENGAGEMENT IN COVID-19 RESPONSE AND RECOVERY CONTEXT

Worldwide efforts to mitigate the spread of the pandemic, while managing its social and economic impacts, illustrate the critical role of the citizen-state engagement in shaping responses, policies, and approaches to resolving the crisis. Although there have been some swift and effective responses from governments, in many respects the pandemic has highlighted visible gaps in the resilience of countries, particularly in the way the State relates to its citizens and vice versa.

Resilient societies are premised on effective governance and the principle of inclusiveness (leaving no one behind, nondiscrimination, participation, and social equity), which are core elements for being prepared to cope with unforeseen crises. Available data[1] show that almost 111 million people around the world have been infected with COVID-19 and over 2.45 million people have died from it. In the Republic of Moldova, the situation continues to be severe, with almost 177 thousand confirmed cases and more than 3,760 deaths. The pandemic also has a significant negative impact on the Moldovan economy, healthcare system and social life, the consequences of which are expected to lurk in the long run.

With certain population groups being affected more than others, the COVID-19 pandemic is opening up and increasing social inequalities. Notably vulnerable and exposed to the crisis are, amongst many others, older persons and those with existing health conditions, "essential workers" (including healthcare and law enforcement professionals, teachers), small business owners and unemployed people, but also children and young people whose education has been partially disrupted.

The Government's efforts to tackle the spread of the virus have highlighted the crucial role of effective and inclusive governance, and particularly of the relationship between State and citizens, which has been placed under pressure and an increased scrutiny. A national crisis of this nature inevitably requires reconsideration of the roles, obligations, responsibilities of one and the other. The way this engagement is managed and capitalized will have a significant impact on the efficiency of response measures and on the recovery time.

Needs and Challenges

More than ever, the current crisis emphasizes the importance of a coherent, targeted, innovative and effective collaboration between the Government, institutions, and citizens. To cope with the pandemic, the State needs to be a unifier and collaborator, establishing and strengthening partnerships with the private sector, civil society, and international partners as to inclusively engage all stakeholders in finding solutions and to efficiently mobilize resources.

The "social contract" that will arise must be based on solidarity, mutual trust, and two-way communication. People need to listen to the State and the State needs to listen to its people, who often understand better their challenges and may have solutions to propose or may respond through social cohesion and collaboration.

However, the pandemic has further negatively affected public confidence in the Government bringing it from the highest in the recent years of 27.8 % recorded in December 2019, down to 20.3% in June 2020[2].

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[1] WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard (updated as of 21 February 2021), available at: https://covid19.who.int/
[2] Institute of Public Policies. Public Opinion Barometer / 2020, available at: http://bop.ipp.md/en/

Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the effectiveness of governance and citizen engagement

This inherent lack of trust has reduced over the years the willingness of citizens and business to respond to public policies and, in the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, affected civic engagement in terms of compliance with the imposed limitations. 18% of the respondents to a UNDP Ethnographic Study confirmed that they did not change their lifestyle due to pandemic, which is a worrying sign telling that these people are not taking seriously the restrictive measures imposed by the government and do not obey to them, contributing to the spread of the virus.[3] The non-compliant behavior was also because public authorities did not always provide timely and relevant information in an accessible format (in particular for people with disabilities),[4] which diminishes the ability of citizens and NGOs to analyze information, propose adequate solutions and engage in their implementation. The restrictions for circulation of persons, self-isolation, the lack of technical infrastructure that widened social distancing have further diminished the opportunities for public participation. As a result, the pandemic has worsened the social cohesion indicators.[5]

In this context, the Government's ability to harness public trust during the pandemic that has converged from a health crisis into a socio-economic crisis is crucial for a sustainable recovery. Long-term solutions and strategies need to be designed with a people-centered approach and implemented in an inclusive manner to ensure effective governance and public services which respond to the needs of all, especially the underrepresented and vulnerable, and contribute to sustainable development. That is why governance responses to the pandemic need to be anchored in human rights, extensive collaboration, co-creation and innovative tools for inclusion and interaction.

The way the COVID-19 crisis gets handled will have far-reaching implications for the relationship between the State and the people, potentially diminishing or enhancing the public trust in institutions and leadership. At the same time, it offers an opportunity to focus on the kind of governance relationships that ensure resilience and sustainability, as well as to address inequality and various forms of exclusion to enhance the well-being of the entire society.

Social cohesion is critical for a sustainable recovery

UNDP defines social cohesion as "the extent of trust in government and within society and the willingness to participate collectively toward a shared vision of sustainable peace and common development goals" and describes it along two dimensions: horizontal and vertical[6]. The horizontal dimension is society-centered and describes the trust and interactions among people, across divisions such as identity or other social constructs. The vertical dimension represents trust between government and the society, including trust in processes such as elections, access to justice, budgeting, and the delivery of public services.

Strengthening social cohesion between citizens and the State, as well as within and across individuals and social groups, is central to SDG16, that targets responsive and inclusive institutions and representative decision-making. The promotion of inclusive social dialogue and governance, grounded on human rights, has the potential of enhancing social cohesion and, thus, increase the efficiency of the response to the pandemic. In November 2016, the United Nations in Moldova launched the SCORE Index, an innovative analytical tool dedicated to improving the understanding of societal dynamics in the country. Designed to measure different components of social cohesion, resilience capacities and vulnerability factors, the SCORE provides decision-makers and development actors with robust scientific evidence for programming.

In August 2020, UNDP Moldova assessed the impact of COVID-19 on social cohesion in Moldova through a simplified version of the SCORE and evaluated the main trends in human rights, civic responsibility, gender equality and social tolerance. The study highlighted that some of the SCORE indicators have worsened due to

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[3] The Study was part of the Social and Economic Impact Assessment of COVID-19 in the Republic of Moldova (SEIA), available at: https://www.md.undp.org/content/moldova/en/home/library/inclusive_growth/social-and-economic-impact-assessment-of-covid-19-in-the-republi.html

[4] SCORE (Social Cohesion and Reconciliation Index) Survey, 2020. UN RCO/DPA. The SCORE methodology was developed by UNDP and SeeD in Cyprus. The first SCORE Survey in Moldova (2017) was implemented by the UN RCO, UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA, UN Women and OHCHR: https://www.scoreforpeace.org/en/moldova/

[5] Ibid.

[6] UNDP / Strengthening social cohesion: Conceptual framing and programming implications, available at: https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/conflict-prevention/strengthening-social-cohesion--conceptual-framing-and-programmin.html

the self-isolation and social distancing, and stated that concerted interventions are required to improve social cohesion.

In parallel, UNDP Moldova completed an ethnographic research of individual experiences during the COVID-19 crisis[7], meant to contribute to the socio-economic impact assessment on the most vulnerable people and communities (SEIA)[8]. The collection of micronarratives brought a new people-centered dimension to the UNDP's data assessment designed to explore the complexity of the socio-economic impact of the crisis and to facilitate better response measures. The research respondents highlighted as the most important during the pandemic factors the financial stability, access to medical supplies, and security. According to the responses, the three biggest challenges were: getting the right information, concerns about healthcare and staying in touch with people. While 66% of the stories were seen as negative, about a third of the respondents believed that the situation could be improved by better community cooperation. Combined results of the micronarratives suggested that people place their trust in the community (39%) or in a combination of community and the government (23%).

Way Forward

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the critical importance of effective governance systems and institutions, as well as of the responsive communication within the society. Based on these, UNDP Moldova will continue to take broad and fast actions to support the Government, communities, and citizens to look beyond the crisis and towards recovery, and focus on (re)building confidence and collaboration within the society, required to advance the (new) "social contract".

The UN Social and Economic Response (UN SERRP)[9] produced in September 2020, technically led by UNDP, is one of three critical components of the UN's efforts to protect people, rebuild better, and help decision-makers look beyond recovery, towards 2030, by managing complexity in four main areas: governance and agency, social protection, green economy, and digital disruption. It is important to base the socio-economic response to COVID-19 on inclusive social dialogue and political engagement, grounded on the principles of rule of law, equality and non-discrimination, inclusion, and participation.

UNDP Moldova interventions in the area of effective governance will support Moldovan institutions to cultivate people's trust by implementing sound evidence-based and people-centered policies, digitizing public services, including in health, advancing inclusiveness and gender equality, acting with transparency and integrity, disseminating fact-based information and opening up for consulting with citizens on their priority needs to be reflected in policies and budgets through co-creation.

The Government's efforts to become more transparent and inclusive will be supported in the development of crisis management and emergency response plans, in designing equitable and inclusive public services, in digitizing public services (including in health by establishing a system for telemedicine), and in digitizing the institutional business processes (e-Register of Defense Resources, e-Case Management in Forensic services, e-Recruitment system at the Ministry of Interior, e-Parliament, etc.).

Also, the government will be supported in strengthening the **public finance management** systems and process and equipped with the methodologies that allow for a thorough analysis of the allocation of finances (Development Finance Assessment), for the direction of financial flows towards strategic national and sectorial development priorities and SDGs (Integrated National Financial Framework), for effective use of the allocated resources (Spending Review) and for assessment of impact of the structural reforms.

New technologies have an important role in enhancing and diversifying public participation and ensuring access to information, as they offer accessible **digital platforms** for two-way communication between citizens and government, which was proved in the context of pandemic-related restrictions on physical interaction, when people more and more accessed information, debated, and mobilized through online platforms.

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[7] UNDP Moldova press release, available at: https://www.md.undp.org/content/moldova/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2020/o-nou_-cercetare-pnud-moldova--cum-gestioneaz-oamenii-pandemia-c.html

[8] SEIA: https://www.md.undp.org/content/moldova/en/home/library/inclusive_growth/social-and-economic-impact-assessment-of-covid-19-in-the-republi.html

[9] https://moldova.un.org/en/93768-united-nations-moldova-covid-19-socio-economic-response-and-recovery-plan-updated-version

These approaches already bring results. For example, a public awareness campaign "Vote Safely!" implemented by the Central Elections Commission with UNDP's support that clearly explained the safety rules while exercising the right to vote, contributed to the decisions of 52.78% of the voters to participate in elections in spite of fears of social contacts instilled by the pandemic.

The specific **justice needs** of women and men, such as addressing the rise in gender-based violence in the COVID-19 context and promoting additional institutional reforms to strengthen the accessibility and effectiveness of the justice chain will be addressed by the Access to Justice and Law Enforcement projects.

While the pandemic requires the application of the simplified procurement rules, it may provide fertile grounds for corruption to thrive, but the pandemic also offers opportunities to build a culture of integrity and accountability. These opportunities will be used in our work on **corruption prevention** by providing support in strengthening the institutional integrity standards in public institutions and in the private sector, by engaging Youth in co-creation of effective corruption prevention tools, in strengthening the system of whistle-blowers protection and therefore encouraging whistle-blowing, and in establishing digital platforms that offer a better access to information (Open Money) or opportunities to contribute to reducing corruption risks in the legal and normative acts (ReLAWed).

Efforts will be made to offer accessible **communication and participation channels** that would allow to advocate for policies, facilitate the participation and to enable feedback loops for the civil society. The focus will be on establishing safe and user-friendly digital platforms for virtual participation of diversity of civil society actors, including representing those at risk of not being heard and being left behind. UNDP is well placed to promote the inclusion of civic space as a development outcome in institutional frameworks and to develop capacities of the national counterparts for better transparency, accountability and inclusion, enabling and mediating the dialogue.

In the recovery context, increasing **social cohesion** will continue to be one of our priorities, that will be addressed through innovative interventions of implementing the ideas aiming at fostering civic engagement of men and women at the local level, such as Civic Fabric and People's Assemblies, designed to offer the environment and tools for learning and practicing democracy, empowering an inclusive social dialogue and for addressing community challenges through participation. Possibilities to offer better opportunities to Diaspora to participate in decision-making process in the country will be explored for providing an accessible and effective system for Out-of-Country voting.

Support will be provided to women members of Parliament in re-establishing the Women's Caucus that proved to be an effective instrument for improving **gender equality**. The Women's Caucus will be supported in addressing the needs of women and men, in particular from the vulnerable groups, through the legislative and oversight functions of the Parliament and in strengthening women's role in decision-making, in empowering women for taking leading roles in the private sector, in addressing inequalities related to the unpaid social care work through law-making and oversight.