

**SLE Publication Series - S247 -**



**Bridging the Gap - Participatory District Development Planning in the Water Supply and Sanitation Sector of the Republic of Moldova**

HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITÄT ZU BERLIN



SLE Publication Series – S 247

SLE – Postgraduate Studies on International Cooperation

Study commissioned by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale  
Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)

# **Bridging the Gap – Participatory District Development Planning in the Water Supply and Sanitation Sector of the Republic of Moldova**

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Berlin, December 2011



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## Executive Summary

### Introduction

This report is about strategic, participatory infrastructure development planning on the district level in the Republic of Moldova (RoM). The purpose of the assignment was to design an approach for coherent, vertically integrated planning for public service provision on the local level. At the same time, it explains how the approach for district-level planning was embedded in the existing institutional framework, and covers the results and experiences had during pilot implementation. The assignment has been commissioned by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) for its contracting partner, the Ministry of Regional Development and Construction (MRDC), and carried out in the two pilot districts (*rayons*) of Cahul and Riscani from August to October 2011, focussing on the Water Supply and Sanitation (WatSan) sector. The aim was to exemplify the potential of citizen's participation in strategic development planning; bringing together national policy objectives with civil society's priorities. Bridging the gap, in this report is understood as the endeavour to: firstly, show how the implementation of development policies can be more needs-responsive; and, secondly, link WatSan sector policies' objectives with their local level implementation via the regional development approach.

The Government of Moldova (GoM) created the MRDC in response to the challenges arising from post-Soviet governance legacy and the socio-economic problems. A key function of the MRDC is to increase efficiency and effectiveness of sector policy implementation through its three related Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). From 2010, GIZ carried out pilot projects in the WatSan sector on behalf of MRDC in Cahul city, Cahul rayon and Costesti town, Riscani rayon, respectively. Besides providing improved service quality to the people in the respective localities, these pilot projects have as an aim to train and strengthen RDA's capacities in project management. While choosing the respective sites, MRDC and its partners came to realise that a more systematic approach was required for identifying localities with the highest need for investments. Based on the regional development rationale of *overcoming disparities*, this identification was to be based on participatory decision-making.

The report outlines three elements at the core of this assignment; the first being the challenges surrounding the modernisation of local public service provision, using the WatSan sector as an example. It shows the steps taken in the design of a participatory district planning approach, and draws practical lessons and thematic conclusions from its pilot implementation.

This work contributes to the body of knowledge dealing with practical experiences in the domain of citizen's participation in infrastructure planning, needs-responsive development approaches as opposed to technocratic ones, and the design of dialogue processes on multiple governance levels and across sectors.

### **Scope and Objectives**

Two important initiatives form the basis of the SLE team's assignment: the Investment and Action Plan (I/AP) recently developed by the Moldovan Ministry of Environment (MoE) for ranking WatSan investment project proposals, and supported by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) on the one hand; and the rayon's Socio-Economic Development Strategies (SEDS) on the other. SEDS are to become the rayon's planning tool, aligned with regional operation plans and national strategies. At present, SEDS and their respective sub-chapters lack a coherent, transparent prioritisation of measures, as well as specific, realistic and measurable targets; they are not operational. The newly established (2010) RDAs have a mandate to assist rayon administrations with drafting coherent strategies for all sectors.

The aim of the SLE team's assignment was to generate priority-ranked WatSan investment project clusters for localities within each rayon, as a first draft, for more detailed feasibility studies. These feasibility studies will be brought forward to the I/AP for funding. At the same time, as the SEDS chapter assists rayon administrations and RDAs with fulfilling their planning responsibilities and the development of a participatory vision, the WatSan chapter facilitates the functioning of the I/AP. The approach for updating the SEDS chapter incorporates key elements of the I/AP in order to guarantee the coherence of investment project proposals, and eventually increase the chances for financing.

Assisting the respective RDAs with the drafting of the two pilot rayon's SEDS' WatSan chapter served as Capacity Development for the rayon administration's planning departments, and RDA facilitators. Through this on-the-job training of RDA planners in process facilitation, the model of regional development as an effective form of policy implementation gained a stronger momentum. At the same time, the development of a rayon-level SEDS chapter for implementation of WatSan sector policies served as an exemplary planning approach for other sectors.

On the rayon level, the SLE team supported RDA facilitators and rayon administrations in Participatory Priority Definition (PPD) that would serve as the strategic guidance for identifying those localities where WatSan investments should be *targeted first*. Underlying the approach for PPD is the rationale that through involving people affected by policy measures in planning on the local level, policy

implementation will contribute to a high degree of citizen satisfaction and their identification with political decisions.

## Methodology

The assignment was structured by various activities, which were led by RDA facilitators, GIZ focal points working in the RDAs on behalf of MRDC, and supported by the SLE team of junior advisors:

- **Identification of legal provisions and current practices pertaining to local-level planning documents.** The SEDS chapter's structure has been analysed, improvements proposed, and its function, structure and content approved by GoM's relevant institutions.
- **Analysis of the WatSan sector's institutional framework.** Funding mechanisms, responsibilities, sector priorities, and the normative framework for planning and implementing WatSan projects (investment *and* management) were studied, and the sector performance analysed through expert interviews, discussions during national-level meetings, and desk studies.
- **Development of an approach for updating and drafting the SEDS chapter on WatSan in a participatory way.** Public involvement in strategic planning was conceptualised, and the pathway for completing the chapter after the strategic input was outlined.
- **Pilot testing Participatory Priority Definition on rayon level.** Objectives for sector development stipulated by national policies were identified in order to define rayon stakeholder's room for manoeuvre to adapt policy priorities for the local strategy. The complementary local priorities were identified and weighted during the pilot implementation of Stakeholder Dialogues in the two rayons, comprising three Round Table sessions.
- **Design of a Manual for facilitators, drawing from the lessons learnt during pilot implementation of the participatory approach.** The experiences of and results generated by the RDA facilitators during the Stakeholder Dialogue were closely monitored and captured. Methodological knowledge on the specifics of participatory infrastructure planning can therefore be transferred to other rayons and sectors.
- **Drawing conclusions from other countries' experiences during WatSan governance transformation.** Exposure Visits were carried out to neighbouring Romania and the German federal state of Brandenburg. Moldovan representatives of WatSan governance on all levels joined together to identify relevant knowledge and experiences for the on-going transformation in the RoM.

- **Facilitation of the approach for participatory update of the SEDS chapter through multi-level Policy Dialogue.** Policy objectives and planning procedures were continuously discussed and approval for participatory strategic planning via regional development was sought from decision-makers.

### **Results of the Assignment**

The structure of the SEDS chapter (using the example of the WatSan sector) in alignment with the legal framework was the point of departure defining the inputs to be delivered for the completion of the planning document. It comprises:

- A WatSan sector situation analysis on locality level
- The definition of objectives and investment priorities for the future development of the rayon's WatSan sector (the strategic part)
- Necessary measures to achieve objectives
- An action plan (the planning part)
- Monitoring and Evaluation

After the identification of the SEDS chapter's structure, the focus of the SLE team's support to rayon administrations and RDAs was on accomplishing the *strategic* component as the basis for technical and management planning, definition of targets, as well as the drafting of an action plan. National sector priorities were identified by GOPA<sup>1</sup> senior sector experts, and their respective weights were proposed and approved during a national-level meeting. Through a combination of rayon and national priorities, the attainment of national objectives and investment priorities is safeguarded, as well as the adaption of policy implementation to local level.

The updating of the SEDS' WatSan chapter, including strategic planning on rayon level was carried out following a two-tier approach. Prior situation analysis was to serve as the foundation on which strategic considerations were based by decision-makers (the strategic tier). Beyond the mere definition of priorities, the approach incorporated a process for weighing investment needs. Agreeing on these priorities and weights was the core objective of the pilot Stakeholder Dialogue conducted during three Round Tables in the two pilot rayons.

Parallel to the prioritisation process, the WatSan and socio-economic data assessed served to cluster investment opportunities (the planning tier). Technical and management solutions to group single localities into clusters was adopted for the sake of efficient service provision, and in order to enable economies of scale. As a

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<sup>1</sup> GOPA Consulting provides expert inputs to the GIZ's project Modernisation of Local Public Services in the Republic of Moldova.



final step, priorities and viable solutions will be integrated, identifying those clusters with the highest priority for investments. After this final planning step, rayon decision-makers are to adopt the suggested, priority-based document in order to enable implementation of the strategy and the integration of locality-level plans. The identification of options to cluster localities in order to form regionalised service arrangements is on-going, while national strategic priorities and the priorities defined by stakeholders during the sequence of Round Tables are indicated in the table below. The rayon priorities reflect the **key results of pilot testing** the approach.

**Table: National and rayon priorities with their respective weight**

<b>National priorities</b>	<b>Relative weight</b>
Reduce water-related morbidity	0.25
Increase coverage of population with piped water supply	0.15
Ensure 24 h provision with drinking water	0.15
Increase coverage with improved sanitation	0.15
Halt deterioration of existing infrastructure	0.15
Improve access of (pre-)school students to improved WatSan facilities	0.15
<b>Cahul rayon priorities</b>	<b>Relative weight</b>
To improve economic development	0.41
Satisfy as many people as possible	0.32
Improve WatSan access of public institutions (health)	0.27
<b>Riscani rayon priorities</b>	<b>Relative weight</b>
Improve management of WatSan service providers	0.29
Improve living conditions in disadvantaged localities	0.28
Improve WatSan access of public institutions	0.22
Extend existing WatSan infrastructure	0.21

## Lessons Learnt

The lessons learnt are structured into three sections: Embedding (the establishment of the approach within the Moldovan institutional context), Elaborating (the design of the approach) and Enabling (facilitation of the approach, and the lessons pertaining to the practical pilot implementation).

The following lessons were learnt during embedding the assignment:

- **I/AP constitutes a genuine link.** The suggested bottom-up approach for PPD was seen as necessary by policy makers to rank priority projects according to need while meeting quality standards. Their commitment was of critical importance for successfully embedding the approach in existing sector policies,

and added strategic practical momentum to the existing tool for WatSan sector expenditure management.

- **There are limitations of the SEDS chapter structure.** So far, a SEDS chapter's structure follows guidelines set by the Governmental Decision no. 33 (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2007). The document provides bullet points on what should be contained in a strategy, and served as a rather ambiguous point of reference.

Concerning the elaboration and enabling of the approach for updating the SEDS chapter the following insights were gained:

- Given the complexity of the assignment, it was **required to employ an iterative approach during the elaboration of the methodology.** It led to an extension of the initial idea (comprising participatory priority definition and ranking of localities based on need) to a regionalisation of WatSan service provision. Expert knowledge broadened focus to issues that had previously not been considered, such as the importance of an assessment of willingness or ability to pay.
- **Multi-level Policy Dialogue is indispensable for robust, broad based commitment of decision-makers.** Promoting continuous exchange between governance levels, line ministries, and international partners helped to identify single institutions expectations, and to align development strategies and implementation approaches both vertically and horizontally.
- **Exposure Visits helped to bridge the gap between single WatSan governance institutions.** Representatives from all governance levels profited from the inter-institutional exchange they had during a study tour; covering Romanian and East-German transformation experiences in the WatSan sector. This gave additional impetus to the on-going discussions about approaches and governance competencies in the RoM.

During pilot implementation of the approach, the team learned the following:

- **Data assessment and availability of information proved to be a time-consuming and limiting factor for the two-tier approach.** Current records in town halls or the books of service providers contain data of limited, often out-dated quality.
- **Effective involvement of all relevant stakeholders is a challenge.** The diversity of contributions underlines the strength of involving local people. Exchange on stakeholder groups' individual priorities, however, proved to be time-consuming, and a logistic challenge.
- **Participatory definition of sector priorities is new to most stakeholders.** The purpose of the complex prioritisation process has proven to be difficult to understand for some stakeholders. Questions posed by individual participants



during the discussion sessions showed that expectations for immediate project selection and funding remained high.

## Conclusions

- At the time this report was printed, the clustering tier was not completed. Therefore, one cannot evaluate the impact that PPD had on the ranking of localities compared to a purely technocratic one, or compared to a ranking using just the national priorities. Nevertheless, there is clear evidence for the superiority of participatory strategic planning over exclusive specialist planning. Decisions become more robust through a participatory approach, in terms of well-reflected priorities and thorough exchange. It also diminishes the tendency to favour decision-makers' constituencies, as the consensus cuts across party lines.
- Differentiated considerations reflecting the particularities of rural public service provision are not yet commonplace in the RoM. For example with the given demographics, chances for so-called economies of density (e.g. the number of household connections per kilometre of water supply pipe) diminish drastically; therefore alternatives must be considered. Aggravating the technical-geographic cost factor is the urban-rural poverty gradient; the rural populations' capacity to pay for services needs to receive special attention.
- Availability of sufficient, good-quality data for planning infrastructure service provision is a major obstacle for both planners and strategic decision-makers. Though not surprising in the context of a chronically under-funded sector, the fact is that analysis of the current data will consume large amounts of time and resources; and will delay concrete measures to halt further degradation.
- The approach proposes inter-communal service arrangements, based on the assumption that mayors and commune councils will adopt the idea of regionalised WatSan service provision. However, local public administration does not currently have the capacity to master administrative endeavours such as inter-communal cooperation, and is not likely to easily join cooperation agreements dealing with large amounts of local budget.
- Multi-level governance for public service development in the RoM is at an initial stage. While during the Policy Dialogue fostered during this assignment commitment to cooperate on the basis of regional development as a tool for implementing MoE's policies was strong, the fine detail remains to be accomplished yet. Ambiguous and outdated provisions need to be removed from the framework to form a reliable planning base for administrative bodies and engineers; and in order to enable rapid sector development.
- The donor community, being an increasingly supportive force in the RoM's WatSan governance, needs to continue with the proposed implementation of the

approach for development. The complexities ahead and the knowledge to be established among Moldovan decision-makers and practitioners call for coordinated support.

### **Recommendations**

The process of PPD should be continued in order to understand its potential for strategic planning. It provides a more needs-responsive, locally adapted planning. The key to the successful completion and replication of this process will depend upon the capacity of and resources available for RDAs.

The development of a framework for investment planning and prioritisation within the Moldovan WatSan sector is on-going, as is the will to support the GoM in creating a Moldovan approach. Representatives of GoM eventually should take the lead in this process, while international partners should coordinate donor activities where national institutions show the commitment to play their role. Development partners working in the domains of WatSan and regional development should also tackle concerns of the ability of the population to cover increased service costs. In order to establish realistic, and appropriate targets for diverse situations, the relationship between public service infrastructure development and user tariffs should be examined, especially in disadvantaged rural localities.