Initial Conclusions and Recommendations from the "Mechanisms and Strategy for Civic Engagement in Local Governance" Organizational Activity Seminar

As part of the Civic Engagement in Local Governance (CELoG) program, the Eurasia Partnership Foundation organized an Organizational Activity Seminar (OAS) in Dilijan from 25 February to 1 March 2015, the aim of which was to involve representatives of all stakeholder groups in order to closely discuss the process for reforming local governance, the issues linked to decentralization, and develop an effective strategy and tools for civic engagement.

The event was attended by representatives from LSG-s, community NGOs, the central government, donor and international organizations, mass media, as well as experts in local governance and related sectors.

Below, we present the preliminary conclusions and recommendations extracted by EPF from the OAS report, which may be particularly important and applicable to the CELoG program.

1. There are often more resources present in the community than the current assessments show. In this context, the distribution of resources in the community becomes a high priority issue. Engagement and its reflection in the decisions made have a massive role to play from the point of view of developing mechanisms for the reassessment and distribution of resources. In case of effective reassessment and redistribution, these resources can complement the resources that arise from the consolidation process, and offer a real opportunity to successfully implement the consolidation process.

Recommendation 1: Conduct a pilot assessment of resources in communities separately. Within the CELoG program, such an assessment can be conducted through small research grants. The researchers should not just reassess the resources available, but should also make recommendations on the most effective mechanisms for the utilization of those resources.

2.1. Administrative and territorial integration is a necessary, but insufficient condition for inter-community integration and specifically for the consolidation of communities. In order to implement the integration process effectively, there is also a need for economic, social and cultural integration. Otherwise, only the LSG-s will integrate, further isolating the community population from the local governance process.

2.2. The community-center connection is overestimated at the levels of both perception and regulation. This situation eclipses the importance of the community-community and community-world connections and is a reason for the loss or inefficient use of resources. This situation leads to a need for the development and official acceptance of a community typology, as a result of which it will be possible to effectively realize community-community connections.

Recommendation 2.1: Direct a part of the small grants within the CELoG program to the implementation of inter-community economic, social and cultural initiatives with consolidated and non-consolidated communities, with non-consolidated communities between themselves, with consolidated communities between themselves, as well as among the villages of a consolidated community.

Recommendation 2.2: Implement programs in separate communities or community groups aiming at developing international relations within the scope of already existing programs or communication opportunities (sister cities, LSG networks and so on). Use the existing resources available to LSGs in developed countries for international collaboration.

3. The mechanisms that regulate community life are generated in the center and the community has no ownership of them. It is necessary to create traditions and precedents of generating these regulations within the community. The generation of regulations should be gradual in nature and start with decisions made at the local level, then spread to the generation of legislative initiatives that regulate this area. Expert support to the communities is important in this process both from the point of view of the organization of engagement processes as well as for the wording of legislative and sector-specific policies.

Recommendation 3: Initiate the development of local, regional and state regulations at the local level. Within the CELoG program, this process can be organized as part of public discussions and through the development of components for legislative reform.

4. Governance is seen as a hierarchic pyramidal system, while regulation is seen as a horizontal network. The governance-regulation relationship does not function effectively because the governance pyramid exists but is faulty, while the regulation network is essentially non-existent. With the presence of a regulation network, the effectiveness of the governance pyramid will inevitably increase, because the match between the regulations and governance will form based on public demand.

Recommendation 4.1: Within the CELoG program, initiate engaging and detailed discussions of regulations originating at the center, and develop responses in the form of recommendations, changes and additions which are returned to the center. This should be followed by a close supervision of the process of receipt of the response at the central level, using coordinated efforts by non-government organizations, LSG and mass media.

Recommendation 4.2: Create facilitation courses for LSG staff, aimed at gathering solutions to the community's issues and implementing them through community programs. The skills learned through these courses will allow the LSG staff to work more effectively with people, avoid unnecessary conflicts, and will add to their organizational and management skills.

5. From the point of view of the effective realization of community development, inter-community and community-world connections, there is great potential in "dynamic social" units which, thanks to their mobility and value system, can introduce qualitative changes to the processes mentioned above by finding innovative solutions, overcoming negative stereotypes, creating positive precedents and establishing network connections. This "dynamic social" resource is a unit that can take different shapes including a compatriots' union, a group of young people with quality Western education, and so on.

Recommendation 5: Include the dynamic human resource (successful migrants, well-educated young people, community representatives who hold high positions in culture and science) within the scope of assessing the community resources as a separate evaluation criterion. As a result of assessing this resource, create community foundations, or compatriots' centers for community development, through which the mentioned groups of people can be included in an institution. The CELoG program can implement one or more pilot project in this direction or support their implementation.

6. It is necessary to develop critical thinking in the communities, both within the LSGs and among the community population. Critical thinking will allow an increase in the effectiveness of engagement processes and LSG-Community collaboration, assessing the available resources and sources for other ones in a productive manner, as well as to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate the realization of community programs.

Recommendation 6: Effective activities or programs to develop critical thinking include inter-community internships, 360 degree rotations - where LSG staff and other officials temporarily switch places, exchanges of community programs and budgets between communities, and their horizontal discussion. Another way to implement this idea is through the "Ando School"[1] which includes an analysis of the characteristics of the "dynamic social" unit and, based on this, a "dynamic social" methodology of instruction. This recommendation can also be pushed forward through preliminary research, and a pilot version of the "Ando School" can be implemented during the course of the CELoG program. See also Recommendation 5.

7. An important pre-condition for networking and publicity is the definition of common objectives and the convergence of common interests. The community-community and community-world connections must therefore be assessed based on these pre-conditions. In the case of the community-community connection, these processes will be clarified based on the communities' typology, with collaboration between similar communities through the pooling of resources, and collaboration between different types of communities through the complementarity of their resources. A specialization will begin to form around each community and the items in its orbit. For the community-world connection, it is important for the community to realize that it is an independent unit (strategically, as a functioning subject), which is linked to the specialization of the community, and also to the world, that is, to communities in other countries, international organizations, along with the development of the ability to meet a business need.

Recommendation 7: Within the scope of the program, this idea can develop as a new methodology for networks and, specifically, through the development of a new and more advanced methodology for the InfoTun network. The CELoG program can also implement one or two pilot preparatory projects in this area, through active community leader NGOs.

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[1] An "Ando" is the bearer of the values of "laws that are written but not obeyed" and within his internal relationships, those "laws that are written but not obeyed" are transformed into "laws that are obeyed but not written."

8. The youth are a very important community resource, and their involvement in local governance has great significance for volunteerism, the development of a sense of ownership and innovation, as well as other aspects. There is great potential in the communities for the initiation and implementation of youth programs.

Recommendation 8.1: Compile the unwritten laws, with the involvement of the youth. This activity will allow one to clarify the functioning regulatory mechanisms within a community, to reveal the rules that run them and, based on the conclusions that follow, to use them in the planning and governance processes.

Recommendation 8.2: Youth engagement in a trial planning for a four-year community program that is not based on financial resources. What does the community need? This exercise will allow one to assess the non-material resources available in a community, as well as mobilize the youth, encourage community activity and develop a culture of volunteering.

9. On numerous occasions during the OAS, ideas were expressed for the localization of a number of different sectors (a local court, the localization of some taxes, etc.), which led to contrasting reactions. It is necessary to develop content-rich discussions on decentralization, during which similar proposals can be discussed in detail, bringing them closer to viability by emphasizing the advantages of the ideas and noting the objective barriers that stand in the way of their realization.

Recommendation 9: Content-rich discussion on the decentralization of education, the tax and justice systems with experts in local governance and the sectors being discussed as well as other stakeholders. The program can organize a number of such discussions.