



OSCEval News is the evaluation newsletter of the Office of Internal Oversight.

Its aim is to provide insights into the OSCE's work in evaluation, by sharing key evaluation findings and conclusions, as well as new developments regarding the OSCE's overall evaluation culture.

Evaluation is a management tool that contributes to decision-making, strategic planning, and organizational learning.



This edition of *OSCEval News* is dedicated to the

Evaluation of OSCE Projects Delivered Through the Århus Centre Network, 2002-2017

This evaluation was conducted by the Office of Internal Oversight in 2018.

Introduction

The Århus Convention was signed in 1998 and entered into force in 2001. Administrated by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), it consists of three pillars that address democratic governance in the environmental area:

- I. Citizen access to environmental information;
- II. Citizen participation in environmental decision making;
- III. Citizen access to justice when Pillar I has been violated.

In 1999, the OSCE issued the Istanbul Declaration that stated "In the spirit of the 1998 Århus Convention [...] we will in particular seek to ensure access to information, public participation in decision making and access to justice in environmental matters."

While the signatories are responsible for implementing the Convention, Århus centres in currently 14 countries of Eastern Europe, South-Eastern Europe, South Caucasus and Central Asia assist with this task. Starting in 2002, the OSCE, through the Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities (OCEEA) and the respective OSCE field operations, has supported the opening of centres.

Evaluation Purpose and Scope

In 2018 the Office of Internal Oversight (OIO) carried out an independent evaluation of the OSCE's project assistance delivered through the Århus centres. Apart from constituting routine oversight, its larger purpose was to provide OSCE executive structures with input to decisions on the future role of the centres in the OSCE's work in support of the implementation of the Convention.

The evaluation was cross-organisational and covered the time period 2002-2017, with special attention paid to the period 2012-2017 to ensure that recommendations are based on the current state-of-affairs. It covered all OSCE projects (93) that had the purpose to assist in implementing the Convention.

It was based on desk reviews of OSCE and third-party data and documents, interviews of 141 individuals from the OSCE Secretariat and field operations; civil servants in Armenia, Tajikistan and Serbia; Århus centres; representatives of civil society organizations in these three countries; the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Tajikistan; and the UNECE in Geneva. As part of the evaluation, OIO visited a sample of 18 centres in Serbia, Armenia, and Tajikistan in April and May 2018.

Findings

Overall, the assistance was found to be relevant as it was aligned with the Convention implementation compliance gaps identified in UNECE reports. It was less relevant, however, when compared to the UNECE's strategic plans and work programmes, which focus on national government capacity building.

It was also observed that the OSCE's project monitoring activities have mostly been activity and output-based. This allowed project officers to stay informed about the activities delivered by the centres, which they also sometimes attended. The evaluation noted meanwhile that assistance outcomes in terms enhanced knowledge/awareness from activities, or re-



sults from public consultations on local environmental issues, were not tracked by the centres.

Given the lack of outcome level information, OIO relied on interview information and project documents to assess results. Interviews showed that the assistance was effective in that the centres' activities had apparently strengthened local Convention-related knowledge among the public and contributed to some enhanced local practices. However, because of the character of the available data, it was not possible for OIO to determine to exactly what extent these results had materialized. Moreover, the evaluation revealed that changed knowledge and practices had not led to changed local policies regarding the implementation of the Convention. The foremost cited reason by interviewees was that policy changes are decided on the regional government level and not at the local municipality level where the centres are active.

Gender equality considerations are not included in the Århus Convention. As a consequence, they are outside of the explicit compliance criteria against which Parties to the Convention report on, and are assessed for. The evaluation nevertheless observed a stated attention to gender equality concerns in one third of the projects and across virtually all concerned executive structures. In most cases, however, the focus was on ensuring gender parity in activities and events, rather than on systematic gender mainstreaming throughout the phases of the project cycle.

Sustainability in terms of whether assistance gains can be sustained in the event of discontinued OSCE assistance varied. At the strategic level, sustainability was not ensured as the OSCE did not have a long-term assistance plan intended to strengthen government compliance with the Convention at the national level. Only limited focus has been put on building government capacity to implement the Convention and thus to make governments self-reliant.

As a result, the assistance has overall not contributed to creating Convention-related strategies or policies in the countries visited by OIO. Instead, it generated foremost local outcomes such as enhanced public knowledge, and changed local practices with regard to the exchange of environmental information and the organization of public discussions. It is therefore unclear to what extent countries that benefitted from the OSCE's support will continue this type of work in the event that the support is discontinued.

Funding of the Århus centres has also been a recurrent concern for the OSCE and the network ever since 2002. The network has been shrinking over the past few years, and

many of the remaining centres have only a very limited level of functionality and activity.

As regards the communication on the Århus Centre Network, the evaluation established that there is a need to update the OSCE's Århus Centres Network website to reflect the current state of the network and its activities.

Recommendations

The assistance delivered through the centres was not based on a long-term plan with timelines, deliverables, and clear goals. It has focused on filling in for government resource gaps instead of building government capacity. Meanwhile, the evaluation observed a demand among stake-holders, OSCE executive structures and Århus centre staff for clear assistance goals and government centred assistance.

To ensure long-term results and sustainability of the OSCE's work, the evaluation formulated the following key recommendations:

- I. Develop a cross-OSCE Århus Convention assistance implementation plan with clear expected outcomes that serve to enhance country compliance with the Convention;
- II. Align this plan with the UNECE's Århus Convention implementation strategy and work plans;
- III. Increase the focus on those Århus centres that have proven capacity to empower local civil society (to exercise its environmental security rights), influence policy and strengthen government skills and commitment for the implementation of the Convention;
- IV. Focus on projects that build the capacity of selected Århus centres to work as resource centres for the Convention; that strengthen government capacity and commitment to exercise democratic governance in the environmental area; and that support the establishment of national mechanisms for the implementation of the Convention;
- V. Carry out more extensive gender mainstreaming in all projects funded by the OSCE; and
- VI. Update the OSCE's website on the state and activities of the Århus centre network.



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