IREX

Comunitatea Mea Trust Research

NARRATIVE REPORT

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I. Executive Summary

IREX's Center for Applied Learning and Impact (CALI), in partnership with the IREX Comunitatea Mea (CM) program, a USAID-funded program to strengthen local government in Moldova, set out to examine trust-building dynamics between local governments and citizens in Moldova in six communities where CM works. As part of IREX's Trust Initiative, this research is the first phase of a study that seeks to establish a foundational understanding of trust and how it can strengthen governance and community development. We also aim to develop a systematized approach to evaluating trust in IREX programs.

We learned that in the Moldovan communities where CM works, trust building can be understood as a virtuous cycle in which the local government (called the Local Public Authority, or LPA) and the community are continually engaged. The cycle is initiated when leaders engage citizens to participate in decision-making, by providing opportunities for community members to articulate their thoughts and needs. In the next stage, the LPA acts and implements the decisions that were made. Next, the LPA produces concrete results such as newly paved roads, new lighting, wastewater treatment, parks and tree plantings, and kindergarten construction—all of which create a more livable community. Last, the community and the LPA celebrate the results and honor the individuals who helped to achieve them. Trust is built throughout the cycle, and the completion of a cycle feeds stronger trust and thus more cycles.

This virtuous cycle, we learned, is cultivated by three interlocking strategies:

1. **Developing servant leadership:** mentoring leaders to put community members first, empowering them, and partnering with them in decision-making.

2. **Employing generous communication:** operating transparently and incentivizing citizen engagement by listening, seeking to build relationships, and engaging empathetically.

3. **Emphasizing relationship building:** fostering collaborative partnerships with a foundation of mutual trust in an active and intentional process.

This report also highlights potential threats to trust building, including leadership succession challenges and broader political dynamics, residual apathy in the population, and staggering emigration levels.

We end by offering four recommendations to build on what we learned to strengthen approaches to building public trust:

Adopt standard measures to evaluate trust levels between communities and their governments within and across governance programming.

Continually validate public trust-building strategies with evidence so that stakeholders share an understanding of trust levels and trends over time.

Expand research to include a wide diversity of contexts to expand our understanding of trust-building strategies, and identify which strategies are culture-specific and which are more universal.

Create a trust-building tool with indicators (the key strategies) that can support the trust-building efforts of IREX and beyond.

II. Introduction

In August 2023, IREX's Center for Applied Learning and Impact (CALI) partnered with IREX program Comunitatea Mea (CM), an eight-year, USAID-funded program to strengthen local government in Moldova to become more effective, transparent, and accountable to citizens. Together, CALI and CM launched a study to understand how trust has been built between government and citizens in CM partner communities. This study is part of IREX's Trust Initiative, which aims to understand how programs cultivate social and public trust and seeks to improve trust-building measurements and approaches within IREX's programs, so that IREX can catalyze public and social trust in public and civic institutions, within communities, and between and among people.

This report is meant to provide an expanded understanding of trust building for IREX, CM, USAID local governance programming, and the broader global development field.
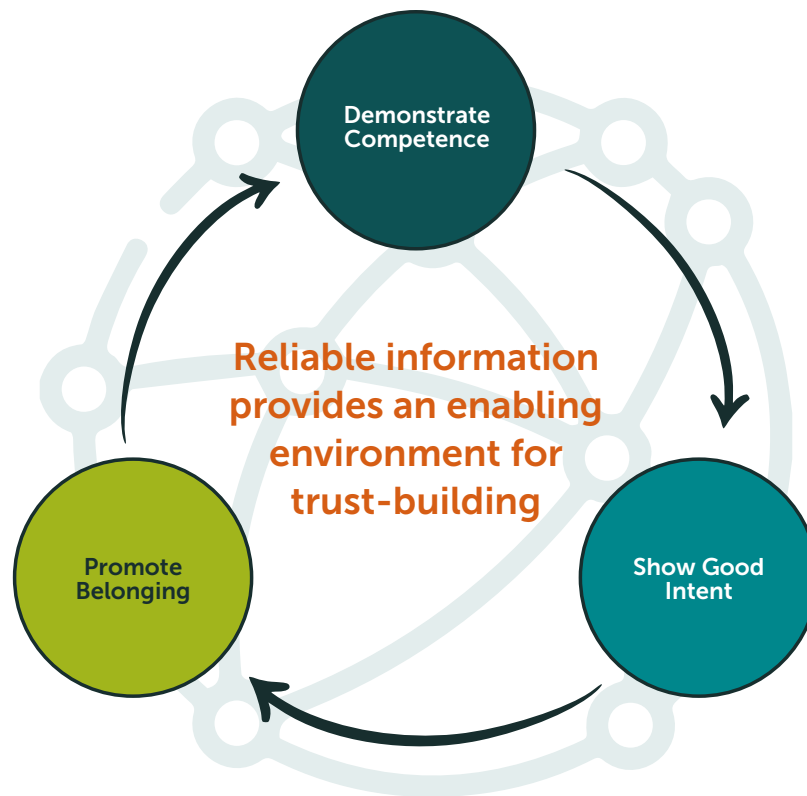
III. Background: Defining Trust

Figure 1. IREX's trust framework

Trust is considered a vital component in programming that strengthens the impact of all other work, rather than a goal in and of itself. IREX's working definition of trust is *the belief in the honesty, integrity, and reliability of others*.

IREX created a framework to structure our thinking about trust based on an extensive literature review and interviews with staff from 13 IREX programs around the globe.[1] This framework focuses on trust building for leaders and institutions and includes three core building blocks: **demonstrating competence, showing good intent**, and **promoting belonging**. Taken together, these building blocks can contribute

to trust building when they are operationalized within an enabling environment of reliable information. These building blocks are mutually reinforcing and necessary for trust building to be effective. When leaders and institutions demonstrate competence, they show their capacity to reliably respond to and proactively anticipate the needs of their constituents. When leaders and institutions show good intent, they demonstrate what motivates their actions and communicate those intentions. When leaders and institutions promote belonging, they foster a shared sense of identity to encourage unity, engage in bridge building, and establish relationships that encourage trust. This framework guided this qualitative study.

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1. See *Cultivating Community: A Framework for Building Trust in Leaders and Institutions* on the IREX website: https://www.irex.org/resource/cultivating-community-framework-building-trust-leaders-and-institutions.

IV. Research Methods

Research questions:

The goal of this qualitative research was to identify strategies that Local Public Authorities (LPAs)[2] in Moldova used to improve public trust by demonstrating competence, showing good intent, and promoting belonging within their communities. The research is based on 31 interviews and three focus groups across six communities in Moldova where CM works. More details on the participants, data collection, and analysis can be found in Annex 1.

"What does public trust look like in the context of CM's work strengthening local governments in Moldovan communities?"

"What are the processes and outcomes of the 'trust building work' of CM-assisted LPAs?"

2. The Local Public Authority (LPA) is the unit of local government in Moldovan towns and villages. We interviewed mayors and other LPA staff (especially secretaries) for this research.

V. Research Findings

1. A Virtuous Cycle of Trust Building

Figure 2. The Virtuous Cycle of Public Trust Building

IREX's analysis of the qualitative data identified a four-phase cycle of trust building in the communities where CM works, as well as three key strategies that are employed throughout the cycle. This graphic illustrates a snapshot of this cyclical process. Both the LPA and the community are engaged throughout this cycle. Trust emerges as a result of these interactions and depends on ongoing dynamic engagement, rather than as a result of what any one actor does.

The cycle is initiated when leaders engage citizens to participate in decision-making, **showing good intent and promoting belonging** by providing opportunities for community members to articulate thoughts and needs through a variety of modes and activities. In the next stage, the leaders act—and implement the decision, **demonstrating competence and good intent**.

Next, the local government produces concrete results. The clearest way that LPAs **demonstrate competence** to residents is to show the concrete results of a project. In all communities, interviewees mentioned newly paved roads, new lighting, wastewater treatment, parks and tree plantings, and kindergarten construction, among other results that create a more livable and viable community. These not only **demonstrate the competence** of the LPA but also show how collaborative efforts, often involving residents, can work to improve the community. The physical and observable changes spur residents to have pride in their village and a **sense of belonging**. They have communally overcome a challenge together and accomplished something meaningful.

The community and the LPA respond by celebrating the results as well as the individuals who helped achieve those results. Trust is built throughout, but the celebration is a high point—it creates emotional bonding between community members and between the community and the LPA, pride in the accomplishment, and a **sense of unity and belonging**.

Having gone through the cycle where they are engaged, listened to, able to experience concrete outcomes that improve the community, and are (at times) recognized, community members become more open to getting engaged in community activities and decision-making processes again.

Thinking about local government work in terms of this virtuous cycle offers a different perspective on a central component of local governance: "service delivery." Service delivery is important (critical government services keep communities alive and flourishing), but as a concept, it is transactional and limited.

What the data revealed was not merely transactional, but a self-reinforcing process by which communities work in meaningful and impactful ways with local governments.

This cycle results in trusting relationships that power the engine of positive community change and generate more trust. The process itself gets stronger with every cycle, the way that exercise strengthens a muscle. Individuals are more likely to feel trust and to expect trust with each successive cycle. The process yields incremental change and each time it happens, it strengthens the trust "muscle."

2. Three Interlocking Strategies to Build Trust

We identified strategies that local government and leaders can use to build trust throughout the cycle. They include (a) developing servant leadership, (b) employing generous communication, and (c) emphasizing relationship building. The following sections cover each strategy, followed by a case study that describes how the strategy operates in a specific community.

A. Developing Servant Leadership

To the communities we spoke with in Moldova, leadership is not equated with a title or status but instead is about skills and relationships; a leader is truly a public servant. "Servant leadership emphasizes that leaders be attentive to the concerns of their followers, empathize with them, and nurture them."[3]

Language used throughout the interviews described a good leader as empathetic, someone who listens, and a person who is connected to the community. Their actions, according to residents, demonstrate that leaders are authentically invested in benefiting the community rather than doing it for recognition, social prestige, or material wealth. Collaboration is a key modality for how these types of leaders operate. They have a community-first vision, are accessible, and communicate freely. For example, they regularly walk around the community and talk with their constituents, they have an "open-door policy," and they create multiple opportunities to listen to the community (see Section 2B, "Employing Generous Communication").

"We did not elect the mayor to sit in the town hall, we elected the mayor to be a public servant, the face of the village, and to serve us."

COUNCIL MEMBER, URSOAIA

"Every citizen is the boss."

MAYOR

"You should not distinguish between the town hall and the community. The entire community is the town hall, we work for the people. We take opinions of the community into account. Not only me and the mayor make decisions, we also consult with the people."

LPA MEMBER, SLOBOZIA DUSCA

3. See *Can Youth-Led Networks Take Development to Scale in Kenya?* on the IREX website: https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/node/resource/youth-led-networks-development-scale-kenya-learning-agenda.pdf.

The data also indicate that leaders build strong social and emotional connections. The connection between leadership and highly developed social and emotional skills (also called soft skills) was a major element emerging from the data and will be discussed later in this report.

A variety of activities mentioned in the interviews illustrate how servant leaders engage with the community. They include conducting roundtables, acknowledging volunteers and participants with incentives and thank-you certificates, walking around town, and visiting construction sites. They also participate in community events such as flower plantings and cultural events where they decorate a community room for festivities (Ursoaia mayor interview). Most of the activities that interviewees highlighted as evidence of good leadership appear to be innovations that CM introduced, including the door-to-door visits conducted by mayors, open budget hearings, and "Meet the Mayor" sessions held in libraries within partner communities.

Case Study 1: Ursoaia

The mayor of this village is a highly visible public servant who values community satisfaction and visible accountability. As a member of the LPA explained, "She holds many meetings in the village, goes out in the field, and if a problem arises, she solves the problem together with the community."

One example of this approach was how the mayor, supported by CM, engaged the community in a recent public project. Historically, Ursoaia has experienced chronic flooding. The LPA authorized funds to build a footbridge across a stream that often overflowed during storms. When the work on the footbridge was finished, the mayor invited residents to look at the work, and then asked them to give her permission to sign the acceptance certificate for the work performed by the contractor. Afterwards, some residents from the neighborhood laid a table and asked the mayor to stay for a celebratory meal, and each person came offering two or three dishes to share. An LPA staff member recounted, "We were [pleasantly] shocked because we came as the commission to check and accept the work—and that was their way to say thank you."

"We have a good mayor with a big heart who discusses all issues personally with each community member and enjoys respect of the entire community; she does not put on airs; she is very down-to-earth."

OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE MEMBER, URSOAIA

MOLDOVA

Chisinau

Ursoaia

B. Employing Generous Communication

Robust communication builds trust between local government and its citizens, according to interview respondents. This type of communication increases the reach and accessibility of community development information, ensures that decisions that impact the community are made collaboratively, and builds deep connections between the LPA and members of the community. Our analysis suggests that this is achieved through what we call generous communication—a way of interacting that is driven by listening, seeks to build relationships, and emphasizes engaging empathetically. Generous communication is a major driver of citizen engagement, and it increases residents' feeling of belonging and participation, as well as a sense that their voices are encouraged and heard.

The residents and LPA members articulated diverse modalities of generous communication, including in-person consultations; live-streaming town council meetings; Facebook and other social media postings, Viber chats, and voice memos; and surveys of the residents on a range of topics. Mayors often walk around town and interact with residents, which the research team witnessed firsthand. In several interviews with mayors, they arrived at town hall for the meeting and then returned to engaging with the community after the interview concluded. These modalities were all part of CM's training of the LPAs in various strategic communications methods. These methods were not only strategic, but they also had the benefit of strengthening ties between LPAs and communities, which in turn increased community members' sense of belonging. The constant communication and engagement between the leaders and citizens, and vice versa, have improved understanding of what the role of a leader is, increased residents' trust in leaders, and thus enhanced the ways in which citizens engage in and contribute to the growth of their community.

"[We reach out to residents] through various communication methods; for example, every day after working hours we have a meeting in the street ... every day."

LPA STAFF, STRASENI

"I have learned to listen to people, to explain, to be more loyal to them.Interaction with people makes you more disciplined, mobilizes you."

LPA SECRETARY, STRASENI

Case Study 2: Slobozia Dusca

The village leadership of Slobozia Dusca engages in generous communication by organizing public consultations to select the issues to for the agenda of local council meetings. People can ask any questions at public consultations, not only on topics directly connected with the agenda of the meeting. The LPA ensures that all its issues and actions have high visibility on social media, and all decisions made by the LPA are posted on the village website.

The LPA's close partnership with the secondary school is another example of its use of the generous communication strategy. One resident, a teacher who is also a city council member, organized a public café at the secondary school to engage students and representatives of the mayor's office in dialogue. Before the meeting, the students conducted a survey and identified community problems to raise in the face-to-face discussion with the mayor. The students identified roads that were not walkable, and the mayor assured them that he would raise the issue of repairing them with the local council—and those roads were repaired.

MOLDOVA

Slobozia Dusca

Chisinau

C. Emphasizing Relationship Building

We define relationship building as fostering collaborative partnerships with a foundation of mutual trust. Interview respondents emphasized that relationship building is an active and intentional process. Strong relationships can address problems in a spirit of communal effort and cooperation: and the stronger the relationship, the stronger the trust, and vice versa. In addition to the relationships that are built between the mayor and the citizens, relationships are also key to the work between the LPA staff and the mayor, between the councilors and community, and among community members. Importantly, relationships are also critical to gaining and sustaining funding. In all the communities we researched, building relationships both with international donors and with residents (who voluntarily donate to community projects) is essential for the availability of adequate funds for community development.

LPAs build relationships in different ways. In one community, as part of the work of CM, a group of people made house-to-house visits to talk with residents about issues that needed to be addressed. They then went to the town hall and told the community about the problems that were ranked high on the list. With the support of CM, the mayor of a different community explained how she began to streamline and ensure the fairness of public procurement processes and to engage the community in participatory budgeting. Relationships were built as part of this ongoing collaborative work.

"I live on the outskirts of the village; my house is about 800 meters away from the town hall, and when I go to work, people say hello to me and ask me how I am and how things are at my home—and I am charged with good energy on the way from and to home. I mean that people feel they matter, because the LPA takes their needs into account and we put the village, the community, and the people in the foreground— we provide services as well as psychological, physical, and financial assistance."

LPA SECRETARY, STRASENI

Case Study 3: Bilicenii Vechi

In Bilicenii Vechi, residents reported strong personal relationships with LPA staff. Residents who participated in the research said that they felt as though they were "an equal partner" with the LPA. The village places a lot of emphasis on participation and community engagement. Residents described feeling invested and accountable for improving their community's infrastructure. They are willing to put their own time and money into improving it. The data convey a sense that the community and the LPA work as a team. In other words, because community members have built strong relationships with one another and with the LPA, they are more willing and able to work together to solve community problems.

In recent public projects, residents raised funds in conjunction with contributions from the LPA. Many of the residents volunteered their labor. The residents organized to raise money for street lighting—a project cofunded and supported through CM—and then to have a water line built. The same thing occurred with a gas line project. Before construction, residents had to haul gas on their own. After the gas line was connected, the roads were in very bad condition; the community organized to contribute funds for road repair. The community also lacked a playground, and in partnership with the LPA, one was built. As one community member stated, "They listen to us in the decision-making process—we gather in the town hall and issues are put to our vote—practically everyone votes for what people need—and they ask everyone if we agree—everything is put to our vote."

Bilicenii Vechi

MOLDOVA

Chisinau
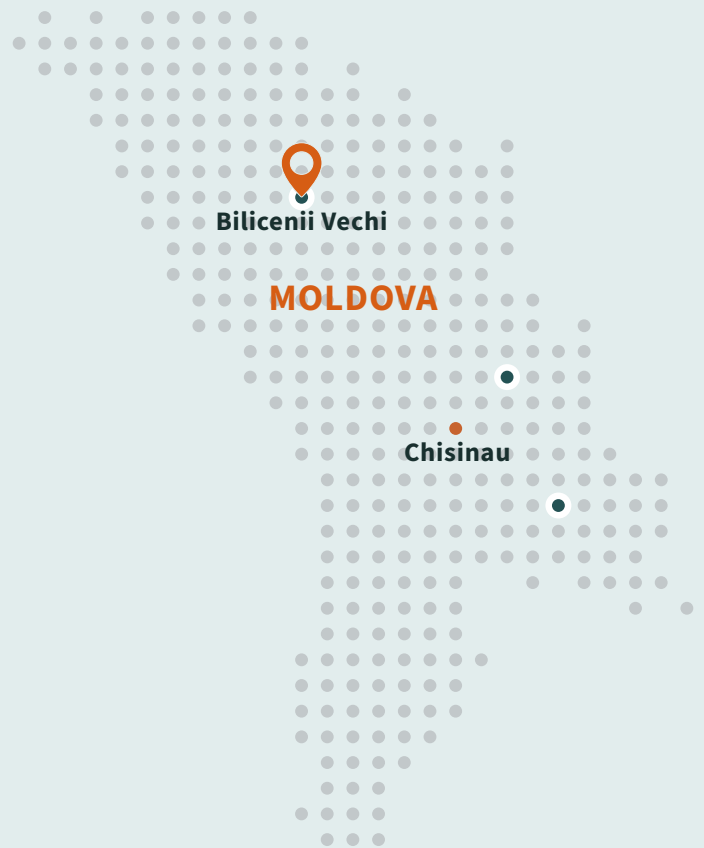
"A lot has changed. when you go for a walk through the village in the evening, you feel like you are in a small town— people come home from work in the evening and are not afraid of dogs [that had been loose on the street before a joint LPA and community action]—it's the same in the morning—the streets are lighted, it's very good."

RESIDENT OF BILICENII VECHI

Relationships are further strengthened by celebration events organized by the mayor and LPA; in one example, the LPA held a concert, and honorary certificates and gifts were given out to all community members. As one resident explained, "The people really enjoy it, because even though it is a very small sign of appreciation, people feel that they are important for the village. Even though it is a small sign of attention, people still feel good." While celebrations don't occur for every project, when they do, they are powerful occasions. Celebrating and expressing public appreciation of residents' participation strengthens residents' relationships with the LPA and motivates residents to continue to engage; thus the cycle keeps moving and developing.

3. Threats to Trust Building

The research demonstrated a snapshot of a process and some strategies that can build and maintain trust; nonetheless, there are threats to trust building worth noting. The following are some threats that the research team identified that deserve further exploration.

Uncertainty of Future Trustworthy Leaders

While LPA leadership in this study provides a model for best practices that includes all three strategies, the data suggest that there is a risk that the next generation of leadership could slip back into a previous authoritarian style of leadership, which often included rampant corruption and nepotism, and thus a reduced sense of trust between community members and their government. In a few interviews, residents raised this as an issue or worried about the lack of a leadership pipeline. While this was not the majority opinion, it is worth considering.

Larger Political Issues

In some cases, the political situation beyond a particular village may create unfair advantages for some villages and stymie progress for others. There is also a lack of visibility into national-level decision-making processes, which can create an atmosphere of mistrust. For example, a mayor developed a project proposal together with her community and was awarded funds (from the government of Moldova) to aid in the construction of a community center. The LPA was to receive a certificate confirming the project award, but at the last minute the village was removed from the tender, and the project was given to a neighboring village because of its political affiliation. This had a chilling effect on the mayor's team, and one staff member mentioned that she would no longer work on a proposal because of the lack of transparency of decision-making and politically influenced development decisions.

Lack of Participation

Not all community members will participate in community development.[4] Engaged residents in this study mentioned that it was hard to get some other residents to participate in civic activities. The pessimistic attitudes they described may be inherited from the legacy of Soviet state paternalism, wherein people expected governments to take care of them, witnessed state leaders typically acting in self-interest, and were endowed with little decision-making power or voice in the process. These experiences may have generated suspicion and lack of trust in institutions and provided little incentive for residents to act in the community's interests. Changing this mind-set to a new paradigm may take generations.

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4. One data source on volunteering, for example, found that that 15% of a community does 50% of the volunteer work. James McBryan, *Guess What Percent of Volunteers do most of the Volunteering* (2001), Track It Forward, https://www.trackitforward.com/content/guess-what-percent-volunteers-do-most-volunteering.

"Now we are addressing infrastructure needs ... that must be first. Our ultimate goals will include healthcare. People's needs should be addressed in a systematic way once the basic needs are met."

RESIDENT, STRASENI

Insufficient Sustainable Employment Opportunities and Emigration

The need for sustainable employment drives young residents to emigrate to other cities and, indeed, other parts of the world. Emigration numbers for Moldova are staggering; the most recent numbers from the UN Population statistics were 462,866 in 2022, which the World Bank calculates to be 48% of the working-age population.[5] Most residents we spoke with, unsurprisingly, want a better, more prosperous, and more developed country. Despite engaging with the virtuous cycle and trust-building strategies, trust can still be eroded by demographic trends if many community members leave. Having a strong vision for the future and creating projects that enhance the quality of life might help to keep young people from emigrating, residents argued. For example, parks, good lighting, good roads, and a cultural center all create a more livable environment. These civic construction projects also have the potential to generate jobs and drive economic growth, for example, through tourism. Youth, especially, need the magnet of employment to remain in their home villages. While this a challenging problem that Moldova has been wrangling with for some time and is unlikely to have a single solution, community development projects could provide one part of a broader systemic solution.

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5.   See *Net Migration—Moldova* (2022), World Bank, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SM.POP.NETM?locations=MD.

4.   Recommendations for Further Understanding

Our research suggests several activities that may provide a more complete understanding of trust building.

Adopt standard measures to evaluate trust levels between communities and their governments within and across governance programming. Our research suggests that trust building is a key ingredient for successful governance programming at the local level, and yet few global development funding agencies fund or require programs to collect and analyze data regarding trust building.

Validate trust-building strategies using mixed-methods approaches that employ both quantitative and qualitative methods. Specifically, quantitative measures of trust levels should be consistently used in programing with public administrations so that policymakers, leaders, and community members have a shared understanding of trust levels and trends over time.

Expand research to include locations with very different histories, cultures, and norms to validate the extent to which the strategies identified are relevant across contexts and to expand the menu of trust-building strategies.

Create a tool or barometer of trust building with indicators (the key strategies) and provide training and/or disseminate to a larger audience.

VI. Annexes

Annex 1: Interviews and Focus Groups

In August 2023, IREX partnered with Moldovan research company, CIVIS, to conduct research in six communities in which CM works. The CM Community Engagement Specialist who leads capacity-building trainings for LPAs to improve citizen buy-in and engagement selected communities based on their high level of engagement in CM activities and high level of performance in meeting CM objectives. By selecting high-performing communities, researchers were able to clearly observe and categorize consistent patterns of trust-building processes between citizens and local government.

Method	Communities	Respondents	Total Number	Gender[6]
In-depth interviews	Bilicenii Vechi, Slobozia Dusca, Straseni, Tigheci, Ursoaia, and Zubresti	Local Public Authority (LPA) staff and residents	13 LPA staff 18 citizens N = 31 interviews total	12 women; 1 man 10 women; 8 men
Focus groups	Bilicenii Vechi, Tigheci, and Zubresti	Residents from Community Oversight Groups	Three groups (one group of 6; one group of 3; one group of 5 people) N = 14 people total	11 women; 3 men

Participants

In total, 13 LPA staff and 18 citizens were interviewed for this research.[7] Stakeholders included mayors, members of the LPA, and engaged community members. IREX reached out to LPA staff in each community to help identify engaged community members. Once potential community members were identified, IREX created a set of criteria to identify and select respondents representing a range of roles in the community. CIVIS recruited participants (LPA staff and engaged community members) in the study from this list of preselected respondents.

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6. Understanding the factors related to prevalence of women in leadership positions in the locations we collected data is beyond the scope of this study. However, it would be worthwhile for future research to explore questions such as: how representative is this trend is across the country? What factors led to this trend? To what extent do certain qualities socialized as "female" (e.g. collaborative; good listener; caring) confer a highly effective ability to build trust with both men and women in Moldova?

7. Selection for the research emphasized mayors because they lead LPA activities, including interactions with community, and secretaries, because they organize the local council and are likely to understand how decisions are made. Engaged citizens were recommended by mayors and were selected because they were involved in a local group, organization, or committee that engages with LPA to benefit the community.

Data Collection

IREX designed the interview and focus group question guides. The main topics covered in the guides were perceptions of the community, perceptions of the LPA, experiences as part of the community, and the relationship between the LPA and the community. Discussion indirectly probed the perceptions around whether and how the LPA demonstrated competence, showed good intent, and promoted belonging. Researchers from CIVIS and IREX conducted interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders in the selected communities in local public buildings such as the town hall, culture house, public library, and the like. Interviews were conducted in Romanian and recorded, transcribed verbatim, and then translated into English. The nine interviews conducted by the IREX researcher were assisted by an interpreter.[8] Interviews lasted an average of 42 minutes; focus groups averaged 85 minutes.

Analysis

After we conducted the interviews and focus groups, seven members of the IREX team conducted an intensive collaborative analysis of the data to review interview and focus group transcripts and identify key themes arising from the data (i.e., inductive coding). By triangulating multiple sources (comparing the perspectives of different people within the system) and by collaboratively analyzing the data with multiple analysts, we increased the credibility of our findings.[9] IREX held several sessions to analyze the findings where the team shared themes, brainstormed insights, and discussed patterns and deeper meanings. We validated our findings with several members of the CM team at two stages of the analysis.

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8. Note that one interview was conducted in English, as the resident was fluent in English. One interview was not recorded; the IREX researcher's detailed notes were employed instead of a recording.

9. Triangulation refers to the use of multiple methods or data sources in qualitative research to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena (Patton MQ, Enhancing the Quality and Credibility of Qualitative Analysis. *Health Serv Res*. 1999 Dec; 34(5 Pt 2):1189-208. PMID: 10591279; PMCID: PMC1089059).

Annex 2: The Role of Comunitatea Mea in Building Trust

When the CM team reviewed this research report, they provided concrete activities to help flesh out specifically how CM supported the LPAs. We detail these activities in the following paragraphs. We emphasize that this phase of the research did not seek to identify a causal connection between CM activities and trust building. We propose that the project's methodology and strategies for working with local governments has likely contributed to setting up the virtuous cycle described above and keeping it in motion, and to implementing and cementing the strategies we identified as building trust.

Through its partnership with 123 LPAs across Moldova, the Comunitatea Mea program has integrated intentional activities that contribute to this cycle of trust at all stages. To promote greater engagement, CM supported LPAs to develop or update their Municipal Strategic Plan through a participatory process that included over 2,000 citizens across all partner communities, gathering diverse citizen inputs to inform annual planning. CM also worked with LPAs to conduct door-to-door outreach to gather citizen priorities and inform their planning and allocation of scarce resources. This outreach led to LPA staff visiting over 82,000 constituents across all partner communities. With CM guidance and support, each LPA then analyzed these data and used the results to inform the development of an action plan that LPAs shared back with communities, which they followed with continuous updates as the action plan was implemented.

Additionally, CM worked with partner LPAs to host open budget hearings for their communities—many for the first time in LPA staff's careers in public service—and host "Meet the Mayor" events at their local libraries. As part of the investment in community infrastructure projects, CM introduced a participatory prioritization process to mayors that involved convening diverse citizens in a

"We are extremely grateful to the CM Program for the exposure to the municipal strategic planning process which enabled us to prioritize and select the project idea in a participatory manner and which ultimately received funding from the European Village program. We've used a similar methodology to the one introduced by CM, including the in-person, online, and paper-based surveying of our community, which ensured that the final idea selected was backed up by large-scale consultations with our community thus gaining community-wide support. This way, no one will be able to ever accuse the LPA in the future about the lack of inclusion and transparency in selecting this idea."

DEPUTY MAYOR OF COPCEAC (QUOTE PROVIDED BY CM STAFF; THIS COMMUNITY WAS NOT PART OF THE STUDY)

room to review identify community infrastructure priorities and democratically select the project to be cofunded by the LPA and CM through a one-person, one-vote approach. This process provided a stark contrast to the historically mayor-driven process that had little community buy-in.

CM also closely supported LPAs to deliver on commitments, specifically though supporting LPAs to directly improve service delivery. CM partners developed action plans to improve social service delivery, and then delivered on those new services with cofunding from the CM project,[10] resulting in improved resources for senior citizens, children, and other vulnerable groups. CM supported communities to provide better social work services (CM trained social workers on minimum quality standards to obtain service certification). CM also supported LPAs by helping them to design spaces (such as community cafeterias) with vulnerable groups in mind. A number of LPAs increased the efficiency of administrative services through establishing CM-supported Citizen Information and Service Centers—which reduced wait times for citizens in some cases from 30 days to 10. In addition, these centers reduced the number of trips to various LPA offices, thereby decreasing the potential for informal payments and corruption. The community infrastructure projects serve as the most direct tangible investment that community members observe as having a direct impact on their lives.

Numerous other examples flesh out CM's approach. To date, over 71 projects have been completed, directly benefiting over 455,000 citizens with improved services including street lighting, renovated kindergartens, improved road and water infrastructure, and others. Notably, many community members helped oversee these projects through their role on Community Oversight

Groups (COGs), an initiative that CM introduced, which have promoted greater transparency and accountability of LPA-led projects. Communities that CM works with have formed 70 COGs; many continue to be utilized within communities to foster greater collaboration on community investments between LPAs and their constituents. Additionally, CM's direct support to LPAs on public financial management has resulted in LPAs bringing in over $12 million in additional revenue due to improved asset management, and increasing locally owned revenue by an average of 72% per LPA.[11]

CM also supported LPAs to celebrate their accomplishments together with the communities. LPAs organized launch events in partnership with CM for completed infrastructure projects that serve as points of pride for both LPA staff and the community. CM trained mayors to keep communities engaged in the process by using their social media channels, websites, and printed materials to publicize LPA progress and successes, directly following up on earlier commitments to both promote accountability and celebrate successes.

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10. Note: The other part of the cofunding was typically provided directly by the LPA through their own local budgetary contribution. In some cases, part of the local contribution came from community donations, which we heard about frequently in the research and which demonstrates that the community has "skin in the game."

11. Locally owned revenue is revenue that is collected locally, as compared to resources dispersed from the central government. Locally owned revenue sources for LPAs include local taxes, land sales, tourism activities, and public-private partnerships, among others. One of CM's goals is to both diversify and increase locally owned revenue.

Acknowledgments

About IREX

IREX works with partners in more than 100 countries in four areas essential to progress: empowering youth, cultivating leaders, strengthening institutions, and extending access to quality education and information. Our work includes reducing corruption, stopping disinformation, and building social trust. IREX's Center for Applied Learning and Impact (CALI), leads the Trust Initiative. CALI's mission is to apply research and learning to unlock solutions that impact people's lives and advance development outcomes.

About Comunitatea Mea

Comunitatea Mea (CM) is an USAID-funded program based in Moldova that aims to strengthen local government to become more effective, transparent, and accountable to citizens. This program aims to build local government capacity to meet citizens' needs. CM works to increase the capacity of local authorities, including their ability to work inclusively with citizens and civil society, and to strengthen checks and balances between the central and local governments and to improve the lives of the communities in which they work. CM accomplishes these goals by meaningfully engaging citizens in local governance; advancing decentralization policy reforms; and increasing locally owned revenues and improving financial management practices.

**Comunitatea Mea Trust
Research**
Narrative Report

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