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# External evaluation of Active Citizens Fund Bulgaria under the EEA Financial Mechanism 2014-2021

*Final report 30/09/2024*

Global Metrics Ltd.



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## List of abbreviations

<i>ACF Bulgaria</i>	Active Citizens Fund Bulgaria
<i>CSO</i>	Civil society organization
<i>EEA</i>	European Economic Area
<i>ESPP</i>	Electronic Proposal Submission System
<i>EU</i>	European Union
<i>NGO</i>	Non-governmental organization
<i>OSI – Sofia</i>	Open Society Institute Sofia
<i>SIS</i>	Small initiative schemes
<i>TO</i>	Thematic Outcome
<i>WCF</i>	Workshop for Civic Initiatives Foundation

## I. Introduction

### General information

Active Citizens Fund provides support to civil society is a key priority for the EEA Grants 2014-2021, funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway in 15 EU Member States in Central and Southern Europe and the Baltics. It is established under priority sector ‘Culture, Civil Society, Good Governance and Fundamental Rights and Freedoms’, one of the five priority sectors agreed between the donors and the European Union. The Program is operating up to the end of 2024 and aims to contribute to the overall objectives of the EEA and Norway Grants – reduction of economic and social disparities, as well as strengthening bilateral relations between the beneficiary and donor states.

The primary aim of the Active Citizens Fund is to enhance civil society and foster active citizenship while empowering vulnerable groups. The fund is committed to fostering the long-term sustainability and capacity-building of the civil society sector, thereby reinforcing its pivotal role in advancing democratic participation, active citizenship, and human rights. Support is provided in the following areas:

- Democracy, active citizenship, good governance and transparency
- Human rights and equal treatment through combating any discrimination on the grounds of racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, gender, disability, age, sexual orientation or gender identity
- Social justice and inclusion of vulnerable groups
- Gender equality and gender-based violence
- Environment and climate change

The allocation to the Active Citizens Fund Bulgaria, is 16 045 000 euro, provided by the donor-states Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway.

The Active Citizens Fund in Bulgaria has carried out two calls for strategic projects as well as four small initiative schemes (SIS). The strategic calls for proposals aim to support long-term projects of civil society organizations offering strategic solutions for the sustainability and capacity of the

civil sector in Bulgaria, strengthening its role in promoting democratic participation, active citizenship and human rights. The first call for strategic projects was carried out between October 2018 and January 2019 and the Second call for strategic projects was carried out between September 2020 and January 2021. The strategic projects calls can fund civil organizations (non-profit legal entities) with duration of 12 to 36 months and a grant amount of 10,001 to 200,000 euro. The supported projects can be implemented in partnership, including with entities from the donor countries - Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein.

The four small initiative schemes were carried out as follow: First SIS (March – September 2019), second SIS (September 2019 – March 2020), third SIS (June – September 2020) and fourth SIS was carried out between March and April 2022 - two of the SIS were emergency sessions carried out in response to the Covid-pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Projects funded under the SIS may last from 2 to 12 months and be granted between 2,000 and the maximum amount up to 25,000 euros for some of the SIS project.

All of the funded projects have been carried out in one of six thematic priorities (outcomes):



**Thematic outcome 1:** Strengthened democratic culture and civic awareness



**Thematic outcome 2:** Increased support for human rights



**Thematic outcome 3:** Vulnerable groups are empowered



**Thematic outcome 4:** CSOs actively address gender equality and gender based violence (GBV)



**Thematic outcome 5:** Increased civic engagement in environmental protection/climate change



**Thematic outcome 6:** Enhanced capacity and sustainability of the civil society sector including CSOs

The thematic priorities were selected by the Fund Operator and were validated with the interested parties during a consultative stakeholder meeting that took place on July 26, 2017 in Sofia, Bulgaria.

Active Citizens Fund is managed in a consortium between Open Society Institute – Sofia (OSI – Sofia), the Workshop for Civic Initiatives Foundation (WCF) and the Trust for Social Achievement Foundation (TSA).

## Aims of the Evaluation

The current external evaluation was initiated and commissioned by the Fund Operator of the Active Citizens Fund Bulgaria. The aim is to provide an objective and independent analysis of the design, implementation and results achieved under the Bulgarian Active Citizens Fund program under the EEA FM 2014-2021 with a focus on the supported projects in the following two thematic priorities:

- Thematic Outcome No.1: "Strengthened democratic culture and civic awareness";
- Thematic Outcome No. 6: "Enhanced capacity and sustainability of the civil society sector including CSOs".

The evaluation is done based on three main criteria:

- **Relevance** – The study efforts are focused on evaluating the extent to which the thematic priorities align with the needs of the program beneficiaries (CSOs). It is essential to ascertain whether the program's design, particularly the thematic priorities under evaluation, genuinely reflect the interests and address the priorities and needs of the CSO beneficiaries.

Key questions in analyzing this criterion include:

- Evaluation of the program's design, focusing on the relevance of the two thematic priorities under assessment, including their specific objectives and indicators, concerning the mission of the program beneficiaries.
  - Assessment of how effectively the program, particularly the thematic priorities under evaluation, meets the needs of the program beneficiaries.
- **Effectiveness** - This study efforts focus on the extent to which the Program has achieved its planned results, taking into account any differential results across different groups.

Key questions in analyzing this criterion include:

- Assessment of the quality of outputs produced and outcomes achieved in comparison to planned targets. Factors influencing the attainment of results (outputs and outcomes) are also identified.
  - Identification of any additional outputs beyond those outlined in the results framework that have materialized and contributed to the planned outcome(s), if applicable.
  - Identification of any additional outcomes beyond those outlined in the results framework that have materialized and contributed to the program objective, if applicable.
- **Sustainability** - This criterion assesses whether the benefits of the implemented projects are likely to continue over time.

Key questions in analyzing this criterion include:

- Evaluation of the likelihood that the benefits of the program/projects will persist over the next five years.
- Examination of the financial, economic, social, environmental, and institutional capacities required to sustain the benefits over time.

In addition to the key questions, there were additional questions that the study addresses.

## II. Methodology

The methodological design is based on a mixed method research approach, which combines elements of both qualitative and quantitative research. This approach helps to overcome the deficits of using only one of the two research approaches. The result of mixed method approach is information that can be generalized (as opposed to qualitative information that usually cannot be used for generalization purposes), adds richer details to conclusions and strengthens the validity of the conclusions.

### Evaluation methods

#### a. Desk research

The research team has carried out desk research, which allows for an accurate assessment of the need for further information to be acquired through other data collection methods.

The document analysis is based on:

- Annual reports provided by the Fund Operator
- Quantitative data gathered by the Fund Operator
- Resumes of achieved results for each of the projects that were implemented under thematic priority (outcome) 1 and thematic priority (outcome) 6.

#### b. Quantitative method

Under the quantitative approach, a survey was designed to help explore the relevance, effectiveness and sustainability of the Program based on the assessment of the CSOs that have implemented projects under thematic priority 1 and thematic priority 6.

The study used an exhaustive sample of all of the unique CSOs that have implemented projects under said thematic priorities<sup>1</sup>. Some CSOs have implemented more than one project under the two thematic priorities, however, they were only represented in the qualitative study once.

The survey was distributed via e-mail using the Lime survey platform and all the organizations were invited to participate in the quantitative study 3 times, between March 18<sup>th</sup> 2024 and April

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<sup>1</sup> An up-to-date list of all CSOs was provided by the Fund operator.



30<sup>th</sup> 2024. Whenever a CSO was not able to be reached due to a faulty e-mail address, the fieldwork team has found new or alternative e-mail addresses of the organizations to disseminate the survey.

c. Qualitative method  
i. Focus group discussion

Two focus group discussions were held online, one for organizations that have implemented projects under thematic priority 1 and one for organizations implemented projects under thematic priority 6. For each of the focus groups 12 organizations were invited to participate<sup>2</sup>.

The focus groups were sampled with a purposeful sample design taking into account:

- That half participants in each group should be from CSOs registered and operating in Sofia and the other half should be registered and operating in other parts of the country
- Participants should have a different organizational profile – foundations, non-profit associations, other NGO organizations
- Participants should have implemented projects with different target groups and should have worked on a different area of societal issues.

The pre-selected focus group participants and their substitutes were agreed upon with the Fund operator and the operator's opinion on the selection has been taken into account<sup>3</sup>.

**Note!** Despite the research team efforts and the assurance of CSOs of their participation, some of them were not able to join the focus group discussions. In these cases, members of the CSOs were invited to participate in in-depth interviews instead.

Focus group guides were developed in order to capture the relevance, effectiveness and sustainability of the program results. Both guides were essentially the same, but were referring to projects that have been implemented under each thematic priority under evaluation. The focus group guides were agreed upon with the Fund operator.

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<sup>2</sup> Two of the organizations were invited a week after the initial 10, once two of the organizations have turned down the invitation to participate.

<sup>3</sup> The Operator has only provided notes on whether some of the selected organizations are still operating or not.

## ii. In-depth interviews

Ten in-depth interviews were carried out with CSOs that have implemented projects within thematic priority No.1 and No.6 were held online.

The interview participants were selected based on a purposeful sampling, accounting for:

- The type of financing scheme the CSOs has implemented a project under
- Various target groups of the projects
- CSOs operating in Sofia (capital) and other parts of the country
- CSOs that have implemented their projects in partnership with another organization(s).

The Interview guides were developed and agreed upon with the Fund operator. The aim of interview guide is help capture the CSOs evaluation of the Program (relevance, effectiveness, sustainability) in a qualitative term.

## iii. Case studies

This approach is based on a thorough examination of a specific case(s), taking into account many various perspectives, and hence requires a significant investment of resources. Hence, one organization implementing a project under thematic priority 1 and one organization implementing a project under thematic priority 6 were invited to participate in the case studies. Their main aim was to illustrate in-depth the process of implementing a project under the program and to gain better understating as to how the CSOs and the program operator have responded to the difficulties that Covid – 19, as well as the war in Ukraine have presented to the implementation of the initially funded projects.

Two projects were selected based on the outreach that the projects had, as well as the complexity of activities that the CSOs have performed. Both organizations have experience in fundraising and have a set topic of operational interest. Their experience with fundraising has been very valuable to the research.

The qualitative part of the study was conducted between March 18<sup>th</sup> and April 30<sup>th</sup> 2024 via online conversations over Zoom.

## Scope and main questions of the evaluation

The current study is an external evaluation of the Active Citizen's Program. It's aims are to gather qualitative and quantitative data and produce a report that will outline:

- How the results and recommendations will be applied in future initiatives
- What worked well and why?
- What went wrong, and why?
- What can be improved, and how?

The evaluation focuses on the achievements of the projects funded in the following two thematic priorities across all program call for proposals:

- **Thematic priority No. 1: "Strengthened democratic culture and civic awareness"** with the following specific objectives:
  1. Participation of citizens in decision-making on public policies
  2. Undertaking research to support decision-making, public policy formulation and debate
  3. Promotion of media literacy and civic education
  4. Improved transparency and accountability of public institutions
  5. Monitoring and promoting the application of ethical standards in journalism
- **Thematic priority No. 6: "Enhanced capacity and sustainability of the civil society sector including CSOs"** with the following specific objectives:
  1. Creation and strengthening of partnerships between civic organizations and public/private organizations
  2. Development or maintenance of platforms and networks between civil organizations
  3. Improving citizens' awareness of the role of non-governmental organizations in society
  4. Capacity building of civil organization

The external evaluation is based on three main criteria: relevance, effectiveness and sustainability.

**The relevance criteria** explore the extent to which the thematic priorities meet the needs of the CSOs in the country.

Key questions in analysing this criterion include:

- Evaluation of the program's design, focusing on the relevance of the two thematic priorities under assessment, including their specific objectives and indicators, concerning the mission of the program beneficiaries.
- Assessment of how effectively the program, particularly the thematic priorities under evaluation, meets the needs of the program beneficiaries.

Apart from the key questions under the relevance criterion mentioned in point (2) Aims of the evaluation, some of the additional questions that the study explores are:

- To what extent does the design and rules of the program (calls for proposals, rules and conditions for providing the grant funding) meet the needs of the beneficiaries to carry out their activities in the field of the thematic priority?
- Have these needs changed and how during the implementation of the projects / program as a whole?
- How relevant were the two special sessions of the Small Initiatives scheme to the needs of the beneficiaries?
- To what extent is demand for funding driven by supply? Are some needs easier to get financing than others?
- Are there specific objectives for the thematic priority (identified as important by the beneficiaries) that have remained outside the focus of the program and if so, what are they?
- How relevant are the funded projects from the point of view of the people who participated in them (the project teams themselves, as well as the target groups and/or supporters of the funded organizations)?

**The effectiveness criteria** focus on the extent to which the Programme has achieved its planned results, taking into account any differential results across different groups.

Key questions in analysing this criterion include:

- Assessment of the quality of outputs produced and outcomes achieved in comparison to planned targets. Factors influencing the attainment of results (outputs and outcomes) are also identified.
- Identification of any additional outputs beyond those outlined in the results framework that have materialized and contributed to the planned outcome(s), if applicable.

- Identification of any additional outcomes beyond those outlined in the results framework that have materialized and contributed to the program objective, if applicable.

Apart from the key questions under the relevance criterion, some of the additional questions that the study explores under the effectiveness criteria are:

- What is the long-term impact – favourable and unfavourable, intended and unintended – did the projects have on civic space/civil society effectiveness/civil society influence/civil society connectivity at national/local level?
- What significant changes and patterns have occurred in the civil sector (including changes in norms/standards, national policies, practices, ideas and beliefs) that may be directly or indirectly related to program activity?
- To what extent did the innovative tools created by the projects enable beneficiaries to promote, share and implement (both locally and nationally) policies that support citizen action?
- Does the Program Operator act in a transparent and timely manner for the benefit of the beneficiaries and their work (including their successes and failures)? What information policies and practices exist as a result of the program/projects?

**Under the sustainability criteria** the evaluation assesses whether the benefits of the implemented projects are likely to continue over time.

Key questions in analysing this criterion include:

- Evaluation of the likelihood that the benefits of the program/projects will persist over the next five years.
- Examination of the financial, economic, social, environmental, and institutional capacities required to sustain the benefits over time.

Some of the additional questions that the study explores under the effectiveness criteria are:

- How does the program invest in partnerships for long-term cooperation?
- To what extent were key stakeholders involved in the planning and implementation of activities and project management?
- Are the expectations for sustainability of the projects/organizations financed under the strategic calls and under the small initiatives scheme different and to what extent?

### **III. Evaluation findings and conclusions**

#### **Thematic Outcome No.1: "Strengthened democratic culture and civic awareness"**

According to the Annual Programme Report of the Fund Operator for Bulgaria, by the end of 2022, 62 projects that aim to deliver results within the scope of Thematic Outcome No.1 have been funded. By the end of 2022, most of the strategic projects from the first call have been successfully implemented. 7 new projects were launched under an emergency session of the Small Initiatives Scheme with a focus on the consequences of the war in Ukraine.

Most of the project promoters implementing strategic projects requested prolongation of project activities in order to catch-up with live events after the Covid 19 pandemic. However, changes in project time-schedules are in line with end of eligibility of costs date.

The report also indicates that in 2022, supported project promoters report that they have involved more than 5,000 people in total in various project activities. Most of the project promoters in this outcome have pursued research activities in support of decision-making, public policy formulation and debate as the main objective of their projects. Some of the strategic projects aim to contribute to improving the transparency and accountability of public institutions. Others of the projects in this thematic outcome explicitly focused on participation of citizens in decision-making on public policies and decision-making or promote media literacy and civic education, and produced a variety of teaching resources and digital instruments.

A main characteristic of the assessment is that it is retrospective (subsequent, ex-post) and focuses on projects that have been completed at the time the evaluation starts and/or are in the process of being completed at the time of the assignment.

In this regard, the following conclusions and recommendations are made on the basis of quantitative and qualitative information gathered for the evaluation from organizations that have successfully implemented or are in the process of finalizing projects under Thematic Outcome No.1. "Strengthened democratic culture and civic awareness".

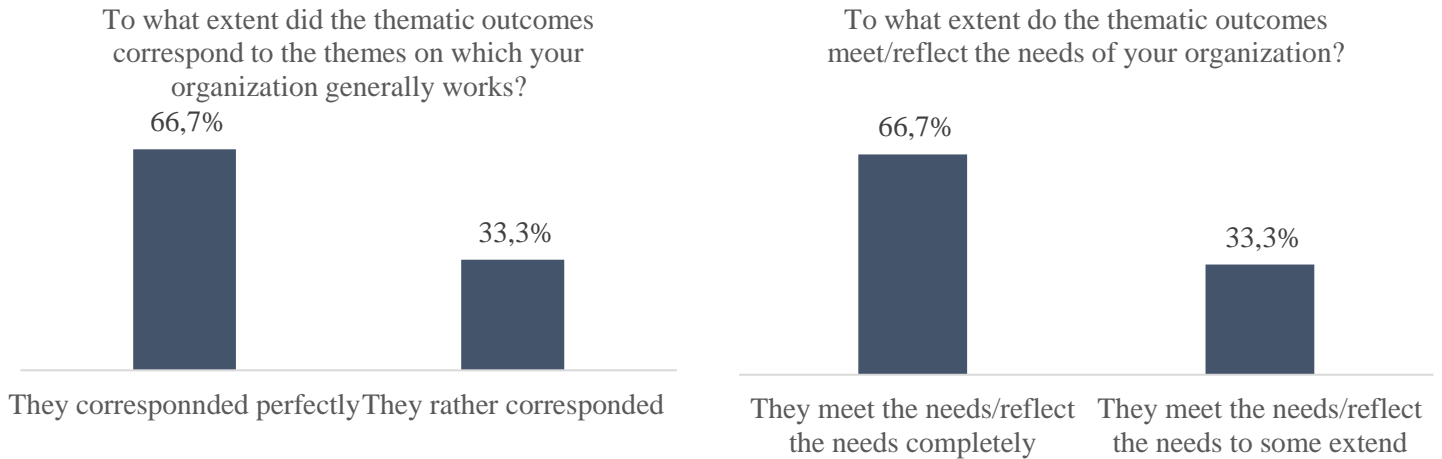
## Relevance

This assessment addresses several aspects of relevance. On the one hand, it analyses to what extent the implemented projects under the thematic outcome correspond to the real needs of civil society, the NGO sector in the country and the target groups, beneficiaries of the programme. The extent to which selected forms of support has been able to respond to contextual changes throughout the funding period and meet the original design and objectives of the thematic area and the programme as a whole.

The relevance of the thematic outcome is thought through the relevance of the implemented projects. The organisations covered by the evaluation represent a wide range of themes and activities important for improving democratic culture and civic awareness. Each of them designs and implements its projects on the basis of its experience and field of operation. In most cases, the projects implemented under TO No.1 are a natural/logical extension of previous ideas and efforts that the organisations have made in the fields they seek to improve. In this context, the opportunities offered by the Programme and the thematic outcome are seen as the best opportunity to achieve new or predefined objectives of the NGO sector in the processes of formulating and/or reforming national and local policies, promoting media literacy and civic education, as well as transparency and accountability of public institutions. This form of funding is perceived as bringing together many significant themes that organisations know well, have identified as fields of their work, and have seen as areas in need of development and improvement. At the same time, these are areas that continue to be relevant over time, which automatically makes them relevant to an otherwise dynamic environment.

Through the data collected in the survey conducted for the evaluation, 66.7% of the organisations that have implemented a project under TO No.1 of the Programme find full alignment between the objectives of the priority and those that the beneficiary organisation itself sets in its work in general. In addition, the majority of TO No.1 project promoters say that the priority corresponds/reflects the needs of the NGO implementing the project.

Figure 1. Relevance of the thematic priority of the topics and the needs of the organisation implementing the project(s) (%)



Source: Results of a quantitative survey, for the purpose of the evaluation, among organisations, beneficiaries of the Programme and Thematic Priority 1

Survey responses confirm the shared impressions of qualitative research participants. The majority of them said that they had no difficulties in selecting the thematic outcome and preparing their project proposals at the application stage. Starting from their usual objectives, activities and needs, the applicant organisations shared that they felt "free" in framing their project proposals and were supported by the Fund Operator in sharing their ideas and setting the financial parameters.

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*“One of our goals as an organization is precisely to improve the donation environment in the country. Our activities include conducting various surveys, organizing trainings, forums and discussions... so it seemed appropriate to apply for this thematic outcome. “*

*“Back when the program was launched, we focused on this priority because, strategically, we as an organization are working to improve democratic culture and civic awareness, and we've been quite successful in the project in terms of having authored content and taking a position on the specific issues that we've been advocating and working on for years. “*

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*Focus group with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 1*

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*“The thematic outcome was the most appropriate for us, because civic participation and awareness in general are the topics we have been working on since our establishment. And actually, after a few projects that we had implemented at that time, we decided to deepen a little bit this particular element - of civic engagement, because in most cases we (in Bulgaria) have a historical pattern*



*where civic engagement is lacking, people are embarrassed, for whatever reasons, or they don't have the experience to participate in civic initiatives.”*

*“Under no circumstances have we been limited in our project in terms of name, themes, activities or shaping the financial parameters. We know the topic of civic participation well, and at the same time, the external reason to realize the project was that in Bulgaria, the word "democracy" is perceived entirely in the political context of parties, elections and so on. We wanted to de-politicize this word and show that democracy is a tool, a process in which everyone can understand how to participate.”*

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*In-depth interviews with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 1*

Another point of strength that the evaluated organizations noted was what they called the "broad definition" of the Thematic Outcome. Despite the clearly stated objectives, each organisation stated that the design of the Programme offered a flexible approach to selecting and awarding targeted grant funding. A variety of activities were considered relevant and eligible, as long as they were consistent with the specific objective and thematic indicators.

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*“A big advantage is the way the outcome is defined. Of course, it gives a framework through certain objectives and indicators, but it lacks the element that is present in other donor programmes, where you are obliged even to set specific activities, or to use even certain words, in order to be admitted to a tender...”*

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*Focus group with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 1*

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*“It is very important to note that the Fund and the Priority allows us to implement activities that we seem to have already implemented under a previous project or under another donor. I mentioned at the beginning that we are working in two big directions - donor development and campaigning skills, and this is a goal-mission that will never end, as these skills always need to be created, developed and strengthened. It's the most natural thing in the world for us. But when it comes to seeking funding, it is always looked upon with suspicion that funding is obtained for similar activities. Here, we came across an understanding, and the "broad" definition of priority objectives helped us calmly design our project proposal without skipping activities that sound similar to each other...”*

*“I am in favour of Donors having a broader approach when announcing the themes of the calls to give more freedom to NGOs to formulate their projects in a comfortable way. This is the most important thing for the NGO sector - that organisations maintain their independence and stick to their mandates. It would not be OK for Donors, especially if they are governmental, to set narrow priorities and narrow objectives because this limits their own priorities. So, to have a vibrant civil*

*society in Bulgaria, the most important thing is to have independent organizations that have the ability to set their own goals.”*

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*In-depth interviews with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 1*

Overall, beneficiary organisations report that the programme design and rules ('calls for proposals' and 'grant conditions') meet their expectations and needs, contributing to the realisation of the intended outcomes. A key argument is that the NGO sector, essentially, functions by seeking funding through programmes, grants, projects and donations. In this context, the Fund offers a relevant, well-established and operational grant funding scheme that contains familiar elements, rules and conditions for its potential beneficiaries. With some specificities, the reporting forms (especially the financial statements) are described as "more complex", "more detailed" or "more cumbersome" compared to the forms for projects financed with European (EU) funds. At the same time, these modalities are necessary for proof through the donor countries and verification of the capacity of the NGO sector in terms of administrative work, which is an integral part of any organisation's activity.

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*“The project was submitted in 2018, started in 2019, but things haven't changed much since then. We've basically had the classic difficulties as with any major form. In the beginning we had to figure out exactly the budget form, because in the early stages you have to fix what you will implement, what will be an external expert, who will be hired on a civil contract and who will not...”*

*“It seems to me that the form was both well described and familiar. But we have a team, people who have quite a lot of experience with different forms of application, accounting that works with such programs, which perhaps made things easy for us.”*

*“... The biggest difficulty we had was budgeting and reporting at each stage. You have to be very consistent at these points, you have to have all the necessary reporting documents in place because you need to be very detailed and you need to attach a lot of evidence. These processes have left a more bitter memory with me. We had some difficulties, we had reporting documents returned to us several times, but in the end the Operator cooperated fully and we resolved the cases...”*

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*Focus group with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 1*

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*“There are no difficulties in the "substantive" part of the implementation of the projects. There are difficulties in the financial and administrative part because the rules that have been set up make*

*the whole process more difficult. We had to think about specific reporting rules with accountants, lawyers and we did not understand the logic of having them arranged and required in exactly that way. Logic, though, allows you, if you work with it over time, to master it. The downside was that a significant amount of time was spent on something that for us was a formality...instead, the Fund was very supportive and guided and assisted us to the last. We didn't get the impression that they made it unnecessarily difficult for us on purpose, quite the opposite..."*

*"... very strict requirements, especially for financial reporting. They are even stricter than those of the European Commission. They (the Fund and the operators) probably have less confidence in the organisations in the country. After all, it's a sovereign fund and it has to meet the requirements of donor countries, so we are adjusting..."*

*"Every NGO should have or build capacity to handle the administrative part of the work. This is just a provocation from the Operator that we need to be prepared and have these skills because they are part and parcel of the functioning of an organization that works for the public interest."*

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*In-depth interviews with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 1*

The combination of well-structured application and reporting rules, regular competitive sessions that do not change cardinally but complement the priority objectives over the years, provide the opportunity for financial support in the "purest" form (on a competitive basis, without hidden/private donors), both to large, time-established organizations and smaller or newer ones, with longer or shorter planned projects.

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*"I had the feeling that this principle of application and reporting allows to objectively reach out for funding, both to large and well-known organizations, and to new ones that are just starting out as ideas. If you come up with a good and substantiated idea that meets the objectives of the priority, why not..."*

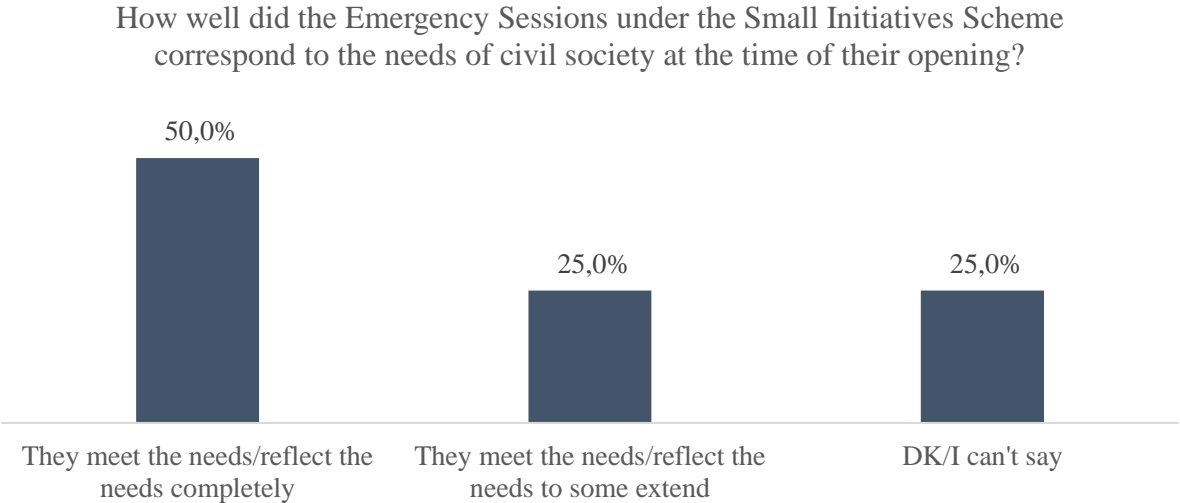
*"The Fund already has a "typical" and time-tested project selection mechanism. Priorities may not change completely, but the Operator always finds the balance between remaining constant over time and building on eligible activities so that there are more and more opportunities. This is what allows linkages and continuations between projects implemented under different thematic areas. It is also possible to follow up and build on the same initiative for which funding has been sought or implemented/maintained on a voluntary basis for years. In this regard, it is possible to fund small and large organisations with short or longer projects..."*

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*In-depth interviews with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 1*

The "flexibility" of the Programme in general, and of the thematic outcome in particular, is confirmed through the organisations' opinions on the two special sessions of the Small Initiatives Scheme, implemented with a focus on the consequences of the crisis related to the global pandemic of Covid-19 and the beginning of the war in Ukraine.

Figure 2. Relevance of Small Initiatives Scheme special sessions to the needs of civil society at the time of their opening (%)



Source: Results of a quantitative survey, for the purpose of the evaluation, among organisations, beneficiaries of the Programme and Thematic Priority 1

Half of the representatives implementing a TO1 project are of the opinion that the proposed emergency schemes completely meet the needs of civil society at the time of their launch. 25% agree to some extent and another 1/4 share that they have no direct observations and cannot evaluate their contribution. However, the role of the Fund in this context is highly appreciated because it enables the NGO sector to continue or expand its activities, in times of crisis, through "secure" funding. At the same time, these schemes place already known priority themes in a new context, which implies new problems/needs to which innovative solutions are sought.

Organizations that faced the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic and the onset of war in Ukraine during the implementation phases of an approved project at the start of these events report that the Fund Operator provides understanding and significant support when changes to already requested activities, extensions of implementation deadlines, financial adjustments, etc. are required. This also becomes an occasion for the beneficiary organisations to share positive feedback on the

cooperation and communication with the Fund Operator, and to identify any measures taken to transform, complement and adapt the thematic outcome in the specific context as relevant.

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*“This kind of funding means that many organisations can continue to operate in difficult times. The events themselves have led to the need to address new issues that we had not thought of. There was a need to talk and work on the issue of misinformation, for example... These schemes, I think, have given us (NGOs) the opportunity to take a kind of initiative and implement activities that are not normally typical for us.”*

*“We were personally affected by COVID-19 because the project included activities and site visits, which were practically impossible - this necessitated an extension of the project, but we managed to successfully complete everything we had set out to do. Undoubtedly, the Operator showed flexibility and understanding and came forward given our difficulties, and that is what made the implementation of this project so successful!”*

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*In-depth interviews with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 1*

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*“In our case, most of the activities coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic and suddenly it became very complicated. We couldn't imagine how we were going to implement all the planned activities and how to continue with the project at all... We had a constant communication and support from the people dealing with the thematic priority. The people we communicated with were very flexible and understanding of the situation we were in. They helped us tremendously and we adapted the project to the conditions in a marvellous way. In the end, we did not deviate from the objective or the results that we had set at the time of application.”*

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*Focus group with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 1*

## Effectiveness

The performance evaluation examines the extent to which the set expected results, indicators and targets have been achieved against the objectives of Thematic Outcome 1, how the funded projects have contributed to their achievement and what objective impact has been observed as a result of their implementation. The evaluation seeks to clarify the effectiveness of the thematic outcome as a whole, in terms of improving democratic culture and civic awareness, as well as to track the effectiveness of the Programme's management approach through the thematic outcome as a form of preferred funding.

Two years after the launch of the Active Citizens Fund Bulgaria programme, the combination of adverse circumstances resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ukraine military actions and persistent political uncertainty and instability are leading to significant contextual changes and giving rise to new problem areas and themes facing civil society and the whole sector in the country. The specific political environment makes it difficult to achieve key strategic priorities for Bulgaria, such as the adoption of the euro as the national currency and the country's integration into the Schengen area. The constant parliamentary turbulence and the short life of the governments in place delay the adoption of important reform packages related to the rule of law or the conditions for the adoption of the EU recovery plan. It is precisely the problems related to the vision of judicial reform, institutional integrity, media freedom that affect the civic space as a whole.

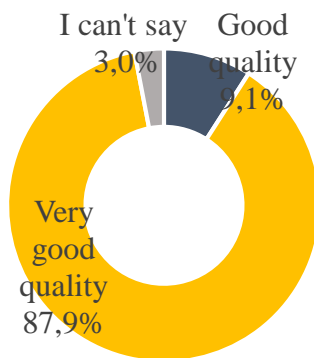
In this context, the EEA Grants continues to provide grants for the implementation of ideas and capacity development to a significant number of Bulgarian civil society organisations, transforming and adapting project management without significantly shifting the focus of priority objectives.

The achievement of the specific objectives and indicators of the thematic outcome "Strengthened democratic culture and civic awareness" is assessed through the specific objectives of the individual projects. The organisations financed by the Fund are achieving the targeted results, have completed or are in the process of finalising their projects and are managing their activities effectively.

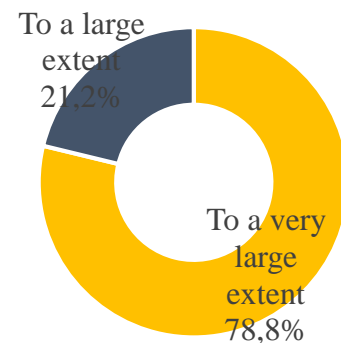
Despite the dynamic context, 87.9% of the TO1 funded organisations that participated in the evaluation survey were confident that they had achieved very high-quality projects. All respondents stated that the outcomes and outputs of the Active Citizens Fund funded project(s) have met their initial expectations and perceptions to a very large or large extent.

*Figure 3. Assessment of the quality of the funded project(s) and the extent to which they meet the initial expectations/perceptions of the supported organisations*

How would you rate the quality of implementation of the project/s financed by the "Active Citizens" Fund?



To what extent did the results and products achieved under the project/s financed by the ACF meet your initial expectations/ideas?



*Source: Results of a quantitative survey, for the purpose of the evaluation, among organisations, beneficiaries of the Programme and Thematic Priority 1*

The organisations on which this evaluation focuses have successfully implemented projects that address issues such as poverty and inequalities, housing policies, domestic crime, health issues, access to information, anti-discrimination and others. The projects have implemented activities to improve democratic culture, raise civic awareness and activism on important social and health issues; improve the degree of transparency and accountability of public institutions through continuous and broad discussion of access to information standards; and strengthen the role of civil society and its participation in problem solving through the development of long-term, appropriate municipal and national policies.

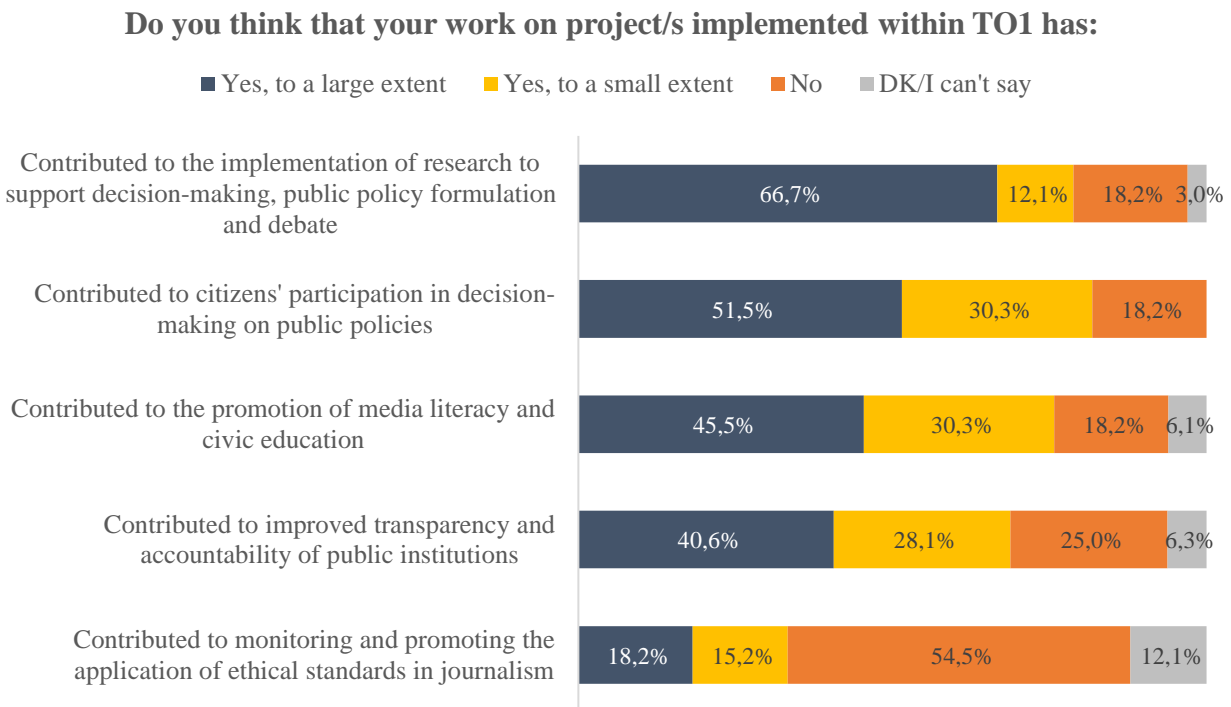
All objectives have been achieved by researching legislation, studying best practices, carrying out analytical work, participating in working groups and committees at local and national level, actively working with the media, drafting articles, publications and opinions, organizing and holding discussions, round tables, producing documents (reports, methodologies, manuals,



training materials) and online platforms on which to store, develop and disseminate all outputs over time.

The confidence with which all the organisations included in the evaluation speak about their projects is also reflected in their explicitness when it comes to the extent to which they have contributed to the main objectives of the thematic priority. Depending on the theme and scope of the project, respondents say that they have been able to contribute directly or indirectly to a large or small extent to the main priorities set out in the financial instrument. The highest proportion of respondents report that they have contributed to research on decision-making processes, public policy formulation and debate by citizens and improved the conditions for their participation in decision-making on issues of public importance. A total of 70% of the representatives surveyed said that they had also had an impact in terms of promoting media literacy and civic education and improving the conditions for transparency and accountability of public institutions. To a smaller extent, funded projects focused on the implementation of ethical standards in journalism.

Figure 4. Assessment of the impact of the implemented project(s) in relation to the objectives of the thematic outcome

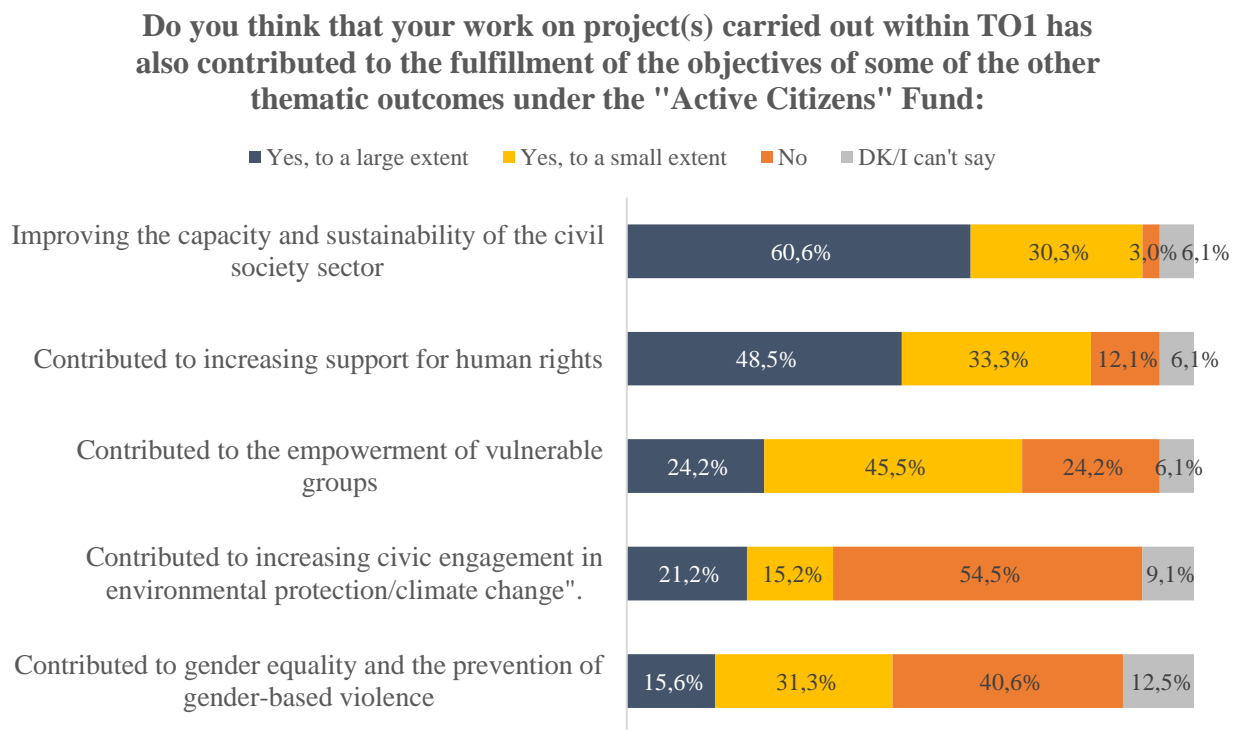


Source: Results of a quantitative survey, for the purpose of the evaluation, among organisations, beneficiaries of the Programme and Thematic Priority 1



In total, about 90% of the cases, the organizations consider their project as significant to improve/increase the capacity and sustainability of the civil society sector. 48.5% of the respondents consider that they address the issue of increasing support for human rights in large extent. 1/3 felt that this was happening to a small extent. Again, about 70% of those who received funding identified their projects as being effective in terms of empowering vulnerable groups, and another 1/4 said that this was happening to a very large extent. The themes of civic engagement in environmental protection/climate change and gender equality and gender-based violence prevention appear to be less prominent for the organisations in the survey.

Figure 5. Assessment of the impact of the implemented project(s) in relation to the objectives of another of the thematic outcomes under the Active Citizens Fund



Source: Results of a quantitative survey, for the purpose of the evaluation, among organisations, beneficiaries of the Programme and Thematic Priority 1

*“Both quantitatively and qualitatively we performed everything as we had set it, but some adaptations were necessary. Qualitatively, in terms of inclusion of the target groups, it was a bit problematic because of the political situation in the country. However, we set up a monitoring*

*system that was preceded by so much analytical and empirical work. We have involved many stakeholders and, despite the difficulties, I am convinced that we have contributed to the objectives of the whole programme.”*

*“There is practically no way that a successful project, in the sense of having successfully passed each stage of application and reporting, and with visible successful results, has not contributed to the objectives of the thematic priority. We have acted first and foremost on our personal objectives and understandings as NGOs, but ultimately, we have attributed them precisely to the Fund's outcomes”*

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*Focus group with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 1*

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*“Our organization, probably like many others, is an example of how the Fund and the TO cover many important issues that organizations working on behalf of the civic interest have been trying to fight for years. They are longstanding, but remain relevant today. So, I strongly believe that the Operator and the design of the Programme itself have managed to catch the pulse of the times and thus made things easier for us as well....”*

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*In-depth interviews with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 1*

The high performance and satisfaction in terms of achieving the project objectives and thematic outcomes, respectively, is confirmed by the high percentage of organisations that note that they have achieved results that were not initially planned or expected (36.4%). Among these, examples such as increased interest in the organisations themselves from various stakeholders and potential donors, who express willingness not only to use what has already been created by the funded project, but to provide financial support to develop and continue it, prevail. Another example shared is the sharing of results at international level. For organisations, this means recognition for a job well done on important and topical issues that are also being addressed beyond Bulgaria. Another unforeseeable outcome is the establishment of long-lasting contacts and networking among organisations and stakeholders with similar interests in different areas of civic participation.

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*“The fact that the local authorities of different localities showed interest in us and in the results of the project itself was something we did not expect. There was an interest and there was a continuation to build on everything we had done, which I think is more positive as an outcome than we had planned.”*

*“It was surprising to us when our results were shared by an international organisation that works on these concepts at a global level. They showed the Bulgarian context and experience. In our case,*

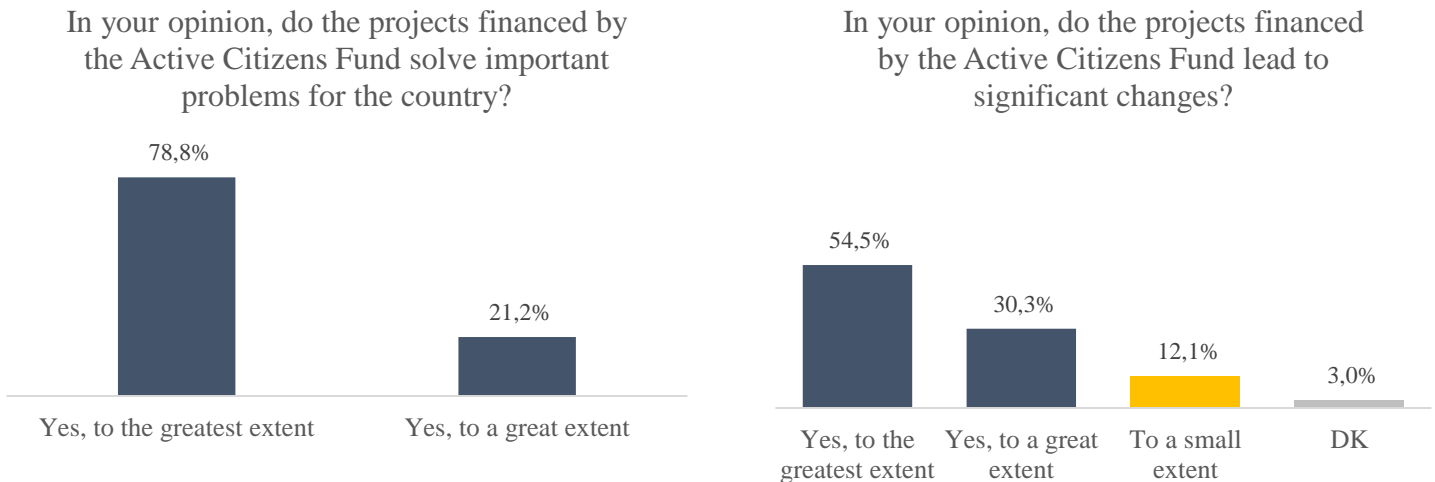
*we were able to showcase a job well done, and it was the sharing of it outside the country that was a sign that we had done our job well.”*

*“... unexpectedly for us we managed to influence the environment, we strengthened the communication with the political parties, we strengthened the internal communication with organizations that work on similar topics to those advocated in our work...we created a kind of network, which is good for our future work.”*

*Focus group with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 1*

Overall, the vast majority of civil society respondents believe that the projects that have received funding are designed to solve important problems for the country. However, when it comes to the extent to which the same projects bring about significant change, there is a diversity of responses. Rather, the proportion of those for whom change is happening to a very large extent declined at the expense of those who thought it was only possible to a small extent or chose not to give a specific answer. Yet, none of the respondents shared the view that the activities that received funding did not provoke any changes.

*Figure 6. Assessing the importance of the Active Citizens Fund in addressing important problems/issues for the country and contributing to significant change*



*Source: Results of a quantitative survey, for the purpose of the evaluation, among organisations, beneficiaries of the Programme and Thematic Priority 1*

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*“... By approaching the Fund, we recognized an opportunity to address a significant issue for Bulgarian civil society (civic awareness and activism). Of course, this problem has many interpretations and manifestations, but the way the thematic outcome was defined gave us a chance to show our approach to solving it...”*

*“I would like to say that the Fund itself has contributed to reforms in certain areas, but this is happening in the context of joint efforts and working with different institutions and other donors. They (the Fund) have been able to successfully fit into the activities that were needed by the civil sector and I think they have made a significant contribution, especially in terms of pushing forward ideas and proposals for national and local policy reforms.”*

*“... It is difficult to evaluate to what extent significant changes are achieved, because whatever we propose and however well we support it with arguments, passing a law, for example, is a very cumbersome and difficult job. It is quite enough for us that our efforts have given confidence and reassurance to the people that their voice can be heard, which was our ambitious task.”*

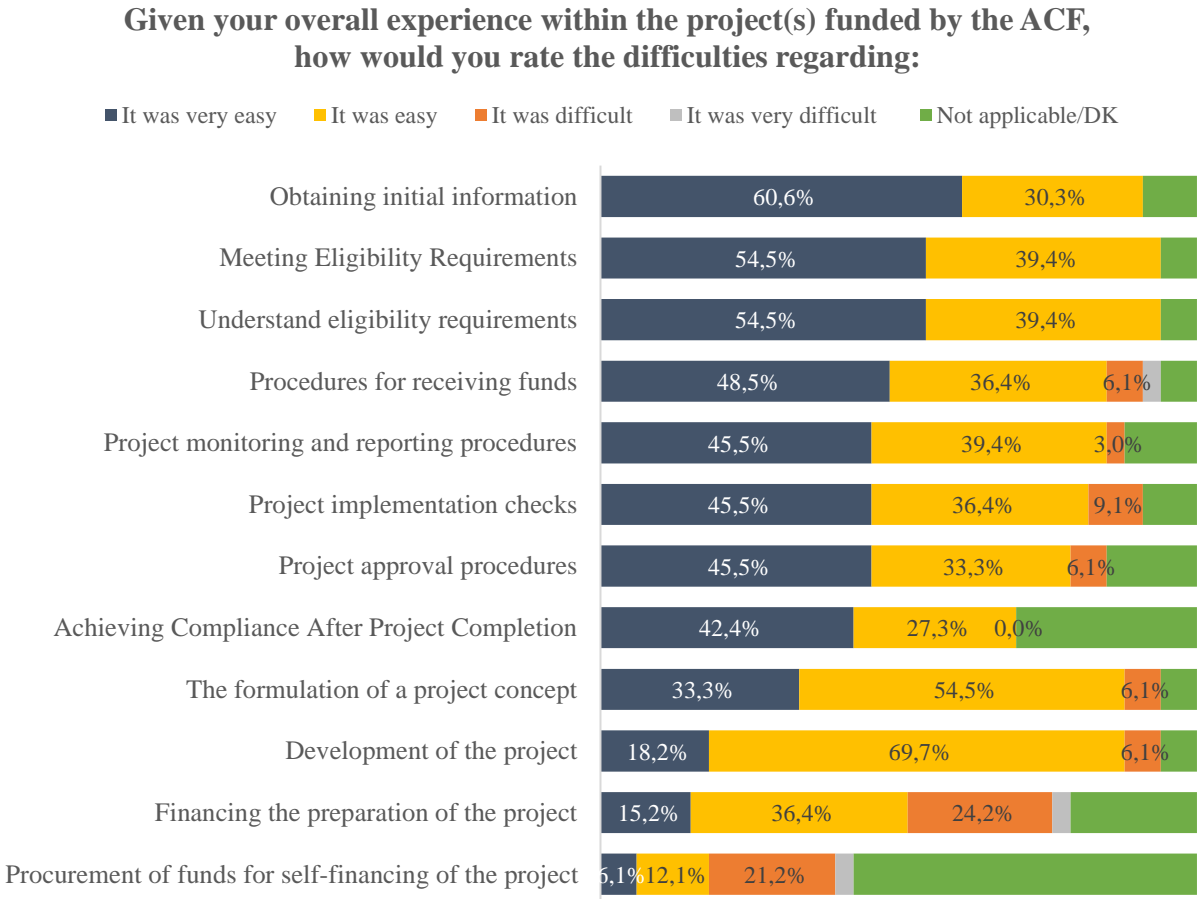
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*In-depth interviews with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 1*

Another favourable factor for the effective implementation of the projects funded under TO1 is the good and constant communication between the Operator and the supported organizations. The general perception is that the Fund Operator acts in a transparent and timely manner for the benefit of the beneficiaries and their work. Good results are prerequisite for providing comprehensive information and assistance at every stage of a project.

The overall experience of the organisations with projects funded by the Active Citizens Fund shows that they have not experienced any difficulties in initially accessing the necessary information about the Fund's financial instruments, understanding and meeting the eligibility requirements. However, formulating a project concept as well as developing it are among the more dynamic processes, and while respondents indicated that they did not experience much difficulty, they remained more moderate in their responses. Elements in which the Fund operators, as the controlling body, are predominantly in the lead are perceived by organisations as easier for themselves. These are, for example, project approval procedures, implementation checks, monitoring and reporting, and receipt of funds. Beneficiary organisations face the greatest difficulties in obtaining funds for the preparation of the project proposal and in self-financing the project when this is necessary.

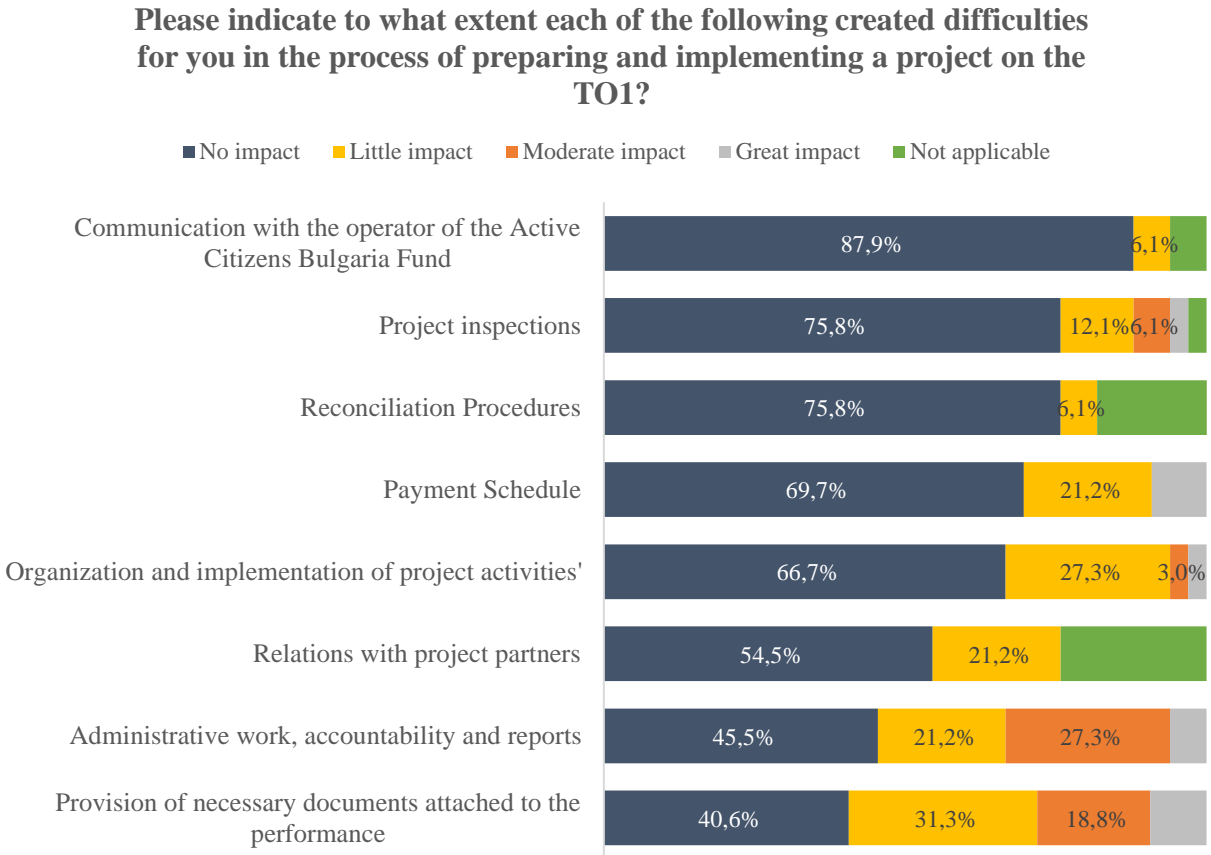
Figure 7. Assessment of the difficulties of the implementation stages of a project funded under the Active Citizens Fund



Source: Results of a quantitative survey, for the purpose of the evaluation, among organisations, beneficiaries of the Programme and Thematic Priority 1

The concrete experience from the work on the thematic priority supports and complements the feeling that an effective system of cooperation is being established between the Fund's decision-makers and the organisations receiving funding, which minimises the difficulties in the process of project preparation and implementation. Communication with the Fund Operator was rated as the most seamless. Even the procedures for checking and reconciling activities were not perceived as causing difficulties. Some difficulties, to the extent that they existed, were seen by the organisations in the activities they manage, such as organising project implementation activities, carrying out administrative work, reporting and reports, or initiating and maintaining relations with project partners.

Figure 8. Assessment of the difficulties in the preparation and implementation of a project funded under TO1



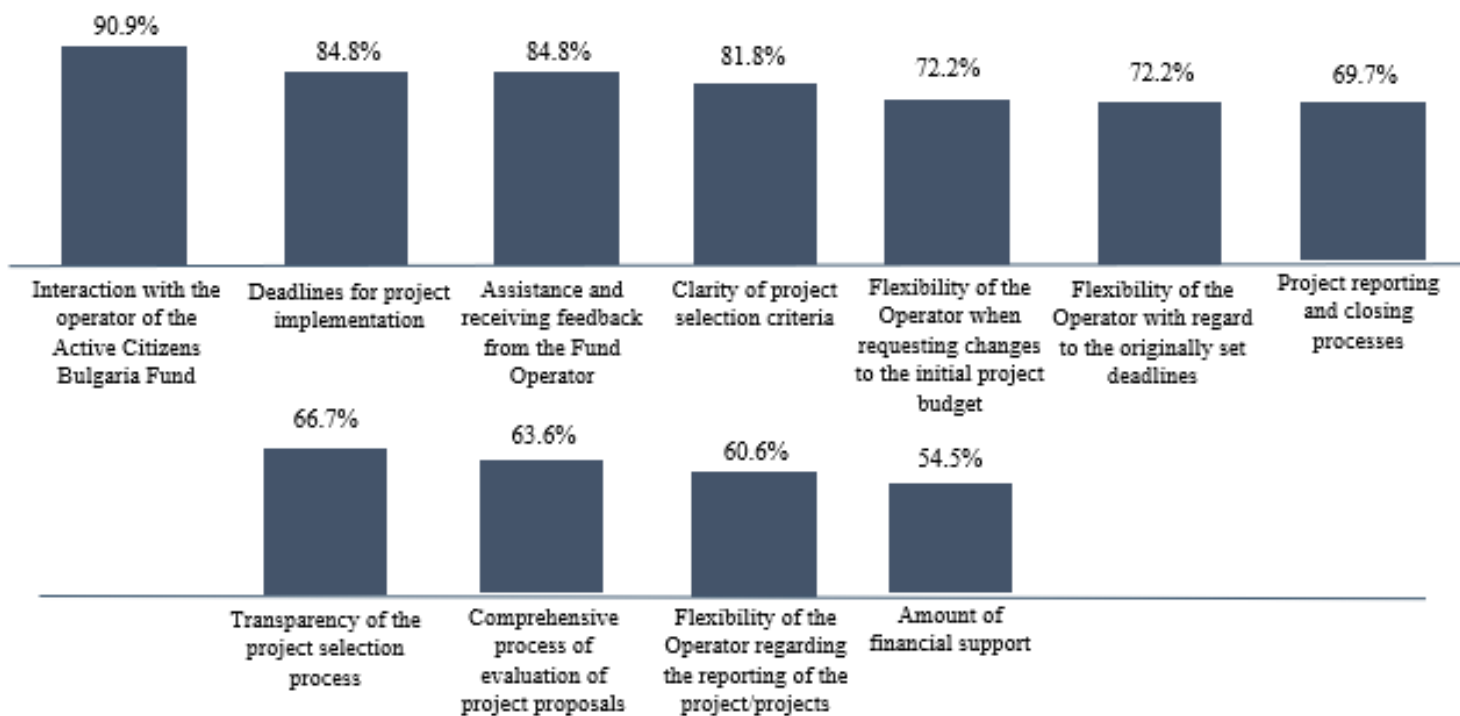
Source: Results of a quantitative survey, for the purpose of the evaluation, among organisations, beneficiaries of the Programme and Thematic Priority 1

Quite naturally, the organisations' satisfaction with the information, guidance and considerations provided by the Programme representatives on the application, selection and implementation processes is high.

If there are aspects that caused some difficulties to part of participant, these are administrative work, accountability and reports (affecting one third of beneficiaries), provision of necessary documents attached to the performance (28%) and payments schedule (9%).

Having in mind that the rest of the beneficiaries were positive and did not face difficulties, probably there is not much room for improvement. Nevertheless, support for some beneficiaries with low capacity or lack of experience can reduce the share of those that point out the above mentioned difficulties.

## Completely satisfied with...



Source: Results of a quantitative survey, for the purpose of the evaluation, among organisations, beneficiaries of the Programme and Thematic Priority 1

*“...it was important for us that we received all information in a timely manner. Even before the opening of the application schemes, we had the opportunity to participate in an annual meeting organised by the Fund to discuss the main issues...accordingly, these were set out in the priorities themselves.”*

*“Our practice is such that we normally work with this type of financing. We have experience and tend to develop capacity in writing projects. Yes, we have had to seek support and clarification, but we have never been refused....”*

*“We haven't had much difficulty. The Fund made sure that we had all the necessary information available even in advance. Throughout the project there was email communication, and when we needed to discuss something unclear on accounting documents or reports, we arranged calls and*

*meetings. They helped us all the way through to the end, with advice and recommendations, and we in turn sought feedback to make sure everything was as it should be...*

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*Focus group with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 1*

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*“In our case, we had some concerns around the transformation of some activities. Then we communicated with a gentleman from the Fund Operator. He was so kind and so dedicated in giving us the best advice, specifically for our project... As a relatively young team then, we relied on him constantly and trusted him so much that we had no worries to ask any question we had.”*

*“From the beginning, we knew the teams that manage the Fund. We were aware that they were experts we could rely on. They know the topics we are working on and have generally been in the field of civic affairs for years...we have not had any difficulties in communication, reporting or otherwise...”*

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*In-depth interviews with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 1*

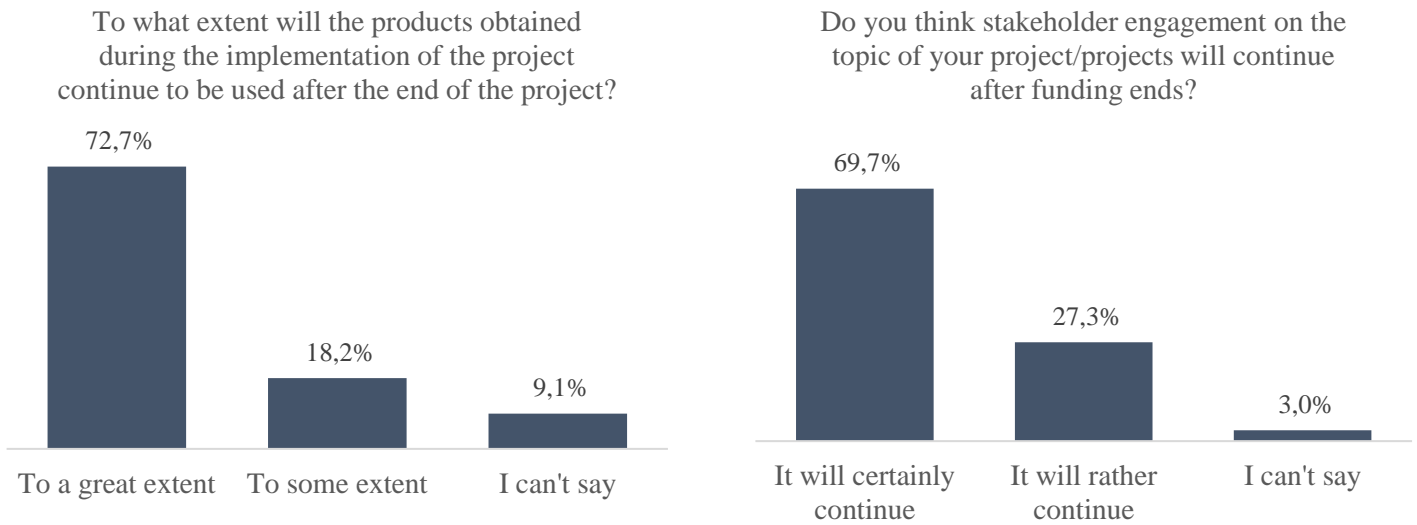
Based on the evaluation, we can conclude that there are several key characteristics of the civil sector in the country. Firstly, the organisations have well-trained staff and are able to develop good administrative and operational capacity that does not struggle to formulate and implement their goals and ideas effectively. Secondly, the design of the programme and the work of the Fund's operators create a well-functioning and transparent management system, built on mutual trust and communication between all parties involved, which undoubtedly leads to quality and meaningful results. Last but not least, the civil society sector in Bulgaria is experiencing the most significant problems and uncertainties when it comes to securing financial resources that remain available/unspent and serve as a "reserve" or "guarantee" for future funding.



## Sustainability

The projects under Thematic Outcome 1 have a positive impact on the target groups and the environment as a whole. The supported organisations strive to achieve sustainability of their results and continue to work on the same or similar themes with the targeted communities even after the projects have ended. The associations continue to develop gradually after the end of the programme funding and some of the activities already carried out continue to be expanded through other donors and funding sources.

*Figure 9. Assessment in terms of sustainability of the products obtained during the implementation of the projects and engagement of the stakeholders after the end of TO1 funding*



*Source: Results of a quantitative survey, for the purpose of the evaluation, among organisations, beneficiaries of the Programme and Thematic Priority 1*

For the majority of the organisations involved in the evaluation, the outputs generated during the project will continue to be used, as will the work and stakeholder engagement, beyond the end of the project. The thematic areas and issues that are addressed in the work of the supported organisations are thought of as sustainable over time and their development and upgrading continues beyond the end of funding. Most of the projects are cause-related and the work is ongoing. Based on the activities implemented, ideas for next actions are being shaped to seek funding beyond the EEA Grants.

According to project participants, promoting and improving cooperation and fostering partnerships with local and foreign organisations within the framework of the thematic outcome contributes to achieving sustainability. 18.2% of the non-profit organisations said that in their project they had partnered with an organisation from the countries that financed the fund (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway) and 69.7% relied on a Bulgarian partner. In more than 90 out of 100 cases, this type of cooperation had a positive impact on the implementation of the projects and the results they achieved.

For the vast majority of those who have sought a partner, the process of finding one is not thought of as difficult. Expectedly, finding like-minded people from Bulgaria was seen as easier, but usually even an international collaboration is preceded by already established partnerships through other activities or initiatives.

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*“...partner means for us a guarantee of sustainability of the achieved results. In addition, you are sure of the quality of the work. Your product (document, report, methodology) will be shown and even applied in other contexts, which is the goal of each of us...”*

*“... when you have found like-minded people who you have worked well with or you have seen that they can contribute to better achieving your goals, it is good to take advantage. The Fund provides such an opportunity and having a foreign organisation as a partner country for them is probably also a kind of guarantee of quality work...”*

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*Focus group with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 1*

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*“The topics we work on are causes. They are not sustainable and we cannot ignore everything we have achieved so far. We are always building on something achieved before us to expand and leave room for action after us.”*

*“The civil community is fragmented to some extent. Organisations know each other. They meet if they work on similar issues. We know each other's work because we take into account what has been done so far. So it was easy for us to choose a partner according to the activities we wanted to implement within the project.”*

*“Want it or not in the areas where we are struggling to improve the environment you cannot act alone. Many stakeholders are involved to achieve your goals and we have a mutual interest in becoming partners with them. To give you an example, to push through changes in the law, we*

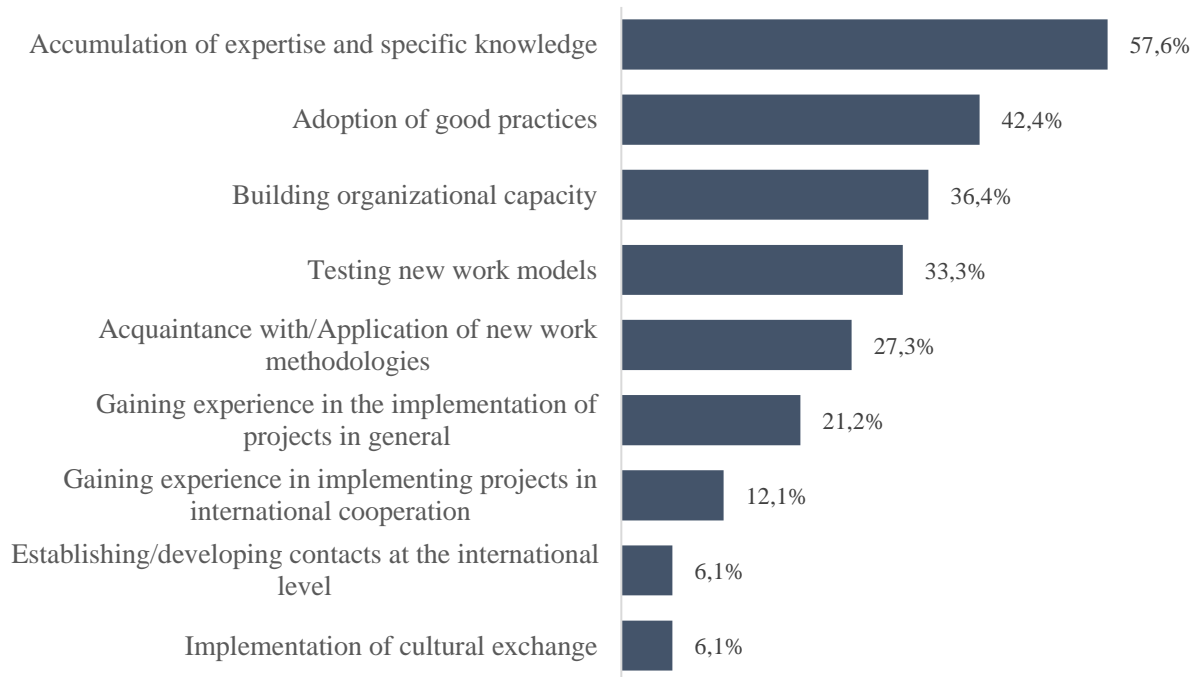
*have to work in collaboration with their committees, policy makers, citizens and expert communities...alone in such a struggle is impossible.”*

*In-depth interviews with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 1*

The benefits of the partnership ensure that work to address societal issues and priorities set by the thematic outcome continues. Some of the organisations' projects represent innovative approaches that have no equivalent in Bulgaria, and the results of some initiatives are disseminated internationally. The established cooperation is an opportunity to accumulate experience, exchange ideas and promote good practices used or to get help to solve a problem. In this way, the sustainability of the results achieved is again ensured.

*Figure 10. Benefits of implementing a partnership within the project/projects financed under the Active Citizens Fund*

**What were the benefits of implementing a partnership within the project/projects financed under the "Active Citizens" Fund for your organization?**



*Source: Results of a quantitative survey, for the purpose of the evaluation, among organisations, beneficiaries of the Programme and Thematic Priority 1*

According to the beneficiaries, the biggest risks to the sustainability of the activities carried out and the results of the projects are the impact of external factors such as the economic situation and

political changes. These influence the behaviour of target groups and the opportunities to reach them. Some of the organisations that have received funding have concerns about their partnerships with institutions due to the political changes that have taken place, but the work of the projects remains fruitful.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Thematic Outcome 1 funds successful and high-quality projects, which are usually a continuation or build on ideas that the supported organisations are already working on and are very familiar with. Starting from their usual objectives, activities and needs, applicant organisations report that through the funding mechanism provided by EEA Grants they are able to 'freely' and 'independently' develop project proposals according to their understanding.

Overall, the design of the Programme and the thematic area offer a flexible approach to the selection and award of targeted grant funding, and the well-established administration system contributes to the realisation of relevant and quality results.

The programme, through the perspective of those who have received funding under TO1, has responded quite appropriately and timely with the launch of the two special sessions of the Small Initiatives Scheme, implemented with a focus on the consequences of the crisis related to the global pandemic of Covid-19 and the beginning of the war in Ukraine. At the same time, the Operator of the Fund has provided understanding and substantial support when urgent changes related to restructuring of activities or implementation timelines occur as a result of force majeure circumstances.

TO1 project developers have successfully implemented projects that address issues such as poverty and inequalities, housing policies, domestic crime, health issues, access to information, anti-discrimination and others. The projects have implemented activities aimed at improving democratic culture, raising civic awareness and activism on important social and health issues; improving the degree of transparency and accountability of public institutions through continuous and broad discussion of access to information standards; strengthening the role of civil society and its participation in problem solving through the development of long-term, responsive municipal and national policies.

Many of the organisations included in the evaluation achieve results that can also be attributed to the other thematic outcomes of the Programme.

On the basis of the evaluation, it can be concluded that CSOs have qualified human resources that often combine more than one role in the processes of project formulation, implementation and effective management. The design of the thematic outcome and the work of the Fund's operators contribute to an effective and transparent management system built on mutual trust and communication between all parties involved, leading to the achievement of quality and meaningful results. The outputs of the supported projects will continue to be used, as will the work and engagement of the stakeholders, beyond the end of the funding, because the projects are cause-related and the work continues.

The recommendations made by those who have received funding under TO1 are in the direction of facilitating the technical reporting processes of project implementation. It is more difficult for organisations to dedicate human resources to be only responsible for reporting and administering the work done. For them, it makes more sense to make the reporting stages less frequent and to focus on the final reporting, because only towards the end of the project can its objective progress be monitored.

Another aspect to which the organisations involved in the evaluation pay particular attention is the retention of what they call the 'broad' model of defining thematic outcomes. Setting one guiding framework of objectives and indicators is perceived as a workable model that does not restrict the civil sector to define its needs differently. In the same context, attention to the 'conceptual' potential of a project proposal is also thought of as a good practice to create a more competitive environment between applicants for funding. In this way, activities and innovative practices will emerge that will achieve qualitative successes/outcomes that are difficult to predict.

## **Thematic Outcome No. 6: "Enhanced capacity and sustainability of the civil society sector including CSOs".**

The 2022 Annual Programme Report of the Fund Operator for Bulgaria describes that the total number of supported projects under Outcome 6 is 50 for the whole programme. In 2022, two contracts under the First Call for Strategic Projects were under implementation, both completed by the end of the year. Another 6 contracts under the Second Call for Strategic Projects launched in September 2020 were also under implementation. Extensions were requested and agreed for 2 strategic projects. In 2022, four small initiative projects under the third session were completed, and another 14 small initiative projects under the fourth session started implementation.

Most of the project promoters in this outcome work towards improving the environment for civic activities and the work of CSOs, creating and strengthening partnerships between CSOs and public/private organisations, developing or maintaining platforms and networks between CSOs, and improving citizens' awareness of the role of NGOs in society. Supported projects are often focused in areas, such as culture education, environment, health, civic monitoring, employment and entrepreneurship, data and information handling and others, which aims to improve the capacity of NGOs, to build the capacity of both non-profit and donor organizations and participating in capacity-building activities, including one-on-one mentorship sessions with experts, providing individual capacity-building support to anyone in need.

A main characteristic of the evaluation is that it is retrospective (subsequent, ex-post) and focuses on projects that have been completed at the time the evaluation starts and/or are in the process of being completed at the time of the assignment.

In this regard, the following conclusions and recommendations are made on the basis of quantitative and qualitative information gathered for the evaluation from organizations that have successfully implemented or are in the process of finalizing projects under Thematic Outcome No.6 "Enhanced capacity and sustainability of the civil society sector including CSOs".

## Relevance

Almost as soon as the Active Citizens Fund Bulgaria programme was launched, events of global significance emerged that imposed new pace and processes of development of civil society and CSOs in the country. The epidemic of Covid-19 and its effects, as well as the Russian invasion of Ukraine contribute to socio-economic turmoil, political instability, social exclusion, which confront the civil sector with emerging issues and problems that are being addressed.

Force majeure shifts the focus away from familiar forms of CSO functioning and they are forced to look for new sources of funding to engage in causes different from their usual ones.

In addition to the significant contextual changes, the study "Dynamics of the NGO Sector in Bulgaria", carried out by a team of the Open Society Institute - Sofia in December 2023, highlights the three most frequently mentioned problems facing the NGO activity. The lack of financial and material resources, insufficient support from the state for the sector and the lack of professionals with the necessary expertise emerge as persistent and increasing difficulties over time. However, it is the shortage of human resources that has emerged as the most acute problem over the last six years.<sup>4</sup>

In this regard, the availability of funding opportunities for projects under Thematic Outcome 6: "Enhanced capacity and sustainability of the civil society sector including CSOs", is essential for the development of the civil sector as a whole.

Similar to Thematic Outcome 1, the relevance of Thematic Outcome 6 is assessed through the relevance of the implemented projects. The organisations covered by the evaluation implemented a wide range of activities and initiatives to improve the capacity of CSOs. Each of them identified a topical issue to improve, taking as a reference their experience and expertise. Once the problem is identified and referred to the thematic indicators and objectives, it becomes relevant and consistent with the objectives of the programme.

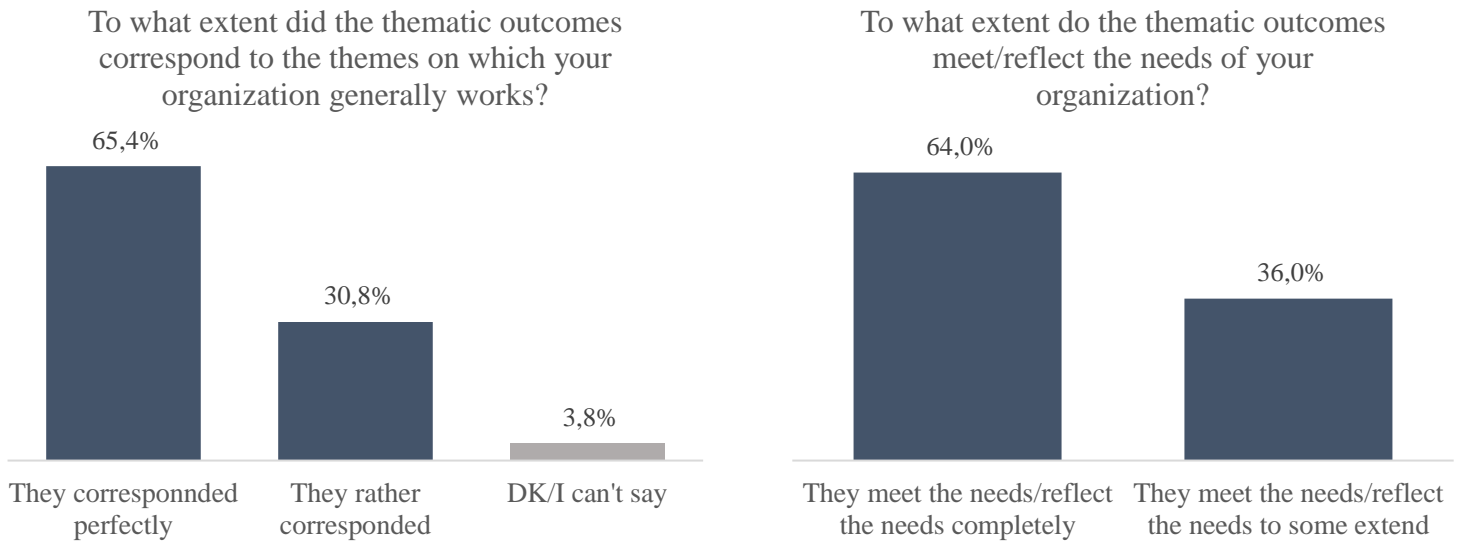
The results of the evaluation survey show that 65.4% of the organisations that have implemented a TO6 project find a good alignment between the objectives of the priority and those of the

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<sup>4</sup> "Dynamics of the NGO Sector in Bulgaria", Open Society Institute – Sofia, December 2023

organisation itself. In addition, the majority of project promoters said the outcome they chose perfectly or rather correspond with the needs of the NGO implementing the project.

Figure 11. Relevance of the thematic priority of the topics and the needs of the organisation implementing the project(s) (%)



Source: Results of a quantitative survey, for the purpose of the evaluation, among organisations, beneficiaries of the Programme and Thematic Priority 6

The understanding that the thematic outcome and the projects it funds are relevant is complemented by the narratives of the organisations that participate in focus groups and in-depth interviews. Some of them share feedback from their beneficiaries, interpreting their participation in the project as a recognition of the importance of the outcomes it sets out to achieve. The broad scope of most initiatives and the practical application of lessons learned in the course of the projects were perceived as evidence of their relevance as well.

*“I can quote feedback from CSO representatives who participated in our mentoring program to develop skills in fundraising, communication and building partnerships with businesses...What we received as feedback is that funding CSOs is one of the biggest issues. In this regard, all organizations need to improve skills in this area. This includes improving their skills to communicate externally, i.e. to present their work so that what we do is understood and accepted by people.”*

Focus group with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 6



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*“We believe that we have implemented a useful project that addresses a relevant issue. We have not only quantitatively achieved the indicators we had set, we have exceeded them. We were able to involve more volunteers in our initiatives related to disaster and crisis work.”*

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*In-depth interviews with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 6*

An additional support that the thematic outcome reflects the problems and needs of its target groups comes from the personal experience of supported organisations in implementing projects that aim to enhance and develop their own capacity. Such an opportunity has existed since the first calls for proposals were launched, and has been developed and transformed with significant force during the special sessions of the Small Initiatives Scheme. Starting out as a tool to fund activities that organisations could not normally allocate funds to, the thematic outcome provides a resource to introduce innovative methods and techniques to improve the capacity of the civil sector on emerging themes such as tackling misinformation, encouraging donor and fundraising in the context of war and migration processes.

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*“When we applied, we saw an opportunity to receive funding for activities that would create a framework for positioning an NGO that was new at the time. Thanks to the funding, we created our strategy, a communication strategy, implemented analyses for working with municipalities and working with donors; we also consulted a lawyer thanks to the project. There was also the adaptation of contracts, financial and annual reports, because until that moment we had neither the capacity nor the money to pay this work to a specialist...”*

*“The thematic outcome meant for us a chance to reach out to something bigger, both in terms of funding, in terms of activities to implement, in terms of influence, and above all in terms of capacity development. We were aware that our project ideas were good, but having already won the funding, we knew that all our work had to take on a more professional look... we implemented development trainings for ourselves as well, and somehow this challenged us and gave us a chance to have the confidence of no longer being beginners in the work”*

*“In the face of uncertainty and crisis, we ourselves did not know where to head. Just then, the topic of disinformation emerged as an opportunity for a project to receive funding, in exactly the right context, when fake news became a very pressing issue, especially for the civil sector. We immediately recognised this topic as something we needed to develop as a skill to be able to be useful to civil society...”*

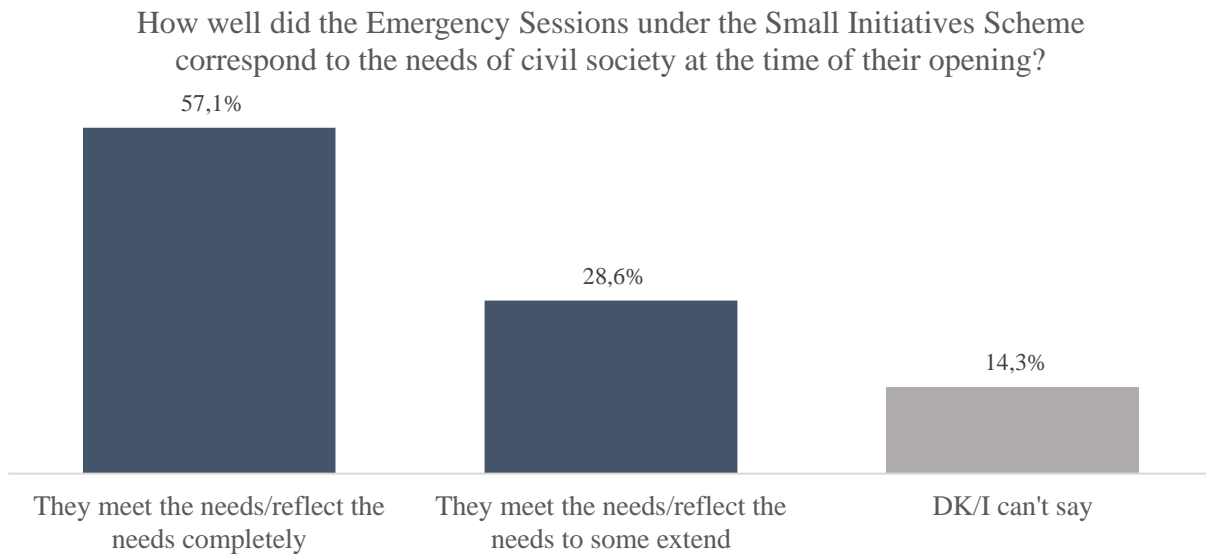
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*“...when the large flows of Ukrainian women and children into the country began, we personally felt the chaos that ensued in the civilian sector. Chaotically, forces began to be harnessed in a disorganized collection of funds and in-kind donations that could not lead to anything useful and lasting. It was then that the Fund's opportunity came and we concentrated our efforts on how to encourage and at the same time protect the donor community in a time of crisis.”*

*In-depth interviews with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 6*

The relevance of the priority objectives and the flexibility in the approach of the Workshops for Civic Initiatives Foundation as the administering organisation under the two Emergency Sessions under the Small Initiatives Scheme are highly appreciated. More than half of the respondents agreed that the two Sessions fully reflected the needs of civil society at the time of their opening, and 28.6% agreed that this was the case, but to some extent.

*Figure 12. Relevance of Small Initiatives Scheme special sessions to the needs of civil society at the time of their opening (%)*



*Source: Results of a quantitative survey, for the purpose of the evaluation, among organisations, beneficiaries of the Programme and Thematic Priority 6*

In a context of political and economic instability, military action and shifting social layers, the Fund enables the civil sector to continue its activities. At a time when regular sources of funding are being pulled back or redirected, through proceeds from private donors or donations, the EEA Grant remains one of the leading financial mechanisms for supporting CSOs.

*“The response of the Fund related to the two crises was essential, because it allowed a lot of organizations to get involved, to continue their activities, implementing a project through funding. Our personal experience of the emergency scheme is that if you had asked me three days before the scheme was launched whether we would have dealt with the issue of misinformation in this way, my answer would have been no! These schemes have enabled us to focus on activity that is extremely useful but never has the time, capacity or resources left for it....”*

*“In the situation surrounding the Covid pandemic, for example, many organisations have been forced to limit or outright stop their activities. We also felt that donors now had a different focus, and most funds were redirected to other more urgent and shorter-term giving campaigns. Then came the response from the Fund and we were confident that we could continue to work in the same 'urgent' and very 'pressing' issues, thanks to a funding.”*

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*In-depth interviews with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 6*

The Fund Operator also responds flexibly to urgent changes or transformations of already fixed activities of projects approved for funding, before the processes and restrictions related to the epidemic of Covid-19, for example. The constant communication and general possibility to make changes reinforces the feeling of the funded organisations that the design of the thematic priority and the programme is made to reflect the needs of the beneficiaries at any given moment.

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*“In the wake of the Corona virus pandemic, we have had difficulty implementing some of our activities that were intended to happen face-to-face. We had to ask for a 2-month extension to the project. The Operator's response was positive and it was immediately after we sent the request. It was handled with a partnership attitude. We felt that the people across the table were well intentioned and wanted to help, not harm. Not all programs are like that. I've had programs where they are just waiting to catch you in a mistake. There wasn't that feeling here...”*

*“Our project was also during and shortly after Covid. There were also activities planned related to live meetings, training and travel, which we managed to transform into more period-appropriate activities without any problem. We met with full understanding from the Operator. They were flexible, understanding and looking for efficiencies that would lead to an end result.”*

*“When we wrote the project proposal, it was just after the start of the war in Ukraine. The needs of the refugees then were of one nature - more provision of shelter, food and similar primary needs. Already in the aftermath, the approval process, the signing of the contract - things have shifted a bit over the months and the needs have changed quite a bit. When we started the project, we also talked to the experts from Active Citizens Fund that we would have to change the activities that we were*

*implementing. I.e. we will not deliver food packages, as originally planned, but we focused on information and counselling services for refugees so that they integrate more easily. We did several lectures related to education, health, and several campaigns targeting them. This was extremely well received by the Operator. We have people on the other side who want the project to happen and are supporting the whole process for this.”*

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*Focus group with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 6*

Last but not least, the supported organisations find the programme design and rules relevant to their expectations and needs. There is a positive perception that the design of the thematic outcome is presented in a clear and accessible way, and that special efforts have been made to ensure that all relevant information is available at the right time. Positive assessments were also shared regarding the administration system, which is made up of familiar terms and conditions and requirements for grant scheme proposals. Where there are uncertainties, these are addressed through constant communication between beneficiaries and the Operator or through information provided through clarification campaigns or live Q&A sessions.”

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*“...we have a larger project, the so-called strategic projects, which presumably involve organisations that are experienced, that are used to planning large projects and dealing with donor requirements. So, for us it was no problem. I had a very good impression of the guidelines, that it was obvious that someone had made a serious effort to make them very clear.”*

*“There were no problems in the preparation and implementation of the project. We are also particularly pleased with the personal contact we had with the representatives of the administrators. Both at the meeting in Bankya and afterwards, we talked about the project quite extensively, through individual meetings and email correspondence.”*

*“... as far as we have experience with such larger projects, this was one of the best explained. I wouldn't say the requirements were very easy, more of the more serious ones. But everything was very clearly explained. We had to ask questions several times, we got the answer within literally 15 minutes.”*

*“Perhaps the Fund (ACF) is one of the most well-designed programmes, and in the case of a crisis, as was the case with the refugee wave. Many funds have opened in crisis, but they have been much more poorly administered. I mean, what is required in terms of documents from applicants, in terms of information and objectives in general. The Active Citizens Fund had quite a stable structure. We always had someone to answer questions and if we missed something they gave us a chance to fill it in...”*

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*Focus group with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 6*

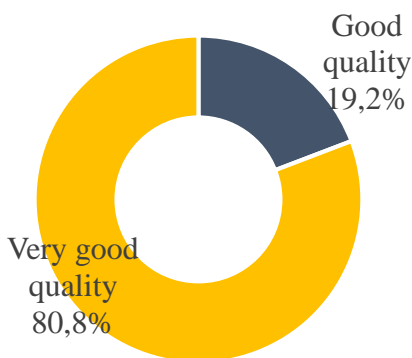
### Effectiveness

The evaluation focuses on the extent to which the set project results, indicators and targets have been achieved, and to what extent they are in accordance with Thematic Priority 6 "Enhanced capacity and sustainability of the civil society sector including CSOs". What objective impact is observed as a result of their implementation and to what extent do they contribute to significant changes and patterns in the civil society sector (including changes in norms/standards, national policies, practices, ideas and beliefs).

The supported organisations that are the subject of the evaluation are adamant that they have achieved very high quality in the implementation of their projects. Successfully passing all reporting stages to the Operator and achieving more than the expected quantitative results compared to the indicators stated in the inception phase are criteria for high effectiveness of the work done.

*Figure 13. Assessment of the quality of the funded project(s) and the extent to which they meet the initial expectations/perceptions of the supported organisations*

How would you rate the quality of implementation of the project/s financed by the "Active Citizens" Fund?



To what extent did the results and products achieved under the project/s financed by the ACF meet your initial expectations/ideas?



*Source: Results of a quantitative survey, for the purpose of the evaluation, among organisations, beneficiaries of the Programme and Thematic Priority 6*

Through the funding received, projects have been implemented in order to focus on improving the capacity and resilience of CSOs by increasing public trust in them, introducing innovative forms of engaging different social groups as advocates for democratic values and the rights of vulnerable groups, strengthening the civic sector and building skills to respond more effectively to the new challenges following the Covid pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

All the objectives were achieved through thematic civic campaigns to improve citizens' awareness of the role of NGOs, trainings, meetings, discussions. Online platforms, portals and social media channels have been created to showcase good practices, innovative models and the effects of CSOs' work in the country.

Regardless of the theme, scope and period of implementation of the project, the respondents share that they were able to directly contribute to the achievement of the main priorities set out in Thematic Outcome 6. The highest proportion of respondents reported that they had contributed to improving the capacity of CSOs (92.0%). In more than 80 out of 100 cases, respondents reported that through their project they had contributed to improving citizens' awareness of the role of NGOs in society, and the creation and strengthening of partnerships between CSOs and public/private organisations. To a small extent, the supported organizations report their impact in terms of creating the maintenance of platforms and networks between CSOs, with 32% of respondents noting that they do not contribute to this objective, rather they do not have any activities planned that correspond directly or indirectly to it.

Figure 14. Assessment of the impact of the implemented project(s) in relation to the objectives of the thematic outcome



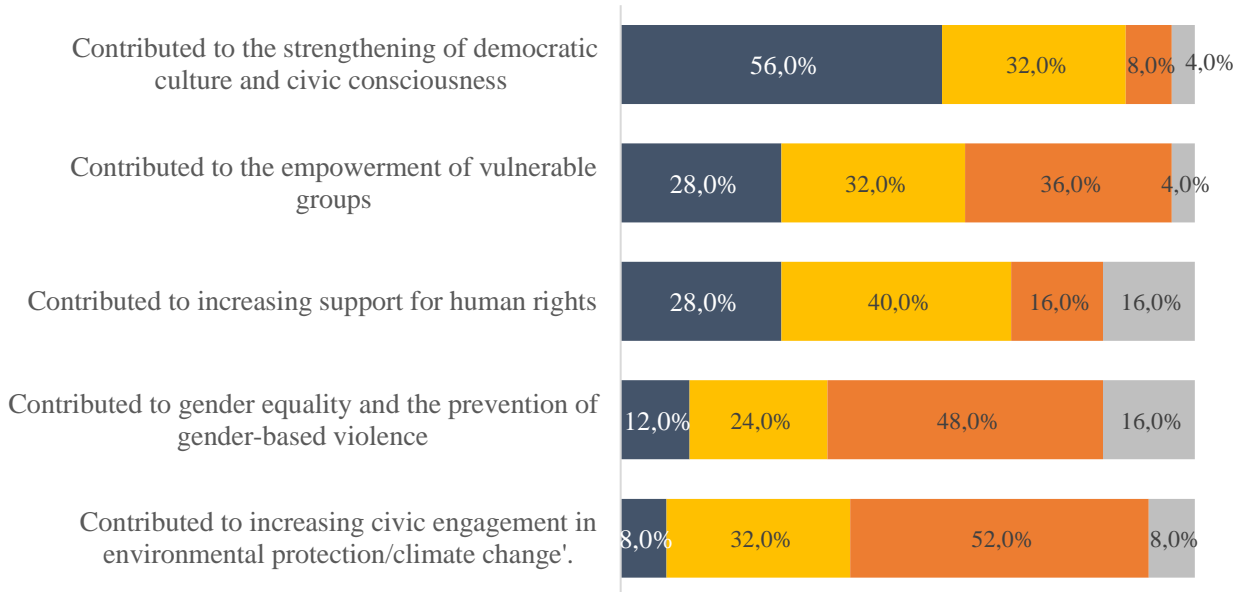
Source: Results of a quantitative survey, for the purpose of the evaluation, among organisations, beneficiaries of the Programme and Thematic Priority 6

In terms of the other thematic priorities, within the Active Citizens Fund, a total of 80.8% of the representatives of the organisations also identified their project as significant for strengthening democratic culture and civic consciousness. 68.0% contributed through their activities to increasing support for human rights, and 60% achieved results related to the empowerment of vulnerable groups. To a significantly lesser extent, projects funded under the priority "Enhanced capacity and sustainability of the civil society sector including CSOs" contribute to the themes of gender equality and prevention of gender-based violence or civic engagement in environmental protection/climate change, which are set out in TO4 and TO5.

Figure 15. Assessment of the impact of the implemented project(s) in relation to the objectives of another of the thematic outcomes under the Active Citizens Fund

**Do you think that your work on project(s) carried out within TO6 has also contributed to the fulfillment of the objectives of some of the other thematic outcomes under the "Active Citizens" Fund:**

■ Yes, to a large extent   ■ Yes, to a small extent   ■ No   ■ DK/I can't say



Source: Results of a quantitative survey, for the purpose of the evaluation, among organisations, beneficiaries of the Programme and Thematic Priority 6

*“We don't know the details of the targets set for the other thematic areas, but having recalled them as names/formulations, I can say that our work has direct results that apply to them as well. This is one advantage of the programme as a whole. It's as if the model is made so that there is a link between all the thematic areas and calls. In this way, the projects and the work done are complemented and built upon, and the Fund itself becomes a collection point or archive of so many valuable results and achievements...”*

*“... it would not be possible to have applied for, implemented and reported on a project that is not in line with the objectives of the financial mechanism. We probably can't meet every target indicator, but my recollection is that our activities covered most of them...”*

Focus group with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 6



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*“I remember the moment when we were choosing exactly which priority to apply for. We already had the idea, based on our experience, that we would work on the issue of tackling hate speech, with vulnerable groups and young people, but we realised the need that we ourselves also needed to develop specific skills. So, yes, certainly our project can be referred to another priority...”*

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*In-depth interviews with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 6*

The high effectiveness and satisfaction of the beneficiary organisations, in terms of the results achieved and the objectives of the projects, is also reflected by the comparatively high percentage of representatives who note that they have achieved results that were not initially planned or expected (42.3%). These are most often related to exceeding the number of quantitative results originally set for implementation for each of the thematic indicators of the priority. In a number of cases, there are examples of additional results that enhance the quality of the work done under the projects.

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*“... In our project we tested some new formats and we were not sure if we would meet our indicators, but in the end we even managed to exceed them. For example, in previous periods we have only done the mentoring programme with one organisation, and now we decided to test the approach of bringing more organisations together so they could share experiences with each other. This turned out to be a very good format and worked very well. As an indicator, I can say that 30 organisations were set to be covered and we managed to cover 44”*

*Of everything we had set out to do, all of our metrics were increased. It was an unexpected success for us that we couldn't have predicted at the beginning. We are proud of the target groups covered and are pleased to tell of these achievements of ours. “*

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*Focus group with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 6*

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*“We have even achieved more than we had envisaged, despite changing the nature of the activities a little. We created a humanitarian corps to provide services to Ukrainians. This corps is made up of people of Ukrainian origin who have lived in Bulgaria for many years. So, they know the language very well. This contributed to achieving more than expected, as they were personally involved and worked a lot to spread the word about the project and continue to this day.”*

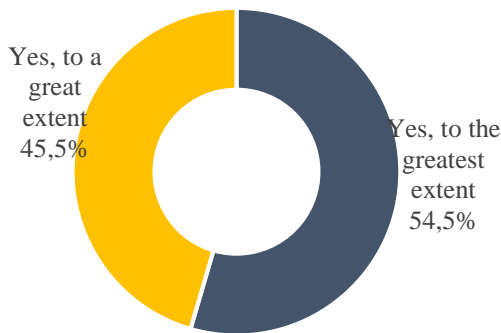
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*In-depth interviews with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 6*

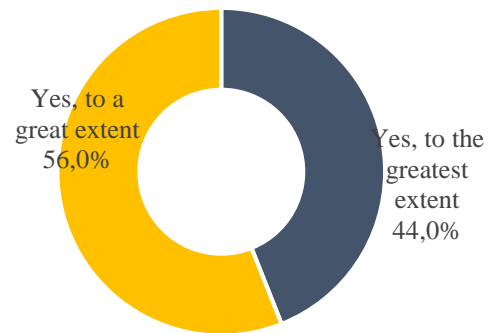
Participants in the survey are adamant that the projects that have received funding from the Active Citizens Fund contribute to solving important problems for the country. Not only do they work towards improving the civil society sector, but according to the respondents, the projects that have been implemented have led to significant changes to a great (56%) or greatest (44%) extent.

Figure 16. Assessing the importance of the Active Citizens Fund in addressing important problems/issues for the country and contributing to significant change

In your opinion, do the projects financed by the Active Citizens Fund solve important problems for the country?



In your opinion, do the projects financed by the Active Citizens Fund lead to significant changes?



Source: Results of a quantitative survey, for the purpose of the evaluation, among organisations, beneficiaries of the Programme and Thematic Priority 6

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*“As far as the NGO sector is concerned, there will always be a need for such funding. We are facing an ever-growing mistrust and suspicion, despite all our efforts. Only this kind of funding, which gives us the freedom to pursue our goals as we understand them, can bring about significant changes, both within CSOs themselves and in society...”*

*“The Fund and its objectives are fully relevant to the times in which we live. They even go a little bit beyond the present moment and I will give you a simple example...when we were working on the issue of violence and hate speech, the case of the girl who was cut with a mock knife happened...we were already working on the issue and it came out in the public domain...I mean, our feeling then was that the Fund was groping and even sensing what was coming, even in the form of policies. It remains to be seen how they will incorporate and anticipate the role of AI in a future funding, because undoubtedly the Fund by nature can set general policies in the country.”*

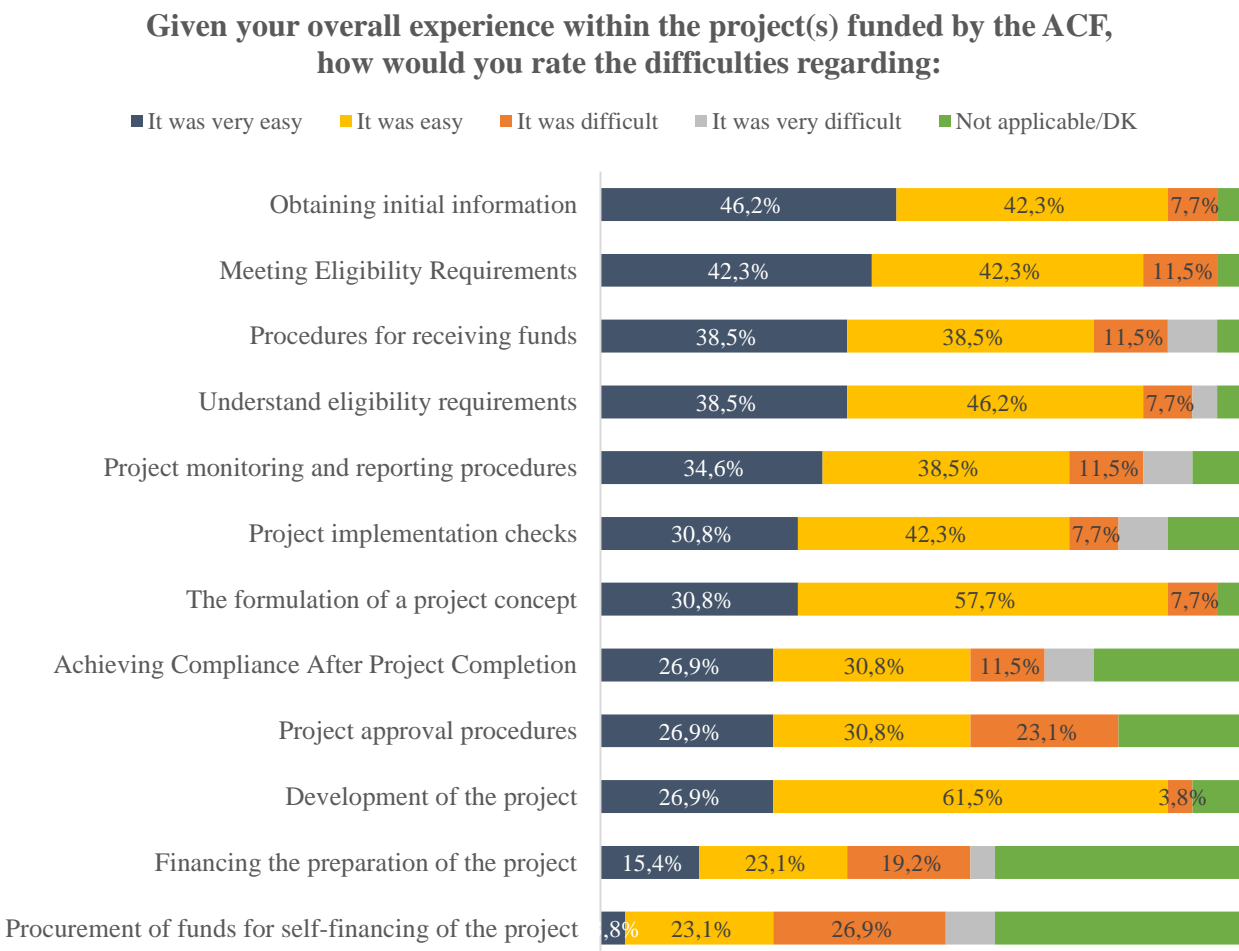
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*In-depth interviews with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 6*

Another favourable factor for the effective implementation of projects funded under TO6 is the access to information and timely feedback from the Operator to the organisations implementing the projects. The general perception is that the Fund Operator has set up a clear system for project administration and management, not stopping to maintain effective communication with the organisations at each stage of the implementation of the activities.

The experience of the organisations shows that they did not experience any difficulties in initially accessing the necessary information about the Fund's financial instruments, understanding and meeting the eligibility requirements. The formulation of the project concept as well as its development were also identified as easy for the vast majority of CSOs that received funding. The processes related to meeting the Fund Operator's expectations (performance checks and reporting), which are usually accompanied by caution and concern, were rated as unproblematic for the majority of the organizations supported under the TO6. Similar to the situation for those receiving funding under TO1, the greatest difficulty encountered by the organisations was in securing funds for the preparation of the project proposal and self-financing the project, where this is a mandatory requirement/criterion for applying for the grant funding.

Figure 17. Assessment of the difficulties of the implementation stages of a project funded under the Active Citizens Fund

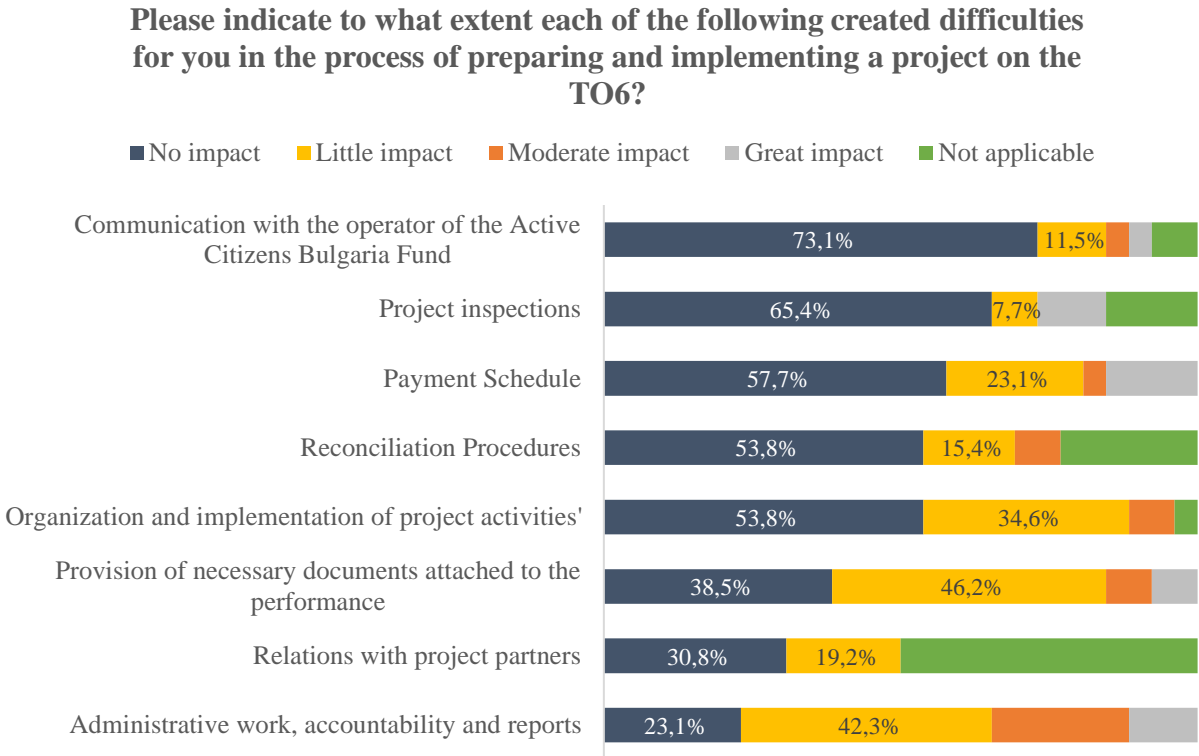


Source: Results of a quantitative survey, for the purpose of the evaluation, among organisations, beneficiaries of the Programme and Thematic Priority 6

With regard to the work under Thematic Priority 6, it is shared that an effective system of cooperation and mutual trust is being established between the Operator's representatives and the organisations that have received funding, which minimises difficulties in the process of project preparation and implementation. More than half of the respondents do not experience difficulties in communicating with the Fund Operator. The procedures for checking and coordinating activities and allocating funds were also not perceived as difficult. Some difficulties, to the extent that they existed, were seen by organisations in the activities they manage, such as organising project

implementation activities, carrying out administrative work, reporting and reports, or initiating and maintaining relations with project partners, where these existed.

Figure 18. Assessment of the difficulties in the preparation and implementation of a project funded under TO6

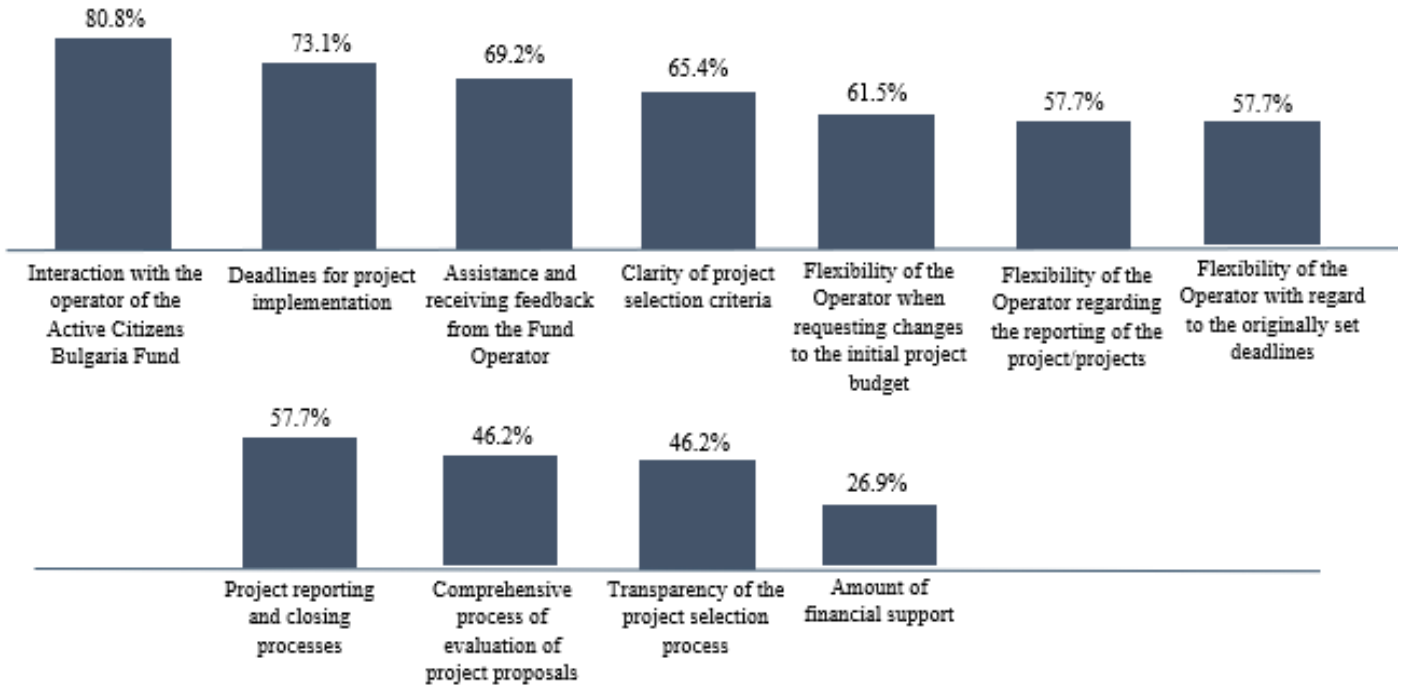


Source: Results of a quantitative survey, for the purpose of the evaluation, among organisations, beneficiaries of the Programme and Thematic Priority 6

In this context, organisations' satisfaction with the overall interaction, information, guidance and feedback provided by the Fund Operator is high. Satisfaction is also high with regard to the flexibility of the administrators when changes are needed to the originally set timelines, requests for changes to the original project budget and the reporting of the project(s) itself. Organisations remain more moderate in their assessment in terms of transparency of the selection process and the overall evaluation process of project proposals, which probably remain 'more hidden' or unclear to them.

Figure 19. Satisfaction with various indicators related to the implementation of project(s) funded under the Active Citizens Fund

**Completely satisfied with...**



Source: Results of a quantitative survey, for the purpose of the evaluation, among organisations, beneficiaries of the Programme and Thematic Priority 6

“Essentially, CSOs function mainly through this type of funding. We look for mechanisms and we apply, so we know this way of working. And here the system is not much different. There are a lot of requirements, especially in terms of accountability, but that's quite in order...”

“Everything needed in terms of information was provided and explained in detail at various events. Already in the process of writing up the project proposal, we asked a few questions and got the best explanation - a recommendation of what would work best in our case and how...”

“...Let us not forget that the Fund has changed its name over the years, but it essentially follows one model of operation. We know their system from before, perhaps that is why we had no difficulty...”

Focus group with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 6

*“All the time we met understanding and a friendly attitude. We maintained constant communication and did not hesitate to ask questions. The most difficult for us were the reporting forms because we encountered them for the first time, our team did not have an expert to deal only with the financial part...we had to make corrections several times, but they happened not because we had made a mistake in spending the money, but because we did not know exactly how to prove the expenses...we encountered full cooperation from the Operator...”*

*“We weren't particularly worried about reporting. Everything was described clearly enough and the forms, although quite detailed, were somewhat simplified. There was a footnote explanation for everything, an example, and if we had missed to apply a proof somewhere, we had the opportunity for corrections...”*

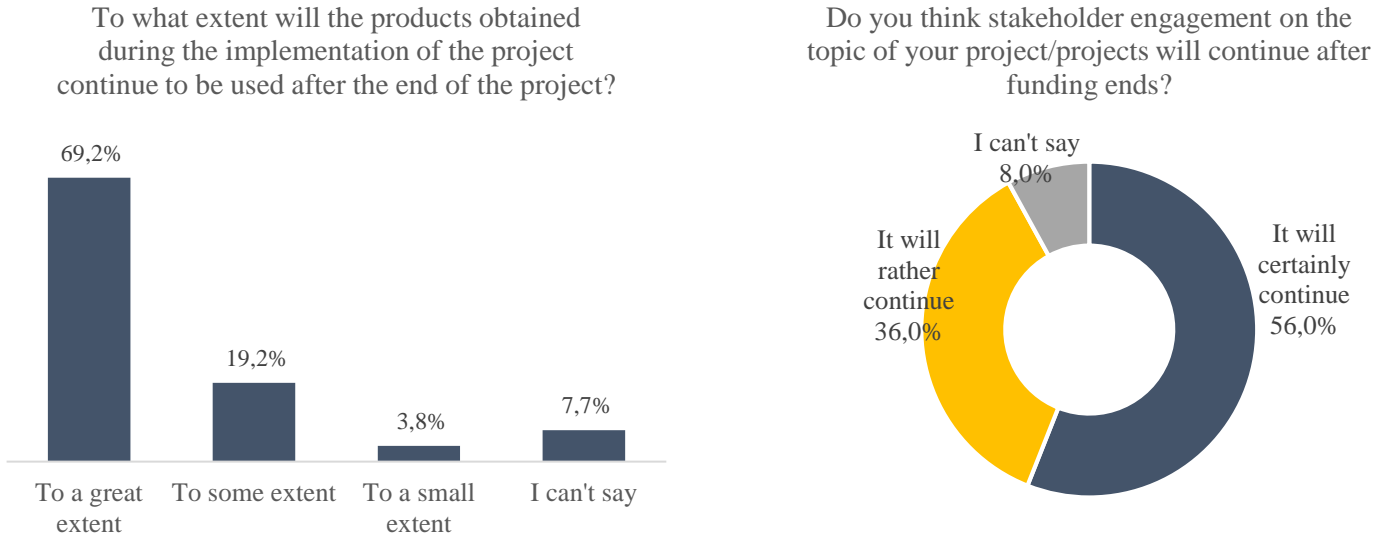
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*In-depth interviews with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 6*

## Sustainability

Under Thematic Priority 6, projects have been implemented that have a positive impact on the target groups and improve the capacities of the civil sector as a whole. Supported organisations strive to achieve sustainability of their results and continue to work with the same target groups and communities to enhance the capacity of CSOs even after the projects have ended. Associations gradually develop beyond the end of the programme funding and some of the activities already carried out are built on/extended thanks to other donors and funding sources.

Figure 20. Assessment in terms of sustainability of the products obtained during the implementation of the projects and engagement of the stakeholders after the end of TO6 funding



Source: Results of a quantitative survey, for the purpose of the evaluation, among organisations, beneficiaries of the Programme and Thematic Priority 6

The majority of the organisations involved in the evaluation shared the understanding that the outputs generated by the project will continue to be used, as will the work with similar target groups and stakeholders. In general, the theme of creating or developing specific capacities in the civil sector is sustainable over time and implies continuous work, on different themes, but with the same final beneficiaries. Based on activities already implemented or contextual changes, new ideas for next actions are shaped to seek funding beyond the Fund.

Although among the funded projects represented in the survey, there are only a few cases where there is a partner organisation, in general the promotion and improvement of cooperation with local and foreign organisations within the thematic outcome means better sustainability. For those who have sought a partner, the process of finding one is not thought of as a difficulty, and is most often made possible by the lead organisation taking the initiative, or on the basis of partnerships already established through previous interactions.

The most common reasons why the supported CSOs prefer to implement their projects on their own are related to the desire to work and report on their activities themselves or not finding other organizations within the country that have addressed their issue in their work. Regarding foreign



partnerships, the largest proportion of respondents shared the view that involving another organization from the Fund's funding countries or those in Bulgaria's border countries is difficult, would not contribute significantly to the project's objectives or would increase costs. Often in the course of project implementation, new contacts are made, between local and foreign organisations with similar fields of work, between which ideas are shared and opportunities for future joint projects are discussed.

Figure 21. During the implementation of the project/projects why did you NOT cooperate with any organization from ...?

***During the implementation of the project/projects why did you NOT cooperate with any organization from ...?***

	Organization from the countries that financed the fund (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway)	Organization from the country	Organization from the countries bordering Bulgaria (Republic of North Macedonia, Republic of Serbia and Republic of Turkey)
<i>It was difficult to find an organization to partner with</i>	45,5%	0,0%	14,3%
<i>We already had in mind a partner organization in the country with which we want to work on the topic</i>	27,3%	0,0%	35,7%
<i>We do not believe that a partnership with an organization from any of these countries would contribute to the fulfilment of the project's objectives</i>	22,7%	0,0%	35,7%
<i>Partnering with such an organization would make the project more expensive</i>	22,7%	12,5%	10,7%
<i>We do not think that any of the organizations in these countries have encountered problems like those that our organization is working on in Bulgaria</i>	13,6%	50,0%	3,6%
<i>We wanted to implement the project independently and report it independently</i>	4,5%	50,0%	10,7%
<i>We already had in mind a partner organization in one of the countries bordering Bulgaria</i>	0,0%	0,0%	3,6%

Source: Results of a quantitative survey, for the purpose of the evaluation, among organisations, beneficiaries of the Programme and Thematic Priority 6

*“... With us it is relatively easy to track to what extent the results will remain in time, because our project is the only one in Bulgaria and one of the few in Europe and will continue to exist because its audience is not decreasing. The other thing that pleases me more is that during this project we communicated very actively with organisations... Their feedback was surprisingly good for me. Including that the materials that we have prepared have been used by other media. Three years*

*later we are in a much more dynamic mode of working with colleagues from other organisations. They are asking us for partnerships.”*

*“We had a lot of interest from other NGOs and a lot of cooperation. Our project was about media representation of working organizations in the NGO sector. We have built very good relationships and continue to hear from many of these working organisations.”*

*“A lot depends on the target groups we work with. Some organisations are very ambitious and constantly want to develop. I think for some participants the training was really useful and they have already been able to build skills on their own. It's an ongoing process. The issues in the NGO sector change every day, the people who work also change, especially those who are in communication positions. This is a soft skill that needs to be encouraged and maintained continuously.”*

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*Focus group with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 6*

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*“A partnership always leads to better results...Our project was in partnership with a partner with whom we have been working for a long time and who helped a lot in the expert and training part.”*

*“... We have based our activities mainly on the expertise we ourselves had. On the one hand, we did not know of an organisation working on our topic, and I also think that another organisation would have been a reason for higher costs and more difficult reporting on the project. We wanted to try it ourselves...I admit that while the work was going on we met many capable people, experts, with whom we keep in touch.”*

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*In-depth interviews with NGOs that have implemented project(s) under Thematic Outcome 6*

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## Conclusions and recommendations

The epidemic of Kovid-19 and its consequences, as well as the Russian attack on Ukraine, require new pace and processes of development of civil society and civil society organizations. The need to address new themes and issues related to the development of specific capacities of CSOs and attracting new sources of funding is coming to the fore.

The shortage of financial and material resources, insufficient state support for the sector and the lack of professionals with the necessary expertise have emerged as persistent and deepening over time difficulties for CSOs.

In this context, the funding of projects under Thematic Priority No. 6: Enhanced capacity and sustainability of the civil society sector including CSOs, fully meets the needs, objectives and priorities of the NGO sector in the country. In addition to addressing the problems and needs of different target groups of CSOs, the TO provides an opportunity to enhance and develop their own capacity.

The transformation of the Thematic Priority under the two Emergency Sessions under the Small Initiatives Scheme are highly appreciated. The Fund Operator also reacts flexibly to urgent changes or transformations of already fixed activities related to the force majeure circumstances.

The financial instrument has implemented projects that focus on improving the capacity and resilience of CSOs by increasing public trust in them, introducing innovative ways to engage different social groups as advocates for democratic values and the rights of vulnerable groups, strengthening the civic sector and building skills to respond more effectively to new challenges in the wake of the Covid pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

A significant contribution of the projects funded under TO6 is also observed in terms of indicators that are set to some of the other thematic areas of the Programme. The most frequent effects are related to the strengthening of democratic culture and civic awareness, the increase of support for human rights, and the empowerment processes of vulnerable groups.

The assessed organisations provide good feedback on the role and performance of the Operator. The general perception is that the Fund Operator has established a clear system for the administration and management of the projects, not stopping to maintain effective communication with the organisations at each stage of the implementation of the activities. Supported organisations do not experience difficulties in the application and reporting stages of the projects.

Similar to the situation of those who received funding under TO1, the greatest difficulty faced by organizations is in securing funds for the preparation of the project proposal and self-financing of the project, when such is a mandatory requirement/criterion for applying for funding.

The organisations involved in the evaluation share the understanding that the outputs generated by the project will continue to be used, as will the work with similar target groups and stakeholders. Overall, the theme of creating or developing specific capacity in the civil sector is sustainable over time and implies continuous work, on different themes, but with the same beneficiaries.

The main recommendation made by the beneficiary organisations relates to the insistence that the opportunity to strengthen the capacity of CSOs should be maintained. Their view is that there is a lack of government grants for such an investment, and large donors do not understand this expenditure and this type of funding for institutional capacity development.

Another area for improvement for future planning is in relation to the difficult predictability of the periods and duration of funding under the Norway Grants. A problem for organisations is that after the announced duration of the Programme, it is not clear how long the following period will be when the Fund will not provide funding. This makes it difficult for organisations to maintain the 'momentum' of successful projects and rely on EEA Grants funding, planning for the Fund as an element of their future activities and budgeting.

## Case Studies

For the purpose of this evaluation, specific cases of one organisation implementing a project under thematic outcome 1 and one organisation implementing a project under thematic outcome 6 are examined in depth as examples of successfully implemented projects within the Active Citizens Fund Bulgaria programme. Their main aim was to illustrate in-depth the process of implementing a project under the program and to gain better understanding as to how the CSOs and the program operator have responded to the difficulties that accompany the implementation of the original objectives of the funded projects.

Two projects were selected based on the outreach that the projects had, as well as the complexity of activities that the CSOs have performed. Both organizations have experience in fundraising and have a set topic of operational interest. Their experience with fundraising has been very valuable to the research.

*Case Study:*

*Thematic outcome 1: Strengthened democratic culture and civic awareness*

*Organization: Access to Information Programme Foundation*

*Project name: Access to Information Forum*

Since its inception in 1996, "Access to Information Programme Foundation" has been campaigning continuously to improve the state of access to information in Bulgaria and is actively involved in international networks and initiatives related to the protection of the right to information. The project "***Access to Information Forum***" is implemented with financial support of 179 507 EUR, funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway under the EEA Financial Mechanism under Thematic priority No. 1: "Strengthened democratic culture and civic awareness".

Project aims at contributing to an improved transparency and accountability of public institutions. The duration of the project is 36 months (until August 2022) and aims at creating an environment to discuss the issues related to the application of APIA which can assist public institutions at national and local level in implementing the international standards related to access to information. From "Access to Information Forum" will benefit both the administration and the representatives of civil society organizations and citizens by providing a forum for debate, surveys, models and their sharing in national and international networks.

The investments made show that this is a key, multi-component project in which the organisation is implementing activities that it has carried out over the years of its existence, but thanks to the funding is increasing their scale, reaching more stakeholders and advocating for the right of access to information for more organisations. As key results of the initiatives implemented, we can systematize the following:

- 1) The provision of legal assistance for access to information, both at the level of application and at the level of consultation and legal advice after a refusal of access to information by public institutions in the country. This activity has not been affected by the measures to restrict gatherings during the Covid-19 pandemic in the country, nor by Russia's war with Ukraine, and has been implemented according to the original plan of the Access to Information Programme Foundation providing legal assistance in cases of seeking access to public information at every stage of the process. The Foundation provided legal

assistance at the initial stage of the information seeking process when the legal team provided advice and/or prepared an application for access to information. In another category of cases, assistance was provided following a refusal to provide information. An essential part of the legal assistance is the drafting of appeals to the courts and representation in cases of applicants who have sought the organisation's assistance. The team provides legal assistance in cases related to disclosure of information in various spheres of public life, with information most often sought in the following areas:

- Urban planning and road infrastructure;
- Inspections and control activities;
- Expenditure of public funds;
- Management and disposal of state and municipal property;
- Environment;
- Transparent and accountable administration;
- Decision making process;
- Activities of public entities/organisations;
- Judicial system.

2) Right to Know Day - this initiative has been part of the Foundation's key advocacy activities since 2002, with the main objective of promoting and strengthening freedom of information standards. On Right to Know Day, 28 September, the Foundation organised an awards ceremony for the International Right to Know Day. Over the years of project implementation, this activity has been one of the more heavily impacted by the measures put in place to restrict gatherings during the covid pandemic, and in only one of the three years that the Active Citizens Fund has funded this activity has it been implemented as originally planned - live. In the other two years, the ceremony was conducted online, which, according to a representative of the organization, affected the solemnity of the event more than the scale of its attendance, because it was the online format of the event that allowed it to be attended by more individuals and organizations than was possible, according to the project's original budget.

- 3) Citizens' audit of active transparency - the Foundation has also carried out activities on research and evaluation of internet portals for submitting applications to administrative structures in the system of the executive power, has compiled a Rating of active transparency, as well as a map of financial and budgetary transparency of municipalities for 2020 and 2021. During the two years of project implementation, the Access to Information Programme has reviewed and assessed the websites of 563 (in 2021) and 562 (in 2020) administrative structures of the executive power at central, territorial and local levels, public legal entities and independent authorities. The main objective is to assess how the surveyed bodies fulfil their obligations in relation to the Access to Information Act. The activity was not affected by the measures introduced in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic as it was carried out in an online environment.
- 4) Report "The State of Access to Information in Bulgaria"- monitoring of legislation and practices related to access to information has been an activity of the Foundation since 2000, and within the framework of the Access to Information Forum project two monitoring reports on "The State of Access to Information in Bulgaria" have been issued - for 2020 and 2021. The reports are key in that they formulate analyses, recommendations and assessments:
- Recommendations relating to the legal framework for access to information and its implementation; Legislation relating to the right of access to information;
  - Assessment of Access to Information Regulations; The State of Active Transparency for 563<sup>5</sup> Authorities in Bulgaria;
  - Analysis of legal aid provided by ODI during the year;
  - Trends in case law on access to information cases supported by ODI in 2020 and 2019.
- Both of these reports were submitted to online conferences due to measures to limit the gathering of people in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 5) "Twenty Years of Access to Public Information Act - Lessons and Challenges" - The Foundation organized an online conference titled "Access to Information - Achievements

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<sup>5</sup> 562 in 2019.

and Challenges" to summarize its 21 years of experience implementing the Access to Public Information Act in Bulgaria and the challenges to improving it. The conference is attended by nearly 100 participants - representatives of state and municipal administration, NGOs, judges and lawyers, representatives of the diplomatic corps, as well as members of the Freedom of Information Advocates International Network (FOIANet).

- 6) Access to Information Days - as part of its activities under the Access to Information Forum project, the Foundation has held a number of webinars on the topic of "Implementing the Access to Public Information Act - Procedures, Obligations and Enforcement". These webinars are designed for staff working with APIA in the executive branch system in all areas of the country. The main contribution of the project is in enhancing the capacity of the employees which will respectively also lead to a change in the environment in terms of enhancing transparency of processes.

In its work on the implementation of the project, the Foundation has not encountered difficulties, on the one hand, because the activities implemented are part of the activities that the Foundation traditionally performs, and on the other hand, because the changes that had to be introduced were mainly related to the transition of some of the activities from a live environment to an online environment. The beneficiary has had an understanding response from the Fund Operator when it has had to make changes to the type of project activities implemented and the timing of the activities. They define communication related to project activities as prompt and timely.

### **Sustainability of the implemented activities**

Thanks to the funding of the project, the Foundation has been able to achieve sustainability of its traditionally implemented activities by increasing both the scale of their dissemination and the impact of the activities, as part of the beneficiary's efforts to improve democratic values by improving access to information in the country. The project contributed to the achievement of international standards in access to information by the public bodies in Bulgaria at a national and local level. The FORUM also provided for a space for debates, research and good models for the administration, as well for NGOs and citizens. The project team actively participated in the public discussion of draft normative acts and national policies related to the access to public information, prepared and submitted legal statements and presented its position within the public consultation



process. The activities implemented under the project will be sustainable and contribute to the following aspects:

- Active part in the public discussion of draft normative acts and national policies related to the access to public information, prepare and submit legal statements and present its position within the public consultation process;
- Perform annual Civil Audit on Active Transparency on 265 municipalities and 300 central government bodies and their territorial units and publicly present the audit results;
- Analyze the legislative initiatives and the access to information provision practices and formulate recommendations for their improvement in the annual report Access to Information in Bulgaria;
- Assist the raising of awareness and the active exercise of the right to information by the organization and holding of the annual awards ceremonies on the International Right to Know Day - 28 September;
- Present the accumulated experience of the Access to Public Information Act implementation at the International Conference TWENTY YEARS OF APIA - LESSONS LEARNED AND FUTURE CHALLENGES in July 2020;
- Contribute to the better implementation of the access to information provision obligations by holding 26 Access to Information Days in the regional cities in the country;
- Provide for publicity and dissemination of the project results and achievements on specialized website Access to Information Forum: [www.ATIforum.net](http://www.ATIforum.net)

*Case Study:*

*Thematic outcome 6: Enhanced capacity and sustainability of the civil society sector including CSOs*

*Organization: BCause Foundation*

*Project name: Inform, Engage, Succeed!*

BCause Foundation is an expert organization, a recognized leader with more than 27 years of national and international experience (since 1995). BCause offers people and companies a choice of causes that are meaningful to them, security and easy ways to give (of money, time and labor) and the satisfaction of benefiting society. They channel donor resources and contribute to the

financial and organizational strengthening of civic organizations and public institutions such as schools, libraries, museums, and parks. Support donors and social entrepreneurs with individualized, high value-added services. Influence policy and culture in philanthropy and social investment through research, government consulting, and special communications projects.

"Inform, Engage, Succeed!" aims to make the causes of NGOs, civic groups and public institutions visible in the public sphere and connect them with donors and supporters beyond their usual circles of support. Many organizations and institutions (parks, museums, libraries) are not good at running a fundraising campaign - a focused effort in a short time frame involving many different external actors, often due to a lack of expertise and human resources. Small inexperienced organisations or organisations from disadvantaged areas or groups do not even try due to lack of skills or courage to break out of geographical or ethnic constraints. The project offers a solution for organizations, public institutions and informal groups by:

- motivational fundraising trainings to assess the importance of the issue and their strengths and motivation.
- participation in 4 Accelerators and follow-up fundraising campaigns - Accelerators are short-term programs supporting the fundraising of a small group of 10-15 organizations. Participants develop detailed plans during and at the end of a two-day hands-on training based on BCause Foundation's experience in philanthropic campaigns and with help from external experts in communications and marketing. Volunteer mentors help throughout the campaign, the Foundation pays for Facebook advertising and actively supports the search for donors. The ultimate goal is for organizations to be able to run successful donation campaigns on their own;
- access the donation platforms Platformata.bg and DMS;
- meetings to share campaign progress and group support;
- one-to-one mentoring from the team, communicators and pro bono ambassadors;
- technical support for copywriting, video and paid Facebook advertising;
- proposing companies' causes for donation;
- overall communications plan and media coverage.

As a result, organizations will raise funds, and the long-term effect for them will be increased visibility, improved public image, and the skills to follow up with successful campaigns.

As key results of the initiatives implemented, we can systematize the following:

- ⇒ The project contributed to the achievement of the goal of improving citizens' awareness of the role of non-governmental organizations in society. Information and encouragement for involvement reached over 450 NGOs. Organizations were encouraged to assess their fundraising readiness, and for the most motivated 155 entered a call for proposals to become participants in 4 Accelerators for successful fundraising campaigns. A total of 40 selected organizations conducted intensive campaigns after training and with the help of pro bono mentors - communicators from companies. The total number of people reached with the 40 organizations' social media donation appeals, donor outreach and organization events, and paid Facebook advertising by BCause is 1,496,151. The total number of celebrities, influencers and active citizens reached the 40 organizations they turned to for support is 202.
- ⇒ The project included 4 Accelerate Success Forums, where participating organizations shared their achievements and challenges during the campaigns, and mentors, other organizations with more experience in fundraising, inspirational figures and media representatives shared stories, tips and recommendations to the NGO audience how to be successful in conducting donation campaigns.
- ⇒ The project launched the "Celebrities Help" initiative in partnership with Forbes Bulgaria, which aims to promote the example of famous Bulgarians with their donation initiatives and to honor a selection of 10. The total amount of donations collected from the 4 Accelerators is BGN 326,542 through Platformata.bg and DMSbg.com, as well as donations from other sources.

A recommendation to the programme by the beneficiary is to organize informal forums to share the results of the implemented projects to seek common solutions with other colleagues. It would be good to consider forms of interaction between the different funded organisations: "More synergy should be sought between the different large organisations because in any case we would be stronger if we worked together on issues that affect us all."

### **Sustainability of the implemented activities**

The beneficiary says that the feedback from the organisations that have participated in the project is that they now feel more confident to launch a campaign. They don't feel like they are taking on

something they have no idea where to start and, in that aspect, the project has achieved its objectives. The 40 participating organizations have increased skills, experience, and confidence to create and run donation campaigns. 20 out of 40 in total started another campaign in Platformata.bg or DMSbg. In total, the 28 pro bono mentors declared their willingness to participate in new editions of the Accelerators in the future. The "Celebrities Help" initiative is yet to develop and establish itself as a prestigious, highly publicized event and source of information and inspiration for both celebrities and all donors about giving causes and endeavours.

The project will contribute to the sustainability of the BCause Foundation with an improved program of support for small organizations, an expanded pool of volunteers, and the launch of a prestigious roster of committed celebrities who will continue to generate benefits for civil society in Bulgaria. Prior to this project, the Foundation has implemented smaller such initiatives back in the years, but as a focused effort, this is the largest they have conducted as the Bcause Foundation. Over the course of about two years, they have worked with 40 organizations with training in 4 phases. The other important indicator, according to the beneficiary, is the total amount they have been able to raise, amounting to over 326 thousand leva. The campaigns are reported to be very successful as they took place during the Covid and post - Covid time and subsequently the War in Ukraine which are major external factors that inevitably change donor attitudes in society.

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