**Final Evaluation**

**UNDP/UNICEF Horizons Project**

**Strengthening Community Resilience**

**in Abkhazia**

**funded by USAID**

Project ID 00100478

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May 2021

Bern, Switzerland

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The summary represents results of the final evaluation of the USAID-funded USD 7.55 ml Horizons Project implemented by UNDP and UNICEF in Abkhazia from June 18, 2016 to June 18, 2021. The overall purpose of the project is to promote the social and economic resilience of local communities, especially youth, through improved access to high quality health and education services. This purpose was pursued through the following components:

* Improving access to quality health services for vulnerable populations;
* Improving access to quality education, skills development and social participation opportunities for children and youth;
* Enhancing dialogue across respective youth and professional groups;
* Enhancing business development skills and access to vocational trainings for young people;
* Providing a COVID-19 integrated response.

The project is especially relevant for attainment of the SDGs related to good health and wellbeing and quality education.

The final evaluation assesses project implementation and achievements against the planned outputs and outcomes, identifies strengths and weaknesses of the intervention, while reflecting on project relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability perspectives. It is also forward looking and draws on conclusions, lessons learned and recommendations to inform future programming. The evaluation was carried out by international consultant Olena Krylova on April-May 2020. It drew on a variety of qualitative methods, including desk research, individual and group interviews with partners and stakeholders, and focus group discussions with beneficiaries.

*In terms of project relevance*, the evaluation found that both implementing agencies, UNDP and UNICEF, were well positioned programmatically and operationally to deliver on their respective project components in line with planned outputs and outcomes. Their rich experience of working in a volatile environment, along with solid partnerships with local and international NGOs, allowed delivery of planned activities in a conflict-sensitive and adoptive manner. Furthermore, the division of labor between the two implementing agencies was very clear and relevant to the mandate of UNDP and UNICEF.

The project effectively achieved its outputs and targets, but sustainability of its achievements still needs to be consolidated:

* *To improve access to quality health care,* the project built capacity of medical professionals across Abkhazia, upgraded infrastructure of selected healthcare facilities (mainly TB outpatient clinics), supported provision of outreach services for early detection of infectious diseases, improved public awareness on HIV/AIDS, TB and infectious diseases; and strengthened competencies of medical specialists to minimize the COVID-19 related risks. As a result, there are skillful local trainers available in many areas of public health care, and new approaches are being translated into adopted protocols used by health facilities and introduced into undergraduate medical education for mid-level professionals. For longer term sustainability of project achievements several pre-conditions are missing: sound health care policies with a focus on primary health care and prevention, a system of post-graduate education and in-service training, a vision for upgrading medical education in Abkhazia, and introduction of health related topics into (in)formal education and public information dissemination schemes.
* *To improve access to quality education, skills development and social participation for children and youth,* the project secured access to ICT equipment for schools, broadened informal education and social activism opportunities for children; improved learning and teaching practices in higher education; introduced a student-centered teaching approach and supported distance learning in schools. From a sustainability perspective, the main concerns are teacher training and function of youth clubs dependence on external funding, an outdated curriculum, and teaching approaches not supportive of new approaches.
* *To enhance business development skills and access to VET*, a unique model of business education was introduced in Abkhazia that supported innovative business ideas as well as professional development, and contributed to upgrading VET institutions and improving the image of VET in Abkhazia. Developing further a “business model” for business education centers and reaching out to the more vulnerable through them, as well as encouraging more systemic changes in the VET sector are the upcoming challenges.
* *To provide a COVID-19 integrated response,* the Horizons project made an impressive contribution in the context of the COVID-19 crisis management in Abkhazia by providing vital and essential medical supplies and necessary equipment to health care and education facilities, ensuring population access to accurate and up-to-date information, and improving capacities of main labs and treatment facilities. USAID through Horizons project was the first international actor to provide sanitary and hygienic supplies to medical facilities in Abkhazia even before registration of the first COVID-19 case. The project also introduced an alternative approach to safer medical waste management but it is still not locally owned or supported with stakeholder commitment and resources.

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*Efficiency* of the Horizons project was achieved mainly due to:

* Effective distribution of roles between implementing partners based not only on their mandate but on comparative advantages of their operations in Abkhazia;
* Drawing on complementarities and synergy with other UNDP and UNICEF projects and other UN agencies active in Abkhazia (WHO, UN Women and UNHCR);
* Large scale introduction of ICT across sectors of involvement and partners;
* Partnership with reputable local NGOs with rich field experience;
* Drawing on a combination of international expertise and exposure to international experiences, and local professional knowledge for their contextualization;
* Use of ToR and peer education in promoting knowledge and skills;
* Procurement of equipment well-coordinated with beneficiary institutions and relevant international experts, followed by training for usage and application (although maintenance of the equipment in the longer run is a concern, due to the lack of internal medical equipment maintenance capacities in Abkhazia).

**LESSONS LEARNED**

*In terms of lessons,* the Horizons project yielded several important lessons:

1. The introduction of ICT can have a transformative impact on efficient access to new knowledge and experience, outreach, networking, dialogue and confidence-building among individuals and groups.
2. Locally owned education, training and support platforms are instrumental for promoting cutting edge knowledge and development of skills among professional and business communities.
3. Ensuring conditions for achievements of recovery investments in a volatile post-conflict environment implies a need for basic systemic changes. Demand for change can be built from below and be facilitated through non-governmental organizations, civil society actors and professional communities.
4. Solid management and steering arrangements, flexibility of approaches, risks and conflict-sensitive management, as well as a reliable M&E system are central for implementing such complex and multi-component interventions in the volatile environment in Abkhazia.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**:

The evaluation recommended that future programming should consider several general strategies:

***1. Gradually bridge from recovery to rebuilding livelihoods and resilience approaches*.** Work on improving living conditions of conflict-affected people, and creating an enabling environment for sustainable peace and confidence-building, should be framed by “SDGs for everybody” and “no one left behind” concepts. It will also require a solid and longer-term theory of change, jointly shared by the international community and all relevant stakeholders.. Effective dialogue and reconciliation imply educated and open-minded people from resilient communities on both sides.

**2. *Verify approach to confidence building*.** The project experience proves that it is ineffectual to pursue confidence-building mechanically. A more constructive and productive way is to work on creating development opportunities for people, professional and business communities and civil society groups. This would call for broader conceptual thinking and a more flexible project design.

***3. Promote more sustainable changes from below****.* There is an emerging understanding among professional and business communities in Abkhazia about the need for more open-minded thinking and systemic changes. They can influence those changes through genuinely organized associations and professional unions. The new project should pursue this strategy-building on the experience of the Horizons project in organizing and networking people around business, education and health.

**4*. Clearly define a collaboration approach (“co-creation”).*** Avoid artificial and complex partnership arrangements among UN agencies in the new project. The experience shows that UN agencies can work well in parallel based on their competencies under well-coordinated management and steering arrangements. Primary stakes should be put, not so much on UN agencies general mandates, but on their current performance and achievements in Abkhazia. The costs of phasing in complete newcomers can be very high.

**5. *Strengthen qualitative M&E*.** To maximize on learning from project experience in terms of promoting livelihoods, resilience and reconciliation with a sharper focus on inclusion and targeting the most vulnerable (often the least independent) population groups, the qualitative side of M&E needs to be secured. It is recommended to strengthen qualitative indicators under each project component, that should be indicative of “improved access” and based on solid baseline assessments.