Empowerment through Comparative Learning: (ECoLearn)

Narrative Report

Submitted to:	**The Netherlands Embassy, Yerevan**
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Project partner:	**VNG International (NL)**
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Location of the project:	**Armenia, 10 municipalities**
Period of the project:	**June 15, 2020 – July 15, 2021**
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Cost of the project:	**Eur 64 610**

1. Brief overview of the project

The ***Empowerment through Comparative Learning – ECoLearn*** project, which was piloted in 2019 with the support of the Embassy of the Netherlands in Tbilisi, aims to support territorial administration reform in Armenia and contribute to enhancement of managerial capacities of consolidated municipalities. The project has established close cooperation with the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructures (MTAI), to ensure that the project outcomes are in line with the strategic objectives of the government.

The ***ECoLearn Phase 2*** implemented in 2020-2021 aimed at building on and strengthening the achievements of the pilot phase of the ECoLearn project. Namely, during that phase, with the support of the Dutch partner, VNG Int., benchmarking (BM) of four municipal services was iterated in 10 newly consolidated municipalities of Armenia. For that, indicators for each of the services were elaborated; an electronic Excel- based Toolkit was crafted. After carrying out the BM exercise, participant municipalities were encouraged to conduct peer reviews to compare their own performance data with each other. In order to address shortfalls in services

identified during the BM, participant municipalities elaborated improvement measures, and the project provided small sub-grants to help them address those gaps.

Lessons learned from the first phase highlighted the need for strengthening the results of the pilot phase and further rooting this innovative instrument in the management system of the municipalities. As advised by the VNG Int., the BM instrument needs to 'mature' by iterating over few years to become a managerial culture and generate enough basis for observing performance dynamics in comparison with peers which is the key aspect of BM. The *ECoLearn Phase 2* intended to make a step ahead and move in that direction having the following distinct objectives in view.

2. Objectives of ECoLearn Phase 2 and outline of the results achieved

1. To organize and carry out the second phase of the benchmarking exercise.
2. Institutionalize and further disseminate the BM method in Armenia.

The following results were achieved upon completion of the project:

- Revised set of indicators defining four key competence areas of municipalities developed and recommended other municipalities for usage;
- 4 on-line benchmarking workshops carried out;
- Second series of BM exercise carried out to generate objective picture of the status and performance dynamics of services;
- A peer review session organized;
- 7 representatives of participating municipalities have obtained enhanced knowledge and skills in applying BM method and are able to act as ToTs;
- A user-friendly electronic platform created for data management and comparison across participating municipalities;
- A "Benchmarking Handbook" created
- The BM method was introduced to additional three municipalities facilitated by the ToTs.

3. Description of Implemented Activities

Many activities of the Phase 2 were carried out during in strict quarantine measures and lockdown restrictions because of COVID-19. Therefore, many activities had to undergo modifications accordingly to meet the new realities.

Activities under Objective 1: To organize and carry out the second phase of the benchmarking exercise

A. *1.1: Revising and fine-tuning of indicators*
A. *1.2: Preparatory workshop for the second benchmarking exercise*

One of the lessons learned from the Pilot Phase was that clarity and simplicity of indicators were key for effective and accurate data collection. Participant municipalities had misinterpreted some of the indicators in the pilot phase; consequently, incompatible data were generated. Also, in some cases indicators were considered irrelevant and/ or not straightforward and not contributing to the overall assessment of the given competence/service area. It became evident that such indicators should be amended or eliminated. Therefore, revisiting the list of indicators was deemed important for further development of the BM practice.

As the entire project period coincided with the pandemic, the initial BM workshop was modified and split into four separate online workshops, during each of them one set of indicators was discussed and finalized with municipalities who are best aware how instrumental this or that indicator is.

After amending the indicators, preparatory and organizational activities were discussed with participating municipalities for carrying out the second BM exercise.

A.1.3: Carrying out the second BM exercise

Participating municipalities were given five months to collect data on revised indicators. During that time consultancy was made available for them by the project team. The project course was deterred by the outbreak of war in Artsakh that encompassed also entire Armenia especially the bordering regions. In situation of severe humanitarian crisis, influx of tens of thousands displaced people, total mobilization and hostilities there was no other way than to put project activities on hold. After the war, despite heavy aftermath, the project activities were resumed. Unfortunately, two municipalities were not able to continue with the project – Geghamasar, a bordering municipality that was impacted greatly from the war and Stepanavan that experienced considerable changes of the staff. The rest of the municipalities managed to collect data on four main competencies and inputted in joint format.

A 1.4: Organizing a peer review session

Upon completion of the second BM exercise, the preparation for the peer review session started. By then, beginning of February, 2021 the COVID-19 situation was considerably mitigated and some of the strict restrictions were eased. The project team consulted with municipalities and asked their opinion about holding the peer review session in physical reality. Participating municipalities warmly welcomed the idea seeing it as an opportunity for relieving pandemic fatigue and being energized for the following activities. Therefore, it was decided to organize the peer review session in face to face format. 14 participants arrived at the session venue in Aghveran outside Yerevan for a two day event. During the sessions, the project team presented visualized spreadsheets including graphs and charts per each competence / service with consolidated data provided by participating municipalities to make comparison of the results across municipalities easy. Also, participants were able to compare their current results with those of the previous (pilot) year and evaluate their performance in the given area. In a later session, participants conducted peer reviews and started discussing the results and finding out best performance practices.

The graph below shows the results of one service – waste management in comparison

BM2 exercise - Waste management

Chart with bars showing Median values:

Municipality	Region	Value
Goris	Syunik	96%
Alaverdi	Lori	95%
Charentsavan	Kotayk	84%
Stepanavan	Lori	67%
Sisian	Syunik	64%
Akhurian	Shirak	51%
Vardenis	Gegharkunik	48%
Tsaghkahovit	Aragatsotn	22%

Activities under Objective 2: Institutionalize and further disseminate the BM method in Armenia

A 2.1: Selection of municipal practitioners to be trained as BM consultants
A 2.2: Training of the ToTs with the support of VNG Int.

These activities were perceived to facilitate further dissemination of the BM method across already consolidated municipalities and those that are going to be consolidated in near future as the territorial-administrative reform unfolds. This means that such municipalities will need advice and mentoring during the initial stages of applying this innovative self-assessment instrument. Therefore creation of a national cadre of BM consultants is deemed important.

The ToT training was designed to be conducted in two sub-courses – introductory and main. The main course was planned to deliver by VNGI consultants in their office in The Hague including shadowing opportunity in a couple of Dutch municipalities. Although the dates of this activity were put off to later stage of the project hoping that COVID situation will subside, however it did not happen during the project implementation period, and the activity had to be canceled.

It was decided to combine the initial ToT course with the peer review session to avoid an additional meeting. 7 participants expressed keen interest in passing the ToT course and becoming mentors/consultants for novice municipalities. Training materials and presentations were prepared for ToTs, lecture part was followed by work group sessions and discussions.

4 ToTs volunteered to disseminate their knowledge to 5 more peers still within the projects:

Communities/ToTs	Trained novice communities
Charentsavan	2- Byureghavan, Meghradzor
Alaverdi	1-Akhtala
Tsaghkahovit	1-Aparan
Vardenis	1-Akunk

The Ambassador of The Netherlands visited the training venue and in his welcoming speech highlighted the Embassy's support to democratic transition in Armenia.

A 2.3: Development of user-friendly software for effective data management

As part of far-reaching goal of making BM a practical managerial instrument for many municipalities and for facilitation of that process, in consultancy with the VNG Int. partners the project team included creation of an on-line platform as one of the targets of Phase 2. In the conceptualizing stage, the project team had several online meetings with VNG Int. consultant who gave guidance and advice about how to proceed with the platform. Regarding the structure, it was agreed that the platform comprised of two sections: one for 'Bench-learning' containing general information about BM instrument, and where community of practice / municipalities can share their best practices in certain fields in platforms for discussions, peer-to-peer advice and/or Q&A. The main section is designed to be accessible only for municipalities that are doing BM. Each municipality was assigned login and password to be authorized to access the platform and input their data. It was advised by VNG Int. that only raw data should be inputted on the platform and not indicators as it could be hard to ensure that the definitions used are the same throughout the database. The tool should calculate the indicators and not the municipalities themselves. This advice was taken into account while developing the site (www.henanish.am)

After inputting data, the municipality could compare those with any other municipality – subscriber of the platform or with all municipalities at the same time. Such comparison is visualized in graphs and charts.

An online presentation of the platform and training how to use it was organized for municipalities, after which they started testing / uploading their data of the previous fiscal year into the platform. During testing, some bugs emerged which were corrected by the consultant. The project team and the involved consultant were available for inquires of municipalities or any eventual issues that arose during testing. It should be noted, though, that the time was rather short for fully evening out the bugs and doing some remodeling of the site upon participants' request. However, the project team is committed to making improvements to have a perfectly operational site.

A 2.4: Development of the " Benchmarking Handbook"

This activity was planned to be implemented during the pilot phase but upon the advice of the Dutch consultant that outcomes of the benchmarking after one year of implementation would not be sufficient to make valid conclusions. Therefore this activity was transferred to the phase 2.

The Handbook is developed in Armenian but its outline discussed among consultants. The structure of the handbook is as follows:

- Definitions: what does the word mean, what are the key words
- When and in what cases a municipality can apply BM
- Benefits of the BM
- The BM cycle and detailed description of steps
- Appendixes with finalized indicators

The final draft of the Handbook was shared with the ToTs and their feedback was considered in the final variant. The Handbook is uploaded in the BM open section of the site.

A 2.5: Participatory evaluation of the project

A2.6: Dissemination of the results

Because of pandemic, these activities had to be modified as well. Participating municipalities which were with the project from the beginning till the end of Phase 2 highly evaluate the project's outcomes and mention the positive impact that it has had in their internal managerial system. They especially mention that now they validate the importance of accurate data; thanks to the project that have consolidated data in four areas which otherwise where scattered throughout departments and files; that record keeping has improved, sourcing and retrieving of data has become much easier. As they mention, the major benefit is that now they have a system for comparing and following their performance statistics which helps them to be more evidence-based in reporting and decision making.

Disseminating BM as an effective management instrument as well as the results of the first two years is at the heart of this project. The project team considers remarkable achievement cascading of BM in four additional municipalities that were initially not included in the project. Moreover, ToTs that were trained in the framework of the project facilitated the process themselves thus obtaining valuable experience that will be utilized in future dissemination.

The final event of the Phase 2 was a dissemination conference held in hybrid format during which the results of cascading were presented. It is worth noting that a small municipality – participant of the project Tsakhkahovit – helped larger municipality Aparan to carry out BM and the process was mutually informative as Aparan learned about BM process, and Tsakhkahovit learned about how to better perform.

B. Lessons Learned and Sustainability

Findings and feedback:

The second phase of the ECoLearn project was implemented in harshest conditions. Severe pandemic restricts prevented from important personal meetings and key activities that required high personal involvement had to be transferred online with reduced productivity. However the major blow for the project was the war that erupted in September. For more than three months the project was put on hold.

One of the municipalities, the bordering Geghamasar could not recover and return to normal as it had to (and still has to) deal with huge number of displaced persons and their humanitarian crisis.

The project team had to cancel the workshop in The Hague, at the VNG office and the shadowing experience with Dutch municipalities where participants would get a broader outlook on data management and its usage.

Despite calamities, the Phase 2 was a success, first of all it was one step towards 'maturing' the BM as now it is possible to compare data with the previous year. Besides, thanks to cascading, it is now clear that many more municipalities are willing to try this innovative method as now they value accurate and reliable data.

As advised by the Dutch consultants, the BM is not a fast track action and it need more time to 'mature'. Therefore, the project team supported by VNG Int., seeks to carry out the third round of the BM exercise. It will help to obtain data on municipal services three years in a row and the performance dynamics will become clearly seen. Another 10-12 consolidated municpalities will be involved in benchmarking process thus increasing the total number of participanats from 10 to 20/22. This will make 35% of municipalities consolidated under territorial-administrative reform so far. That number will allow to derive national benchmarks for given services which will be done in cooperation with VNG Int. consultants. Besides, there is need for further testing and improving the BM platform and increasing sign-up rates.

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Yerevan