



'State of the Nation: Building an innovative tool for the development of evidence-based policy making'

Case study of a Romanian ESF project under the study 'Progress Assessment of the ESF Support to Public Administration' (PAPA)

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PROJECT BACKGROUND

State of the Nation: Building an innovative tool for the development of evidence-based policy making

Operational Programme	Operational Programme Administrative Capacity 2014-2020, Priority Axis 1: 'Efficient public administration and judicial system', Specific Objective 1.1: 'The development and use of common systems and standards in public administration which optimise decision making processes oriented towards citizens and the business sector, according with the Public Administration Development Strategy 2014-2020.'
Beneficiary organisation	General Secretariat of Government (GSG), Government of Romania
Target groups	Central and local public administrations
Project duration	07/04/2016 – 07/04/2019
Budget	EUR 3,486,813.46 (ESF contribution EUR 2,930,039)
Project manager (email address)	Lelia Oanță, Director, Governmental Strategies Department, General Secretariat of Government, Romania (lelia.oanta@gov.ro)
Partners	National School of Political and Administrative Studies (SNSPA), Romania
Project/ organisation website	http://starea-natiunii.ro/index.php/en/ http://romania-durabila.gov.ro/

This case study was produced as part of the project 'Progress Assessment of the ESF Support to Public Administration' project, contracted by DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European Commission. The purpose of this project is to present specific cases of ESF-funded public administration reform and capacity building initiatives, as well as to show the role of ESF financial support in public administration, for the purposes of accountability. This report recounts the story of the project '**State of the Nation: Building an innovative tool for the development of evidence-based policy making**'. This account discusses the context and purpose of the project; the characteristics of the team implementing it; the main challenges faced and the difficulties encountered during its implementation; key developments during the implementation process; the results and impacts achieved; as well as the lessons learnt and the contribution of ESF.

STATE OF THE NATION: BUILDING AN INNOVATIVE TOOL FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY MAKING

Introduction: context of the project

Lelia Oanță, Director of the Governmental Strategies Department at the Romanian General Secretariat of Government (GSG), has worked as a senior civil servant within central government in Romania for many years. Her experience at the centre of government has spanned a number of administrations, as well as differing social, political and economic conditions. She has experienced hands-on how strategic policy making works in central government, and what opportunities and challenges it presents. She has witnessed the development of a number of governmental strategies, and noticed a growing interest in strategic thinking and evidence-based policy making in Romania, fuelled by EU membership and the conditions attached to EU funding. Nevertheless, she notes, all too often strategic documents are created by governments in Romania as reactions to external demands and requirements, rather than as the result of internal planning needs. Furthermore, strategies have often been written under pressure of time, paying little attention to existing data, which is often either outdated or not easily accessible¹.

The use of evidence-based instruments in policy making in Romania is limited, as evidenced by data presented in the Sustainable Development Indicators². The 2019 country report issued by the European Commission has also noted delays in the implementation of reforms that aim to improve policy making³. In addition, the Romanian administrative culture is characterised by formalistic and unsystematic monitoring, evaluation and reporting of reform plans. Furthermore, there is limited coordinated debate across the government on public administration reform priorities and how to address them most effectively⁴.

In 2013 Lelia Oanță participated in discussions within GSG on improving evidence-based policy making in the Government of Romania. These discussions contributed to building the core of the team that would later lead the ESF-supported project that is the subject of this document – 'State of the Nation: Building an Innovative Tool for the Development of Evidence-based Policy-Making'. The project, which was implemented between April 2016 and April 2019, had its origins in an idea that Oanță began to pilot at the end of 2013, when she realised that a set of coherent and usable datasets could help to ground strategic work in objective evidence. She was already aware of the existence of a large number of datasets but when these were investigated, it was discovered that the data were scattered across different databases, were insufficiently coherent to support policy making, and not presented in an accessible manner. She soon realised that these issues hindered the use of the data in a policy context, at a time when evidence-based policy making in Romania was still in its infancy. Oanță was determined to change the status quo by filling this gap.

To turn the idea into a coherent project, GSG required funds. As leader of the new project, Lelia Oanță partnered with the National School of Political and Administrative Studies (SNSPA). Dr. Loredana Radu, an academic with considerable experience in the private sector, became project

¹ Examples of governmental strategies include, among others, The Public Administration Development Strategy 2014-2020 (Guvernul României, 2014a), The Strategy for Better Regulation 2014-2020 (Guvernul României, 2014b), or the National Strategy for Romania's Digital Agenda 2020 (Ministry for the Informational Society, 2015). For a detailed presentation and analysis of recent developments in public administration reform in Romania, see Dan (2019a, 2019b).

² Sustainable Governance Indicators – Romania. Available at: <http://www.sgi-network.org/2018/Romania> (accessed: 28/06/2019).

³ European Commission (2019), Country report Romania 2018. Brussels: European Commission, p. 16.

⁴ Dan, Sorin (2019a), *Public administration characteristics in Romania*. Unpublished report of the EUPACK2019 project.

lead for SNSPA. These key players consolidated the project team by attracting other academics from SNSPA, as well as policy experts and IT professionals. To recruit methodological and policy expertise, the project enlisted social scientists and policy experts, who were grouped into 8 teams. The full team of project staff and partners consisted of 34 members⁵. Together, the project team designed the deliverables and the results they expected to achieve in order to make an impact on the way data and evidence would be used in strategic policy making across central and local government in Romania.

Design and execution of the project

Purpose of the ESF-supported project

The overall purpose of the ESF-supported project 'State of the Nation: Building an Innovative Tool for the Development of Evidence-based Policy-Making' was to create a set of sustainable development indicators and to collect statistical data to support policy makers in central and local governments to develop evidence-based policy making. Specifically, the project aimed to achieve the following objectives⁶: to develop a system of socio-economic indicators and methodology that are relevant to Romania's sustainable development, in order to improve decision-making at central and local government levels; to create a 'statistical data aggregator' that synthetically captures the state of the nation – a multidisciplinary database that contains existing socio-economic aggregate and synthetic data; to collect data concerning public perceptions on relevant topics relating to the country's sustainable development; and to develop future public policy initiatives that make use of the aggregator.

The project leaders' goal was to create a relevant and integrated dataset using a coherent methodology that centres on sustainable development. They planned to make the tool available online, and to present it in an attractive and user-friendly manner. The tool would be promoted across the country to raise awareness, with capacity building and training provided on using the system. The aggregator included 100 indicators⁷ and provided time-series data from 1990 to the present, together with snapshots of the 'state of the nation' in relation to 12 sustainable development areas: 1) demographics, the labour market and quality of life; 2) education and culture; 3) energy and natural resources; 4) economic development and infrastructure; 5) agriculture, food and food security; 6) governance and social capital; 7) environment and sustainable development; 8) health; 9) research, technology and innovation; 10) finance and financial capital; 11) national security; and 12) the European and global context of development. The multiple dimensions of sustainable development captured by the project are rendered graphically in Figure 1 below. The 12 symbols on the map symbolise the 12 sustainable development areas covered by the project while the connecting dots indicate that the development areas are inter-connected and thus need to be holistically addressed nationwide.

⁵ The full list is available at: <http://starea-natiunii.ro/index.php/en/about-the-project/team> (accessed: 11/06/2019).

⁶ General Secretariat of Government (2016), *The State of Nation: Building an Innovative Tool for Development of Evidence-Based Policy-Making*, Project fiche.

⁷ The aggregator is available for use in both Romanian and English at: <http://romania-durabila.gov.ro> (accessed: 29/11/2019).

Figure 1. Visualisation used in the project to depict the concept of sustainable development



Source: General Secretariat of Government, Romania

The project aimed to offer a governance dashboard that is available 24/7 to decision-makers and to all other interested parties on key areas of sustainable development that affect every citizen. By popularising the data, Lelia Oanță and her colleagues were also interested in engaging stakeholders in public debate and focusing attention on key dimensions of Romania's present and future development. The tool was also developed to improve statistical collaboration between institutions in Romania, and to better align the country with European statistical standards. Describing the urgent need for the initiative one beneficiary explained: 'Romania does not have such an aggregator, and lacks a culture of data collection and evidence-based policy making... What is the state of the nation? [It] could be described as... internal fracture... a country that is in the course of depopulation and with serious trust issues. Maybe this picture is too critical, but we cannot continue to look elsewhere for solutions'⁸.

Key developments and milestones during the implementation of the project

Once the project leaders had set up the extended project team and assigned roles and responsibilities, they moved on to the first key phase of the project: **choosing a set of sustainable development indicators, and designing a methodology to measure them.** The intention of the team was to focus on national development, a guiding concept that aligns with the literature and with European and global practices. They intended to capture various facets of development in a holistic and coherent way, going beyond measuring GDP to include economic growth, inequality, cohesion, distribution, development factors and the international context that impacts the country's development. The project team sought to provide the big picture of Romania's development over time, and to create a database that would enable correlations to be made between different areas of development. To gather good international practices, the team examined the literature and made visits to key international institutions, such as the OECD, the Observatoire Français des Conjonctures Economiques, GESIS, Eurostat, Eurofound and Globalstat, as well as the European Commission. **During the second half of 2017, the team also organised 10 thematic workshops** to gather stakeholder feedback on the proposed indicators. This analysis resulted in the selection of 12 development areas: 1)

⁸ General Secretariat of Government (2017), *State of the Nation: Building an Innovative Tool for the Development of Evidence-Based Policy-Making*, Newsletter January 2017, p. 2.

demographics, the labour market and quality of life; 2) education and culture; 3) energy and natural resources; 4) economic development and infrastructure; 5) agriculture, food and food security; 6) governance and social capital; 7) environment and sustainable development; 8) health; 9) research, technology and innovation; 10) finance and financial capital; 11) national security; 12) the international context.

The next step was to select the indicators. For each development area, the team identified 2-5 sub-areas, together with 10-12 main indicators and 10-15 secondary indicators. While the main indicators contained time-series data, the secondary indicators, although relevant, did not. The team also conducted a gap analysis to identify data that were important but missing from existing data sources. The 'objective' indicators that had been identified were supplemented with perception data that would be gathered via representative surveys on selected topics relevant to the country's development. The reason for this approach was that, within public debate in Romania, subjective data were rarely used in conjunction with objective indicators. The team were interested in engaging with current debates on topics that were high on the political agenda. As far as possible, the choice of indicators followed the concept of sustainable development, although certain constraints in relation to data availability and comparability were taken into account. The project aimed to include in the database time-series data that were comparable at national level, sub-nationally (at the level of Romania's eight development regions), and at the European level between different Central and Eastern European countries. Lelia Oanță, Loredana Radu and their team believed firmly in the necessity for comparable data at all of these levels, and hoped that other countries and the EU would continue to develop similar initiatives. The project held three methodological workshops in Iași, Cluj-Napoca and Bucharest during November 2016 to discuss the proposed methodology and indicators with academic experts and local officials.

To further discuss the project and consult with relevant stakeholders, on 18 January 2017, GSG and SNSPA organised **a national conference under the title 'How to measure Romania's development? Main policy areas, indicators and methodological challenges**. Throughout the course of the project, the project team emphasised the need for broad societal consultation on the country's future, as well as the best way to capture development trends and identify challenges. As Lelia Oanță put it, 'We needed the help of academics, researchers, local experts and all interested stakeholders to validate the system of indicators.' The project team also used these consultation opportunities to promote the project, raise awareness of the need to base policymaking on evidence, and stimulate active participation and engagement. The conference marked the achievement of **the first milestone – the selection of the final list of 100 main indicators grouped into the 12 development areas**. The set of indicators and measurement methodology constituted the project's first deliverable, and were finalised in February 2017.

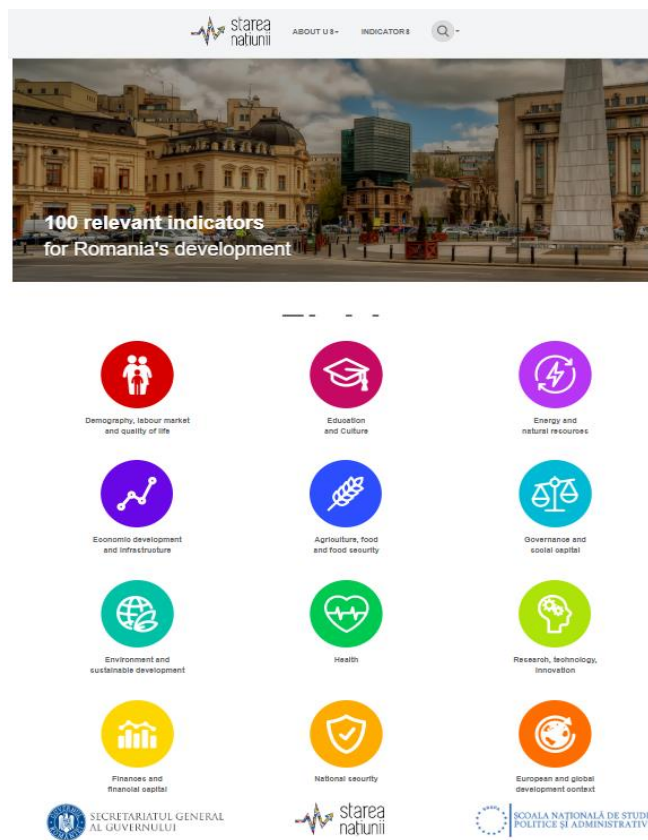
The next phase of the project focused on the development of the online platform. The application, which comprises a web-based interface, client server and smart e-service, is designed to provide information in the form of the statistics required to measure the project's indicators. In March 2017, the project's IT experts first developed the application's web-based interface (shown in Figure 2, below), available in both Romanian and English, and continued working on it throughout the duration of the project. The online aggregator went through over 100 iterations, with successive changes and redesign. The **State of the Nation aggregator** was officially launched in Bucharest on 28-29 November 2017, during the international conference 'Measuring Development in Turbulent Times', organised by the project team in partnership with the European University Institute's GlobalStat programme. This **marked the achievement of a second important milestone**. The event was attended by senior policy makers, and the project leaders used the opportunity to promote the aggregator and raise awareness of its importance

in improving policy making and the use of evidence in Romania and around the world. On this occasion, the team set up important collaborations with experts from the European University Institute, OECD, Overseas Development Institute, Eurostat, Oxford University and SciencesPo for the refinement of the indicators and of the online platform. This led to the publication of the book 'Development in Turbulent Times: The Many Faces of Inequality within Europe', published by Springer in 2019.

Project manager Lelia Oanță, project coordinator Loredana Radu and their team continued to organise thematic consultations and workshops on the 12 development areas. A workshop was convened at the National Bank of Romania on 1 March 2018 to consult with the Bank's experts on the themes of finance, financial capital and economic development. The project team was motivated to build a policy community to support the project, both during and after implementation, as well as to bring together stakeholders to contribute their expertise in a 'national assessment of the health of the country and an honest and data-driven discussion about its future', as they vividly described it.

Once the State of the Nation aggregator became operative, it required testing. The project team convened the first of a series of testing workshops on 27 April 2018 at GSG. Dignitaries and civil servants from GSG took part in the workshop and used the tool for validation, providing feedback on its usefulness. Testing the application represented a first step in the **on-the-job training and capacity building** component of the project, which began on 15 June 2018. This represented the next phase of the project – providing training on the practical use of the tool, and building capacity in its use to develop evidence-based policies in central and local administrations. The first session targeted public officials from central and local public administration in the Bucharest-Ilfov region. The training focused on three topics: sustainable development, the use of indicators, and research communication. Over the following weeks, the project team organised similar sessions with local officials in county prefectures across Romania.

Figure 2. The web-based, English-language interface of 'State of the Nation'



Source: <http://romania-durabila.gov.ro/> (accessed: 29/11/2019).

To further promote the project's results and raise awareness of the aggregator, as well as to build community, Lelia Oanță and her team organised another national conference in Bucharest on 21 September 2018 under the title 'Romania's development: data and reality'. The main purpose of this event was to present the intermediate results of the ESF-funded project and to provide a hands-on demonstration of the aggregator's functionalities. To facilitate training, the project team **created and published an extended, 29-page user guide** that explained step by step how to use the application, its features, and the indicators and development areas covered.

Over the course of the project's three-year lifespan, the team **implemented 30 national surveys (barometers) to assess public perceptions** with regard to the project's development areas, and to complement the indicator-based data that makes up the core of the project. The team also prepared a brief report on each survey, synthesising its key findings. These findings could be accessed through the same web-based application as the aggregator.

The final phase of the project, which began in April 2018, focused on **developing public policy initiatives** that use the aggregator to develop evidence-based policy. This resulted in the use of the aggregator to support the development of *Romania's National Sustainable Development Strategy 2030*⁹. The strategy, coordinated by the Sustainable Development Department (SDD) of GSG, was adopted by the Romanian Government on 9 November 2018 through Government

⁹ Available at: <http://dezvoltaredurabila.gov.ro/web/about/> (accessed: 13/06/2019).

Decision 877/2018. It includes 17 objectives, an action plan, and a framework for monitoring and evaluation.

Main difficulties encountered during the project's implementation

The effective teamwork that developed over the course of the project proved a key ingredient in ensuring the achievement of its deliverables and milestones. The success of the project also stems from its leaders' strong belief in the importance of and need for such a project, and in its timeliness and the opportunities available to make an impact on the way in which policy making is carried out both locally and centrally in Romania. The project leaders also developed a broad consultation process with relevant stakeholders, engaging them actively, requesting their input and widely promoting the project idea and its outputs most notably the State of the Nation aggregator itself. The conferences also proved useful in creating a community around the project and attracting a high-level national and international presence. Being managed by GSG, which represents Romania's centre of government, provided the initiative with great salience.

Despite these success factors, **better coordination between the various departments within GSG and across central government** could further help to channel efforts towards a limited number of reforms and capacity-building initiatives. This is one of the factors that could influence the project's ultimate impact, despite its leaders' best efforts and their assiduous promotion and endorsement.

A similar difficulty was encountered by **the project team that collaborated with the Romanian National Statistical Institute – the primary source of statistical information in the country**. The main aim of the project was to integrate data that had already been collected by national and international bodies; however, the team encountered difficulties in processing data from the Romanian National Statistical Institute due to the difficulty in automating the collection of data using the project's software. In total, 65% of the data included in the database originated from Eurostat; the rest came from other sources. As new data becomes available, it is automatically integrated into the State of the Nation aggregator to maintain its currency.

Conclusion: results, lessons learnt and the role of ESF financial support

Key results and outcomes

The ESF-supported project 'State of the Nation: Building an Innovative Tool for the Development of Evidence-Based Policy Making' was developed by GSG, in partnership with SNSPA in Bucharest and implemented between April 2016 and April 2019. The aim of the project was to create a statistical aggregator containing data on sustainable development in Romania and build capacities in central and local governments to improve evidence-based policy making and strategic work.

The project achieved four key outputs: a system of socio-economic indicators and methodology that are relevant to Romania's sustainable development, and which can improve decision-making at central and local government levels; a 'statistical data aggregator', called the State of the Nation, that synthetically captures the country's multi-faceted development; the collection of data concerning public perceptions on relevant topics relating to the country's sustainable development, gathered via 30 surveys (barometers) implemented over the project's lifespan;

and the development of public policy initiatives that make use of the aggregator for evidence-based policy making. The reports of the barometers are available on the aggregator's website, under each relevant field.

The results of the project went beyond these immediate outputs. First, the multidisciplinary team succeeded in engaging a variety of stakeholders in the preparation and implementation of the project's deliverables. They had two goals in mind: on the one hand, they were interested in gathering expertise on the selection of development areas, indicators and the methodology used to measure the indicators; on the other hand, they also used these opportunities to create a policy community around the project that could support and endorse it both during implementation and after the project ended, to ensure its continuity. The team promoted the project's results in multiple ways: by organising national and international conferences, holding workshops, carrying out study visits to international organisations that supported the project, and through capacity-building sessions. The capacity building targeted officials and civil servants from both central government and county prefectures, and focused on developing the skills necessary to make use of the application, and on promoting evidence-based policies through the use of the application.

Second, the project team succeeded in integrating the State of the Nation into the process of developing Romania's National Sustainable Development Strategy 2030. Moreover, they developed two new projects. The first, entitled 'Sustainable Romania – Developing a strategic and institutional framework to implement Romania's National Strategy for Sustainable Development', aimed to create a framework to support the implementation of Romania's National Sustainable Development Strategy 2030. The second, 'Integrated Monitoring and Evaluation of Public Service Performance', was also developed as a result of the State of the Nation project and concentrated on the evidence-based assessment of the quality of public services across the country. As the project leaders explained, both of these projects aimed to 'put [the statistical aggregator] to good use' – and in doing so, prove its usefulness and impact beyond the timeframe of the initial project. Both of these projects sought to use the results of the ESF-funded project to carry out their work, and in this way ensure the usefulness and sustainability of the aggregator who sustainability would have been limited without subsequent projects. In doing so, they sought to address a major weakness in Romania's administrative system – the limited continuity and impact of reform initiatives¹⁰.

These projects provide some evidence that the initial project's results have begun to be used as part of the working processes of central administration. So far these have been the only documented ways in which the project results have been used in public administration. The project achieved specific objective 1.1 of the ESF support, 'the development and use of common systems and standards in public administration which optimise decision-making processes oriented towards citizens and the business sector' in so far as it created the statistical aggregator and put it to use by connecting it with new reform initiatives. However, there is limited evidence available so far on the impact of the project on outputs such as the adoption of the aggregator by different public organisations or outcomes such as the quality of policy making in Romania. This is an area for further improvement that is linked with insufficient substantive impact assessment and reporting that characterise Romania's public administration more generally. The factors that influence the effectiveness of projects in public administration and capacity building in Romania include: unstable governments; frequent changes in strategies governing the public sector; insufficient institutional collaboration; emphasis on formal monitoring, evaluation and reporting on reforms instead of substantive impact assessment that provides useful evidence on

¹⁰ See, for example, Dan (2019a, 2019b) for a more extensive discussion.

results and provides lessons for better policy making in the future. These same factors also influenced the impact of the State of the Nation project, despite its leaders' commitment and efforts.

At the same time, the project was only recently completed, and thus it is currently difficult to analyse the extent to which the aggregator will continue to be used, and the extent to which it will impact policy making in Romania. Similarly, future research will be needed to assess the degree to which the aggregator will become integrated into the working processes of public organisations. So far, some clear evidence exists that it has impacted policy making at GSG. This is encouraging, given the key role played by this institution in the country's policy making. Local governments could be further stimulated to make use of the statistical aggregator when designing their county and local sustainable development strategies.

Lessons learnt: the role of ESF financial support

The project addressed an important gap within Romania's public sector. Such an idea had been considered for some time, but it was ESF support that was instrumental in providing the necessary resources to make this idea a reality. The project team succeeded in delivering its results on time, but nonetheless acknowledged a few lessons that could be taken on board for future projects.

First, they learned that **institutional collaboration** within the Romanian Government and its agencies is still developing, and that major projects such as the State of the Nation are likely to be supported by some institutions and ignored by others. They noticed a tendency for separate entities to operate in a siloed manner – each collecting data for its own internal needs, with little coordination across organisational boundaries. This, however, did not apply in the case of the collaboration between GSG, a central-government organisation, and SNSPA, an academic institution. Project members from both institutions shared the same ambition and believed in the necessity of the project. They also succeeded in agreeing on the methodologies, indicators and the activities organised throughout the course of the project. In this regard, State of the Nation is a positive example of inter-institutional collaboration. The project team also discovered that key stakeholders may not support a project, despite its relevance to them. This could be due to various reasons: different operating procedures, methodologies and goals, or an institution 'protecting its turf' from perceived competition.

Second, they learned **the importance of ensuring the sustainability of a project's results** by connecting them with other initiatives that could build on previous efforts. The project team discovered that frequent political changes which characterise the Romanian political system could jeopardise the project's sustainability, as well as limiting the usage of the tools, thus affecting their impact. Third, the project leaders also learned that by **incorporating barometer-like, perceptual data** into the new tool in addition to objective data, they could provide a more accurate and useful picture of Romania's development. A fourth lesson that they learned was related to **the usefulness of promoting their project** to increase its salience among top decision-makers, who can then further promote the project. In this regard, the team leaders should continue to engage key decision-makers in national and local administrations, who will ultimately decide what policies Romania should develop, and how policy making should be conducted.

Role of ESF support

In their interviews the project leaders emphasised the role of ESF funding that helped them implement their idea. Without this funding the project could not have been implemented due to a lack of financial and human resources. ESF support enabled the project leaders to design their project by targeting the main area of public administration reform in Romania – evidence-based policy making – that has received increasing attention. The project sought to fill a gap and create the tools and capacities to support central and local policy makers over the short, medium and long term. The focus of the ESF support on capacity building in public administration helped focus the project on administrative capacity building, thus laying the foundation for improvements over time. The project's reporting requirements prompted the project team to plan its activities carefully, to create a policy community, and to actively engage international, national and local stakeholders.

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