

# Impact Evaluation Study of Active Citizens Fund Romania

Consolidated Capacity and  
Sustainability of Civil  
Society Outcome

## REPORT 2024



Conducted by  
**Cosmin Briciu, PhD**



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## Abbreviations

ACF	Active Citizenship Fund
CfP	Call for Projects
CSDF	Civil Society Development Foundation
FMO	Financial Mechanism Office
FO	Fund Operator
ODM	Organizational Development Matrix
PP	Project Promoter
RCRC	Resource Center for Roma Communities
REPF	Romanian Environmental Partnership Foundation

# 1. Executive summary

## 1.1. General description of the ACF programme and its capacity building dimension

Active Citizens Fund (ACF) Romania reached completion in 2024. The aim of the programme was to strengthen civil society and active citizenship and empowering of vulnerable groups, by developing the long-term sustainability and capacity of civil society sector, strengthening its role in promoting democratic participation, active citizenship and human rights, while strengthening bilateral relations with organizations in donor states Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway. Supporting civil society was a key priority for the EEA and Norwegian Grants 2014 – 2021.

The programme was managed in Romania by a consortium of organizations, appointed by the Financial Mechanism Office (FMO) of the EEA and Norwegian Grant as Fund Operator (FO): the Civil Society Development Foundation (CSDF), the Partnership Foundation (REPF), the Resource Center for Roma Communities (RCRC), the PACT Foundation and Frivillighet Norge (The Association of NGOs in Norway).

The programme funded 325 projects at national level through 14 project calls for projects (CfP), with application and evaluation rules and criteria detailed in the Applicant's Guide related to each Call, offering small, large, medium, strategic and rapid response grants structured on 4 outcomes: outcome 1 – Strengthened democratic culture and civic awareness; outcome 2 – NGOs actively defend human rights and promote equal treatment; outcome 3 – Vulnerable groups are empowered; outcome 4 – Enhanced capacity and sustainability of civil society (organizations and the sector). The total re-granting allocation within the framework of Outcome 4 amounted to 5,163,693 Euro, and 35 projects were implemented, with 10 aimed at providing strategic support for capacity building among NGOs, 15 focused on diversifying funding sources, 10 engaged in actions as part of/leading to a structured strategic communication and/or constituency building campaign meant to enhance recognition and visibility of NGOs' roles and activity at local/community or national level and thus contributing to increased engagement with constituencies and civic participation.

Capacity building, the theme of the current evaluation, was delivered through the CfPs under Outcome 4, entirely dedicated to this aim, and those projects contracted through CfPs under the other three Outcomes, for which the promoters chose to allocate a share of the budget to capacity building. This optional line of budgeting was capped at 20% of the total value of the project. Additionally, the Programme incorporated supplementary initiatives targeting the enhancement of capacity within specific categories of NGOs, as well as the broader sector. Notably, these encompassed networks and coalitions, for which strategic grants were awarded with a total of 3,056,508 Euro; NGOs focused on human rights, receiving strategic grants with a cumulative total value of 654,240 Euro; and small or less experienced NGOs primarily situated in rural or small urban areas.

Furthermore, the three Calls for proposals intended for smaller grants (denoted as #1, #4, and #6) collectively featured a budgetary provision amounting to 3,800,000 Euro (and the exact amount of the grants awarded is of 3,374,844.63 Euro). Consequently, the minimum allocation designated for capacity enhancement stands at 12,249,286 Euro. The allocation is even higher, given the option for project promoters (PPs) from the other projected Calls for proposals to apportion 20% of their grant for activities aimed at bolstering organizational

capacity of the Applicant and/or, if the case, of the NGO Partner/s from Romania. Organizational development activities did not need to be in direct conjunction with the project activities. They were required to be formulated based on the requisites of the Applicant and, if applicable, the Romanian Partner/s, and had to be aligned with an organizational development objective. For around two thirds (66,9%) of the projects under other Outcomes, the PPs opted to include a capacity building objective. For these projects the PPs allocated, in relative terms, between a minimum of 0.4% and a maximum 20% of their total project budget, or, in absolute terms, between 680 and 67,637 Eur. This amounted for an additional allocation for capacity building of 2,280,021.85 Eur.

## 1.2. Objectives and scope of the evaluation

The purpose of this impact<sup>1</sup> assessment, planned for the completion of the implementation of the ACF Romania programme, is to assess in depth various variables related to (1) sustainability and (2) the coherence of Outcome 4, and relates additional initiatives.

The objectives of the assessment are to:

- analyze the coherence and alignment of Outcome 4 and additional initiatives,
- analyze the sustainability of Outcome 4 and the additional initiatives implemented through ACF Romania, to understand the long-term impact
- identify the main elements that contribute to the sustainability of Outcome 4 and related initiatives
- generate evidence-based recommendations
- ensure lessons learned are extracted and available for future programmes and initiatives
- identify areas of innovation

All the questions of the interview guides and most of the questions of the questionnaires (beyond those for identification) are assigned to one of the four major evaluation themes: sustainability, coherence, innovation and lessons learned.

## 1.3. Methodology

The study is based on mixed methods research: (i) documentation; (ii) in-depth interviews with representatives of the management entities and of the promoters (the sample criteria are described at pp. 13-14); (iii) two online surveys with promoters, at the level of organizations and projects; (iv) compilation and processing of programme level data.

In-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Bucharest, representatives of two of the organizations that are part of the FO consortium, representatives of a wide sample of PPs, and beneficiaries of those projects where the promoters worked for building the capacity of other organizations part of the target group.

A total of 10 interviews were conducted with PPs from Outcome 4, and 9 interviews with PPs from the other 3 Outcomes. The structure of the qualitative sample reflected the strategic importance of the CfPs under Outcome 4, which mobilized more than 2/3 of the total

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<sup>1</sup> Although the evaluation study was carried out under the general title of "impact evaluation", it does not include a counter-factual element. The aim of the evaluation is to assess the impact of the capacity building component, in terms of its sustainability and coherence, as they are perceived by the main actors involved in implementation, and in the estimates of the evaluator, informed by the quantitative and qualitative evidence collected.

allocation for capacity building budget, and other criteria designed to ensure a balanced representation across CfPs, types and dimension of projects, and development regions.

All the PPs implementing projects under the CfPs under Outcome 4 or with including and Outcome 4 objective were invited to participate to an online survey. This survey consisted of two questionnaires: one focused on the organizational level and another on the project level, (several organizations implemented more than one project). The surveys were piloted and implemented in July 2024. The response rate for the survey with organizations was 67.4% while the response rate for the project survey was 65.2%.<sup>2</sup>

## 1.4. Findings

As per OECD guidance<sup>3</sup>, the concept of coherence is defined as the “compatibility of the intervention with other interventions in a country, sector or institution”. It is classified into: (i) internal coherence, i.e. synergies and interlinkages between the intervention and other interventions of the same organizations and with relevant international norms and standards, supplemented by an analysis of the coherence within the programme, i.e. between its objectives and the implementation process; (ii) external coherence i.e. the consistency of the intervention with other actors’ interventions in the same context.

**The programme is highly coherent with the mission, general profile and history in Romania of the organizations that are part of the consortium** appointed by the FMO in the role of FO. CSDF and REPF maintained this role since the first phase of the Norway SEE and Norway programme in Romania supporting civil society (2004-2009). The strategic importance of the programme for the sector overall seems to be, according with the interviews, an important motivation for the management of the organizations in the consortium to perform this role of FO.

**The programme is highly coherent with its general objective, i.e. “civil society and active citizenship strengthened, and vulnerable groups empowered”,** and especially relevant for the first part of this objective, i.e. “civil society and active citizenship strengthened”.

**The implementation process was coherent with the general objective of the programme,** i.e. “civil society and active citizenship strengthened, and vulnerable groups empowered”. However, the programme did not have an explicit theory of change (ToC) built into its design, to clearly set out how the programme planned to bring about societal change. This lack of an underlying ToC led to the perception shared by some of the stakeholders that the programme was very pragmatical, in respect with its intended purpose to support the resilience of CSOs, and very technical in respect with the modalities chosen for delivering this support.

**The programme is unanimously appreciated by interviewees as sufficiently broad in scope to accommodate the needs and development goals of most CSOs active in Romania.** The structure of the ACF programme in Romania was envisioned by the FO in such a way as to ensure comprehensiveness and inclusivity of its coverage, making it relevant even for the organizations that are less experienced.

**The representatives of all the stakeholders interviewed shared the perception that the high administrative load** (especially the procurement process and the monitoring of activities and

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<sup>2</sup> The questionnaires are attached in Annex 1.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/543e84ed-en/1/3/4/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/543e84ed-en&\\_csp\\_=535d2f2a848b7727d35502d7f36e4885&itemIGO=oecd&itemContentType=book#section-d1e4964](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/543e84ed-en/1/3/4/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/543e84ed-en&_csp_=535d2f2a848b7727d35502d7f36e4885&itemIGO=oecd&itemContentType=book#section-d1e4964)

expenditures) is at odds with the officially assumed objective of the programme to strengthen small and inexperienced NGOs, and **it is a challenge even for some of the more experienced and large organizations.**

All the representatives of the promoters interviewed declared that the capacity building activities financed through ACF Romania were a timely and adequate response to their needs. Furthermore, 113 or **95% of the online survey respondents stated that these activities facilitated the accomplishment of the mission of their organization.**

In the perception of the interviewees, to stimulate development of grassroots, small and inexperienced civil society organizations, in geographical areas, and in thematic areas where the sector is least less developed, **the programme should be more flexible, and the administrative load should be decreased.**

The organizations were asked to rate the projects in respect with their performance against the existing 4 Outcome 4 indicators and 3 Output 4.1 and Output 4.2. indicators. The dynamic of these indicators has been tracked, using quantitative measures<sup>4</sup>, by the promoters and the values are aggregated by the FO<sup>5</sup>. However, the approach taken as part of survey was different: the promoters were invited to offer subjective self-assessments of their performances against these indicators, using scales, and no documents were required for justifying the answers. Around two thirds (**74.0%**) of the respondents to the survey estimate that the experience of having participated to ACF as a promoter has led to the improvement of their organizational governance procedure, **87.0%** estimate that the management procedures of the organization have improved, **91.6%** that the organization's ability to communicate information to the general public has improved, **77.4%** that the organization's funding sources have diversified, and **87.9%** that participation in learning/training funded by the programme was useful for the development of the organization

ACF was one of the main sources of funding for the NGO sector in Romania, and the periods between cycles of funding are regarded by the civil society organizations as critical gaps, often involving reduced budgets and staff cuts. ACF has the particularity of being, in the perception of most of the PPs interviewed, the only available programme supporting some types of capacity development activities for a wide range of organizations eligible to become promoters. **The CfP 9 regarding the diversification of funding sources was mentioned recurrently as a type of support that made ACF singular on the market.** During the last 5 years, for 49 organizations or 41,2% of the respondents, the ACF programme has been the only external source financing capacity building activities.

As per the OECD definition, sustainability is discussed here as „the financial, economic, environmental, and institutional capacities of the systems needed to sustain net benefits over time”.

**Some of the ACF projects had major contributions for maintaining the health and resilience of the CSO environment in Romania.** Sustainability is an important feature of the strategic grants, defined by the FO as those projects effecting systemic changes/preserving the positive

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<sup>4</sup><https://activecitizensfund.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Programme-Indicators.-Guidance-document-2.0.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Compared with the ratio of positive subjective self-assessments varying between 3:4 and 9:10 or total answers across the 7 indicators, the formal self-assessments recorded by the programme's results framework at the end of 2023 varied more widely: from a 14.1% accomplishment rate for indicator 35, to a 313.4% accomplishment rate for indicator 39.

status quo in relevant fields of activity. Beyond sustainability of the gains observed at the level of the promoter organizations and of the activities implemented through projects (discussed below), there are more diffuse sustainability effects that can be witnessed, according with the interviewees. These effects affect the sector overall, and some examples pointed out are qualifications and competences gained by people who are trained even if they shift jobs within the civil society arena, mechanisms of collaboration and participation to decision making created, and a general level of empowerment of the citizens and increased social capital.

**Almost all the projects were assessed to have some continuity: out of the 147 for which answers were obtained, for 78 (51.3%) some of the capacity building activities continued after the projects' completion, for 62 (40.8%) the capacity building activities of the project did not continue as such, but they triggered other activities and processes of organizational development, while 7 projects did have any kind of continuation in terms of activities and processes.**

As part of the online survey, for 23 grants the promoters indicated a link towards a resource created through the projects that they consider at the same time innovative, and useful for other civil society organizations or for any other stakeholders<sup>6</sup>.

### 1.5. Lessons learned

The lessons learned are recommendations beyond the specific situation and the programme in question, with the potential to bring global benefits to programmes of this type:

- **Sufficient timeframes are needed** for the projects with ambitious objectives in terms of the gains in the capacity of the promoter or beneficiary organizations. Most projects that have an ambitious capacity development objective, beyond one-off investments such as mere acquisition of equipment, or payment of membership fees to a representative supra-structure, will typically require longer timeframes (medium, and long-term contracting periods).
- **The selection criteria should ensure that final beneficiary organizations are already engaged in the process of enhancing their capacity**, or fully committed to undertaking all the steps required for doing so.
- **Leveraging the expertise and reputation of the CSOs from donor countries is an important element of the programme.**
- **Many interviewees argued that operational /core cost grants are needed**, especially for consolidated organizations working for the public good, for instance human rights and environment organizations, and for coalitions. This type of financial support is considered vital in the context of the ongoing threats and attacks on democracy in many societies throughout the world, in Europe, and in Romania.
- **The support for small, and inexperienced organizations remains an ongoing need**, irrespective of the level of success in delivering such a support during previous stages of

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<sup>6</sup> The list of these resources has been handed to the FO.



funding. In a dynamic CSO sector, grassroots organizations will emerge constantly, with the accompanying needs for support.

- **A reserve fund is required at programme-level and would be an asset at the level of projects as well.** At the level of the programme, such a budget could be needed for a variety of unforeseen expenditures, such as IT support (in Romania a call center had to be set-up for dealing with the ongoing needs for support in using of the monitoring platform), financial management, investments in communication, and the mitigation of risks (such as the two crises affecting the implementation of ACF).
- **In most cases, for maximizing the success of capacity building activities, a mix of online and face to face activities is needed.**
- At the kick-off of such a programme, **necessary decisions have to be made regarding the trade-off between, on one side, the need to maximize the impact reached and the sustainability of the results, and, on the other side, the aim to increase the coverage and equity of the outcomes.** The programme should ideally allow sufficient space for trial and error and for shared accountability among the managing entities regarding the outcomes, to allow for interventions increasing territorial and social cohesion, and including a wider coverage of the inexperienced, small, and grassroots organizations.

## 1.6. Recommendations

### Macro-Level Strategies

**(1) Shift to Results-Based Management:** ensure the transition from the current focus on technical and financial management, described by the stakeholders interviewed, to a results-based management<sup>7</sup> of the programme. Such a model should ensure that an ambitious and solid ToC becomes the cornerstone for the design of the programme in the new financing cycle.

**(2) Reevaluate Budget Allocations:** reassess the ratio of management budget to implementation budget should be reconsidered, with the increase of the management costs. An increased management budget would allow for an adequate response to the project promoter's demands, as they have been voiced as part of the qualitative research, for exchange and knowledge sharing events and for an increase in the amount of training and coaching provided by the FO.

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<sup>7</sup> RBM is a mindset, a way of working that looks beyond processes, activities, products and services to focus on the actual social and economic benefits of projects and programme at the level of beneficiaries. RBM is a system, and like all systems its components must work harmoniously and cohesively for it to be effective. (Results-Based Management Handbook Applying RBM Concepts and Tools for a Better Urban Future, United Nations Humans Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat))

**(3) Enhance Indicator Framework:** the indicator framework should be reviewed to include specific national indicators. Furthermore, project level reporting could include various qualitative measures of success.

**(4) Continue to support Capacity Building Initiatives:** furthermore, the interviews and the survey indicated a series of capacity building themes that should be supported in the future, adding to the already extensive array covered during the current cycle of funding: mental wellbeing, especially relevant for frontline organizations; digitalization of the sector; systemic change; leadership and strategic management; project management; training and mentorship for project promoters; support for the participation of the management and board members to international conferences; investments in work space; strategic litigation; activities promoting the partnership between public authorities and private for-profit and not-for-profit sectors; professional supervision; and volunteer management and marketing, as well as international volunteering. Furthermore, the representatives of the promoters and FO further suggested that in the future support for building capacity in the area expertise of the promoters is delivered as well.

#### Micro-Level Strategies

**(1) Compile and Share Resources:** the resources created through projects that are valuable for the community and sector overall like training kits, practice tools and other such resources should be compiled, into a publicly available library and its use should be formally and informally supported by the FO.

**(2) Simplify Financial Reporting:** the level of detail of the financial reporting required globally, to all promoters, should be decreased. Whenever the FO needs to look at the expenditures in more detail, a financial audit should be required and used.

**(3) Facilitate Stakeholder Consultations:** formal stakeholder consultations should be organized in a stage of the process and in a format that would facilitate real input into the way the programme is designed.