

Strengthening the Eastern Partnership in Azerbaijan: Challenges in Implementing a Civil Service Training Capacity Program with a Focus on EU Affairs

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Executive Summary

The EU co-funded project “Support to civil service training capacities with a focus on EU affairs” was implemented in cooperation with the Civil Service Commission under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan (CSC). The project had the objectives to support the development of the national civil service training strategy and its implementation and to strengthen the capacities of the CSC to deliver regular, standardized trainings.

The institutional setup of EU (co)financed projects left limited room for changes and adaptation. The project strived to use the small amount of room available to move within these areas and deviate in time, quality, and format from the initial implementation path, but not from the objectives. The political context of the project changed during its implementation, but the project team had to explain and make clear to the CSC that one had to stay within the framework of the agreed objectives, results areas, and activities, even if other areas were more interesting or important for the CSC. The focus on the CSC as the only project partner required implementing activities at the pace of the CSC and in accordance with its views on what was appropriate.

Maybe the greatest hindrance to the implementation of this project as initially planned was the short duration of the project. Due to the limited amount of time, the project team had almost no time to really change the approach to activity implementation; rather, it had to find quick and pragmatic solutions once implementation problems occurred. In GIZ projects, especially in this field of public administration reform, the duration of projects is planned with more realistic timelines, including substantial time spent on the preparation of the project.

Background and context of project

The project “Support to civil service training capacities with a focus on EU affairs” was co-funded by the European Union (EU) and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). The project was implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) in cooperation with the CSC. The project duration was 28 months: from December 2013 to March 2016. Like all projects that utilize EU grants, the basis of the work was the description of action, including a logical framework (logframe) and a corresponding budget. Any changes to the activities or other elements of the logframe or to the budget had to be communicated to the EU – depending on the extent of the change, it might have necessitated a formal amendment to the contract.

Cooperation between the EU and its Eastern European partners, which include the Republic of Azerbaijan, is a crucial part of the EU’s external relations. Human capacities and institutional reforms are being addressed under the Comprehensive Institution Building (CIB)¹ program of the Eastern Partnership (EaP).² The EaP provides for the possibility of gradual integration into the EU economy with enhanced economic and trade relations between partner countries and the EU by establishing a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) in the framework of a future Association Agreement (AA) once the necessary conditions are met. The CIB program was agreed upon by the European Commission and the Azerbaijani government. Based on the Framework Document, Institutional Reform Plans (IRPs) were designed for selected institutions in 2010 in

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- 1 The CIB is a framework jointly developed and implemented by the EU and partner countries. It is specifically intended to help partner countries address the conditionality linked to concluding an Association Agreement and, where relevant, starting and concluding the negotiations on a DCFTA in the framework of the Association Agreement and make progress toward visa liberalization as a long-term goal as well as meet the related commitments.
 - 2 The EaP was launched in 2009 in Prague. It was a new initiative to strengthen relations between the EU and six partner countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine. The EaP seeks to bring partners closer to the EU and promote stability, good governance, and economic development. This initiative is based on shared values such as democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights and basic freedoms, market economy, and sustainable development. For more information, see: <https://eeas.europa.eu/topics/eastern-partnership>

partnership with government representatives and EU member states interested in contributing to the CIB program. With the IRPs, multiannual programs have been identified that bundle and focus support in three priority areas.

It could be observed that the context of the project changed during its implementation, since in June 2014 Azerbaijan suspended the AA negotiations that had started in July 2010. The issue is that the AA – with its objective to achieve closer political relations and gradual economic integration between Azerbaijan and the EU – built a platform for the implementation of the CIB program and IRPs in the country, and thus provided the general framework of this project. Consequently, at one point, the project found itself operating in a new framework. However, in practice, the direct environment of the project did not undergo noticeable changes and continued to be conducive and enabling.

Project objectives

The project addressed the second main objective of the IRP3, which is one of the three Institutional Reform Plans defined for Azerbaijan according to the three priority areas. This project, together with a second project that is being implemented by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), jointly contributed toward achieving the same overall objectives, which are

[t]o strengthen the capacities of the Civil Service Commission under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan (CSC) with regard to management and coordination of civil servants training and professional development function across state bodies and leading the development and implementation of training strategy and training policies.

Contributing to the achievement of the same overall objectives and addressing all three specific objectives of the IRP3 made the overall intervention quite complete and comprehensive. Good cohesion of the two launched projects became a precondition for the successful implementation of the entire intervention.

The project had two specific objectives, which were (i) to support the development of the national civil service training strategy and its implementation (monitoring and evaluation mechanisms and training of the Human Resources Management/ Human Resources Development staff of state bodies) and (ii) to strengthen the capacities of the CSC to deliver reg-

ular training by providing support to the development of standard training modules for priority crosscutting areas supporting the adaptation of state bodies to European standards. In order to achieve the specific objectives foreseen, the project defined three key results as being the most relevant areas for support, with a view to the needs and constraints of the beneficiaries:

1. developing a national civil service training strategy and initiating its implementation,
2. developing and validating standard training modules in EU-related and selected priority areas,
3. establishing a pool of certified trainers who would be able to conduct training in the priority areas.

Their delivery was to strengthen the CSC's capacities to organize and deliver training and provide the basis for the sustainable management and coordination of civil servants' training and professional development across state bodies.

Links and synergies with other projects or programs

The project retained continuity with the EU Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States program "Support to reforms in the field of civil service" (2003–2004), which significantly contributed to the creation of the CSC. Furthermore, the project benefited from the existing collaboration of GIZ with the CSC-SIGMA³ cooperation in the development of a national civil service strategy of Azerbaijan. Furthermore, the project built on previous successful bilateral cooperation between the CSC and GIZ in the field of the reform of civil service (September 2009 to June 2013).

3 SIGMA (Support for Improvement in Governance and Management) is a joint initiative of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the European Union. Its key objective is to strengthen the foundations for improved public governance, and hence support socio-economic development through building the capacities of the public sector, enhancing horizontal governance, and improving the design and implementation of public administration reforms, including proper prioritization, sequencing, and budgeting.

The overall objective of the “Reform of civil service” project was the following: “The conditions for transparent and ‘citizen-oriented’ performance of civil service in central government bodies of Azerbaijan is improved and thus supporting Good Governance.” The key methodological elements were technical and organizational advisory services to the CSC. The project contributed to overall public administration reforms in five fields of intervention, namely: (1) strengthening the organizational capacity of the Civil Service Commission, (2) development of a training and qualification system for civil servants, (3) improvement of communication mechanisms between the Civil Service Commission and its clients, (4) improvement of the merit-based recruitment system for civil servants, and (5) advisory services on strategies and legal provisions for civil service reform.

Today, the CSC has successfully introduced itself as an important player in shaping the future of the civil service. It has earned the CSC a reputation of being a modern organization that is able to achieve significant improvements in the civil service.

Framework for project implementation

The project “Support to civil service training capacities with a focus on EU affairs” was implemented by GIZ in cooperation with the CSC as the single partner of the project. It was not foreseen to involve other institutions in the decision-making processes about activities or to implement activities separate from the CSC with other institutions. The project was a stand-alone project and not attached to an ongoing bilateral or regional project. The initial project duration (from December 2013 to March 2016) had been planned to last for 24 months, with the possibility to be extended one time for four more months.

Like all projects that utilize EU grants, the basis of the work was the description of action, including a logical framework (logframe) and a corresponding budget. Any changes to the activities or other elements of the logframe or to the budget had to be communicated to the EU – bigger changes may have necessitated a formal written amendment to the contract. This structure is very different from the flexible approach that projects financed by BMZ have. BMZ-financed projects can react quickly to a changing political environment and adjust the methodology and activities. Co-financing by the EU leaves limited room for maneuver and

restricted freedom of action and adjustments for the project during implementation. This constraint affected both GIZ and the CSC as the implementing agencies as well as the CSC as the main beneficiary of the project. The EU made it clear from the beginning that they wished to see the agreed objectives achieved by implementing activities in the three defined results areas.

For success, the commitment of the CSC – at the top management and working levels – as well as the involvement and participation in the formulation and implementation of all project activities was crucial. This approach ensured full transparency for the CSC, and thus increased the ownership in the CSC and the sustainability of the achieved results. With the help of an implementation agreement, it was agreed when and how the CSC would be involved in the project activities. One of its guiding principles read as: “All project activities will be implemented in cooperation and with the consent with the Civil Service Commission under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan.” In practice, this agreement meant, for example, that for every agreement, the Terms of Reference (ToR) or other specifications were jointly developed and agreed upon by GIZ and the CSC. Bid and application evaluations on each ToR were done by a panel comprising a CSC representative taking into account the protection of data privacy. Contracts were only awarded based on prior written agreement by the CSC (email). Contracts were only finalized after the quality of the services had also been confirmed in writing by the CSC.

This process ensured full transparency of the project implementation. Such an approach also takes time, and the implementation of project activities had to be adjusted to the capacities of the CSC staff assigned to this action, who were also involved in the regular operations of the CSC.

Challenges in project implementation

According to EU rules for the awarding of contracts, the potential grant recipient has to prepare a set of documents to serve as the project proposal. Subsequently, the description of action for the project was prepared by GIZ and closely coordinated with the CSC. This happened by sending drafts for comments to the CSC. Comments were delivered orally in meetings. *The person in the CSC responsible for the preparation was replaced by a new person at the beginning of the implementation period.* The new person in the CSC was not involved in the detailed planning of the project

proposal and, therefore, had to become familiarized with the logic of the project planning. In the beginning of the project, a stakeholder analysis was jointly conducted, and the operational plan (as the operationalization of the logical framework/logframe) was discussed with the new project manager of the CSC. Because the new person responsible had his own ideas and perspectives of how to best implement the project, some adjustments to the sub-activities had to be made. For example, regarding activities under results area 2, it was decided to limit the scope of the Training Needs Assessment (TNA) in order to define topics for curricula development not only based on results from TNA and to shape the process of the identification of learning objectives differently. The initial plan was to conduct activities under results area 2 in the following chronological order: prepare TNA methodology → conduct nationwide TNAs → identify from TNA results the topics for curricula development → establish thematic expert groups to advise the curricula development → identify experts for curricula development → draft curricula and preliminary approval → pilot training modules → revise curricula and approve final versions.

The implementation period of the action started officially on December 1, 2013. Due to open questions regarding the administrative implementation, the project became operational only in April 2014. Therefore, *activities that had been planned to be implemented consecutively had to be implemented in parallel.*

Development of TNA methodology

After a preparatory mission of the TNA experts and meetings with representatives of training centers in other state bodies and selected HR departments, it became clear that *TNA as an instrument was largely unknown*. So far, such an assessment instrument had not been applied in Azerbaijan. On the basis of the meetings during the fact-finding mission, it was decided that the first TNA should be rolled out not on a national level but with a selected number of pilot institutions. As the TNA methodology was only in a final draft stage, it was impossible to gain the necessary trust among recipients: There was a big fear that the results would be negative and therefore shed a negative light on the institution. After consultation with the experts and the project teams, two state institutions were selected for piloting the TNA. This process was very intensive and took more than

three months. One of the two pilot institutions was the CSC itself; the other one was not really relevant (as its area of responsibility was very narrow, and results from the TNA would not be representative for other state institutions), but *it was not possible to identify a more relevant and central state institution* that was willing to participate in a TNA.

The goal was to develop a TNA methodology that would be available to all state bodies and identify crosscutting training needs as well as sector- or organization-specific training needs. A first draft of the TNA methodology was sent by the TNA experts at the beginning of January 2015 and served as the basis for the first training⁴ on TNA at the end of January. The results from the TNA pilot, which covered two organizations, were analyzed in a workshop with the experts in April 2015. The two pilot TNAs were conducted by the local TNA expert (a member of the team of TNA experts who developed the methodology) and a representative from the CSC. A final draft of a TNA methodology to assess needs in the Azerbaijan civil service was prepared by July 2015, with TNA instruments having been localized to the country context. This final draft had been with the CSC since August 2015 for a final revision. It was planned that once the final Azerbaijani version of the TNA methodology was ready, it would be printed and distributed to state bodies, together with further trainings. It was also planned that the final version would be translated into English to allow the CSC to present and discuss it on an international level with colleagues from other civil service institutions. *Due to the delay on the final draft (the main reason for the delay was the limited personnel resources allocated to the project from the CSC – one person had to manage both (GIZ and UNDP) projects), it was not possible to print and promote the methodology within the timeframe of the EU-funded project.* It was agreed with the CSC and UNDP that the finalization and promotion of the TNA methodology will be supported by the UNDP project, as TNA is an integral part of the standard operation procedures of the future training center. For the CSC's ownership of the methodology, it is essential that the final product be revised by the institution itself. Of course, it would

4 The CSC invited 15 civil servants from nine different state institutions to participate in the training held by one of the international experts and the Azerbaijani expert. Among the participants were representatives from the CSC, the Ministry of Transport, the Ministry of Economy and Industry, the Ministry of Taxes, the State Committee on Property Issues, the State Statistics Committee, the State Social Protection Fund, and the Science and Learning Center of the Ministry of Finance.

have been possible to finalize and print the methodology without a final okay from the CSC's side, but it was to be expected that, in this case, the final product would have been less well accepted.

Development of training modules

With support of the EU-funded project, information on existing training modules and the status of the training materials for these modules were compiled in a comprehensive list. Based on that list as well as on the *list of training needs predefined in the EU call for proposals*,⁵ it was discussed in a meeting between GIZ and the CSC that, besides the expected results from the TNA, there were topics already known for which modern curricula needed to be developed or updated. Five thematic areas for curricula development were specified and agreed with CSC management. With this approach, it was possible to start the process of curricula development in parallel to the TNA methodology development and piloting process. Otherwise, it was feared that the delay in the TNA process would lead to the fact that no – or not enough – training curricula could have been developed within the project.

The learning objectives and main content of the trainings were defined by the project team, agreed with the CSC, and specified in the ToR for the development of the training curricula. The project team, together with the CSC, developed a document defining the elements of standard training that had to be followed by all experts developing training curricula for the CSC. This way, it was ensured that all materials were homogenous and met the same high-quality standard.

5 These topics were identified by the EU during the process of preparing the tender for this grant. Information was collected by experts by conducting a brief training needs analysis. A combination of the most relevant methods was used. In order to get a complete picture from several sources and viewpoints, analysis of existing written materials and documentation was combined with semi-structured and in-depth, face-to-face interviews. Semi-structured interviews provided both quantitative and qualitative information for identifying the training needs of different target groups, as well as allowed the interviewees to provide evidence and describe their ideas regarding the needed training interventions. These interviews with the targeted authorities served also for verifying and updating the information obtained from the written documents.

Consultants developed the training curricula for the five identified subjects. For all five topics, complete sets of training curricula and all supporting materials were discussed, adjusted, and approved before piloting them in June/July 2015. The CSC undertook to validate the materials. After the successful pilots, revisions to the curricula and the training materials were done by the trainer with the support of the CSC. The final set of training toolkits (curricula and supporting materials) were submitted to the CSC and were applied widely thereafter within the project.

Response of the project team to implementation challenges

In reality, the order and scope of the activities had to be adjusted, but due to the limited room for changes with regard to planned activities defined under the results areas of the logframe, any necessary adjustments could only result in a deviation from the planned path to reach the objectives. It was never an option to change the objectives or results areas. The only options were to deviate from the initial plan with regard to time, quality, and format of the activities.

As one example of a necessary deviation during the project implementation, the following situation should be further analyzed: It had been planned to apply the newly developed Training Needs Assessment methodology in a large sample of institutions, but in reality it was only applied in two pilot institutions.

Fact-finding phase

The project had a difficult start. Only after initial administrative problems were solved could the project team start implementing activities. The lengthy process of solving the administrative problems led to mistrust by the CSC in the capabilities of the project team. As a measure that could be implemented very quickly, it was decided to organize a study tour and an international conference as the first activities because they were strongly requested by the CSC. However, because only limited personnel resources were available to GIZ and the CSC, everyone's capacities were greatly reduced due to the preparations for these two events. This further delayed starting the development of the TNA methodology and implementing the nationwide assessment of training needs in the civil service.

In the description of action, it was elaborated and later reconfirmed in inception meetings with the CSC that the essential preparatory step to identify the most relevant EU-related training areas for which training modules for civil servants were needed was to conduct a comprehensive TNA on a national level in the civil service sector. Because the trainings foreseen under this action sought to address training needs that were relevant for all state bodies – excluding sector- or organization-specific training needs – the focus had to be on crosscutting training fields with relevance for target groups related to the negotiation and the implementation of Azerbaijan-EU agreements.

During the fact-finding mission of the TNA expert team, meetings with selected HR managers from different stakeholder organizations were conducted in order to understand their current approaches, processes, and tools. The CSC scheduled meetings only with a selected number of institutions, namely the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy University, the Training Center of Ministry of Finance, the HR Department of Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of Population, the HR Department of the State Committee on Statistics, the Baku Appeal Court, and the Coordination Unit for World Bank-financed projects in the Ministry of Education. These institutions were considered “friendly” institutions by the CSC with counterparts open for initiatives from the CSC. Other institutions that were more central, such as the Ministry of Economy, were not considered for interviews. There was no opportunity to influence the selection process, which was decided by the chairman, head of the CSC. It became evident during these meetings that these institutions had little experience with tools to identify training needs, but also that none of the institutions expressed an interest in conducting – or a need to conduct – such an assessment in their institution.

Preparation for implementation

In the intensive working sessions with experts during the mission, the person in the CSC responsible for project implementation said that, actually, the top management of the CSC was not confident about exposing itself on a national level affecting all state bodies with an untested methodology that is not based on a current decree from the Cabinet of Ministers or the president. There was no other TNA methodology available in Azerbaijan that could have been used instead for this purpose. Without the consent of

CSC management, the plan of a nationwide TNA could not been pursued any further. The only possibility was to use the drafted materials on a smaller (less comprehensive/threatening) scope and to make use of the concept of an existing methodology by adapting it to the context of Azerbaijan and its political landscape.

Decision-making phase

During discussions in a regular working meeting, it was jointly decided not to conduct a TNA on a national level but to implement the methodology on a pilot level in a few selected institutions. The alternative would have been to postpone the TNA implementation until after the methodology had been finalized and promoted, or to cancel the activity completely.

The first alternative was not really an option, as it was clear from the quality of the first draft methodology that its revision would take time, and implementation of a pilot after the approval but within the time span of the project was not realistic.

Furthermore, there would have been no other options, for it was realized that the CSC does not have the organizational and human resources available to approach all institutions in Baku and in the regions – the number of CSC staff was very limited (35 civil servants), and most of the time they were busy conducting recruitment interviews (one of the main tasks of the CSC).

Instead, it was decided that piloting one to three selected tools from the methodology in two to three different organizations would be useful to allow for an in-depth assessment and the combination of several instruments. The decision was taken in a meeting between the CSC, GIZ, and TNA experts, and was backed by CSC management.

Identification of pilot institutions

This resulted in a deviation in nature and format of the planned activity. The initial concept had to be realized with the full involvement and ownership of the CSC. The decision to have a pilot implementation in a few institutions at least offered an opportunity to try the instruments within a local environment and produce authentic results for the second training/workshop with the experts focusing on analysis of the TNA results.

The identification of these selected pilot institutions still proved to be very difficult for the CSC, although the process was started right after the fact-finding mission. The factors for these difficulties related both to the general motivation of organizations to conduct TNAs, their relationships with the CSC, and their organizational configurations.

In the time between the fact-finding mission in October 2014 and the first training on the TNA methodology in January 2015, it was the task of the CSC to use their relationships with other state institutions to identify relevant pilot institutions. They did not want visible support from GIZ in this task. GIZ provided support to the CSC as the partner organization in fulfilling its responsibilities, but it was not to act on behalf of the organization. The CSC, together with GIZ, drafted a concept paper describing the piloting process of TNA tools. In this concept, there was great emphasis asserting that the assessment was not to be regarded as a test of the capacities of the institution but of the applicability of the developed tools in Azerbaijan. The objective of the pilot was to test several tools of the TNA to evaluate their effectiveness in organizing the targeted training of civil servants or other civil service employees in Azerbaijan. Those organizations that participated would not only gain experience with the specific tool but also they would be able to directly use the results of the assessment to develop their own training or staff development plans. The concept offered the prospect that some of their training needs would be directly covered by the CSC training center within the project.

The concept paper was sent by the CSC to the selected state bodies from whom they sensed a general interest. The CSC chose to approach selected state bodies on a personal level (by phone and email). With this approach, the CSC expected to get quicker and more honest feedback on their proposal, as official letters tended to be answered with long delays or vague answers.

Pilot application

Finally, one of the two pilot institutions became the CSC itself. The other pilot institution was the State Motor Transport Service of the Ministry of Transport of the Republic of Azerbaijan. However, it was clear from the beginning that the results of the TNA from the second institution would only be partially transferable to other civil service institutions in Azerbai-

jan. It was impossible to identify a more relevant and central state institution that was willing to participate in a TNA.

Again, the decision had to be made about whether to continue with the activity, even if the quality of the results deviated from what was initially planned. It was jointly decided to continue, because at least some of the instruments could be tested in a real-life situation. As prior experience with the application of TNA instruments in Azerbaijan largely did not exist, any test or real-life application provided an added value. One could have thought of mounting an awareness-raising campaign about the benefits of TNAs and attempted to gain the interest of more relevant institutions. But the tight time schedule would not permit these activities.

The actual pilot implementation of the TNA faced some critical problems:

- The interviews (interviews and tests were the selected TNA instruments to be tested) could not be delivered in an open-minded way. The selected institution was unprepared for a TNA process, and its top management tried to keep information a secret. It seemed that the institution did not believe in the confidentiality of the pilot and could not see the identification of needs as being an opportunity that could help to improve the capacities of the staff, but rather as a sign of failure of their service delivery. As it is common in Azerbaijan that the president dissolves institutions overnight, the institution's fear of making itself vulnerable was understandable.
- The questionnaires only partially followed the advice of the handbook and, therefore, had partially poor results.

Relevance of results from pilot

From a learning perspective, the results were relevant, and they were summarized. The consolidated results were discussed in a joint workshop at the end of April 2015 in which TNA experts, GIZ, the CSC, the other pilot institution, as well as other state bodies attended. The workshop especially aimed to build capacity in the area of interpretation of TNA results and to draw the right conclusions. As the next step after the finalization and printing of the methodology, further trainings and other promotion activities on TNA implementation with government officials will be conducted

by the UNDP project. The TNA is one crucial part in their development of standard operation procedures for the future CSC training center.

Maybe the greatest challenge for the implementation of this activity as initially planned was the short duration of the project: 24 months plus four additional months agreed in June 2015 were foreseen to implement this complex project in the field of institution-building and public administration reform. Due to the limited time and the knowledge that no extension was possible according to EU regulations, the project had almost no time to really change the approach to activity implementation but rather had to find quick and pragmatic solutions once implementation problems occurred. This can lead to deviations in format, quality, and time of implementation of activities. Nevertheless, the project was finished on March 31, 2016, on a very positive note and praised by the CSC, the EU Delegation, and the German Embassy. Even if in some areas there were substantial implementation problems, in general the project was successful in achieving the targeted objectives in the three defined results areas.

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