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E-Learning for all. A cross border project for strengthening the overall capacities of the CSOs

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Abstract

This article aims to present an e-learning conceptual framework that will lead to strengthen the overall capacities and accountability of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). It will also provide ways to guarantee the quality of services of CSOs as well as ways to build up a sustainable role of them in the democratic process through e-learning. CSOs in EU have a well-developed content for the capacity development and taking this into consideration, we will use some already implemented projects as good examples for the present study. An important component of those projects was the Capacity Development of CSOs, the main objective being to increase the capacity of CSO representatives. This was done by offering them new knowledge on contemporary methodologies and techniques as well as the opportunity for exchange and practical knowledge via the development and delivery of e-learning capacity building programmes. This encompasses regional and national trainings, regional and national conferences, development of educational materials and so on. What is important is the fact that critical thinking of CSOs is increasing mostly because of the applied e-learning and blended learning approaches to the trainings and capacity building programmes to the organizations. Many CSOs in EU conduct local/regional/country level training courses on topics of common interest. Manuals and training guides are being published as part of the initiative – but are those of any good? Why not use electronic media to develop a set of basic training components to successfully reach the target audience? The value of this paper came from the research we have made among the e-learning projects implemented in Romania and Turkey, trying to find out if the objectives and the scopes have been fulfilled properly. The way we are going to do that, is by analysing the outputs of the projects we have implemented as partners or leaders, looking mostly to the dissemination plans.

Keywords: Civil Society Organisations, e-learning framework, guideline;

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1. Introduction

Many Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) are conducting local/regional/country level training courses on different topics of interest. As part of those initiatives, there are being published different manuals and trainers' guides, usually in the national languages of the region. Some of these courses are also being offered as an e-learning programme. Despite of all these efforts, there is still a substantial demand for individual capacity building of the CSOs. However, the priority nowadays is to develop a set of basic training components and to introduce and implement them in collaboration with a group of selected resource persons that attended courses, while for the next it is anticipated to hand over the basic training to partner organisations and training institutions and to enable them to be long-term training providers to the CSOs in the region, thus ensuring the long-term sustainability of the action's outcomes (Hutter & O'Mahony, 2004). This process is being supported by programmes for training the instructors, the provision of manuals and trainers' guidelines including ready-made PowerPoint presentations, and tools that can help in applying contemporary teaching and learning methodologies, techniques and technologies in order to maximise effects and outreach (including small and rural CSOs) of the learning (Tirziu & Vrabie, 2015). In addition, there are huge amounts of well-developed content for the capacity development of CSOs in order to make them available for all CSOs members. One of the main problems is the lack of budgeting and the lack of time for establishing these trainings for all CSOs members (Baltac, 2011). Even though we deal with this problem, creating such e-learning programs for the CSOs raises other issues, such as the software licenses and the need of companies for support and maintenance of the e-learning system (Matei & Savulescu, 2013). Hence it is not always possible for the CSOs to create such e-learning environments in effective and pedagogically beneficial ways (Vrabie, 2014).

2. Papers' aim

This article is addressed to the CSOs that have limited budgets but which conduct, under the training premises, a well-developed content for the capacity development. Hence make this very valuable content available for all CSOs members and enhancing these programmes with an e-learning component will increase the wider outreach of these programs across the region. Accordingly, this paper aims to develop an e-learning framework which will enable the CSOs to enhance their training programs and increase their wider outreach within the countries and across the region with a very low budget.

3. Context

Europe 2020 Strategic Plan clearly expresses on the sixth pillar – named “Enhancing digital literacy, skills and inclusion” that “everyone needs enhanced digital skills to fully participate in society”. Here, on the action 61, it says that the actions that should be made must start with “developing an online consumer education tool on new media technologies”.

Romania's National Action Plan (2014-2016), elaborated in June 2014, says on the third chapter – named “Human resource training and development” the following: “[...] it is essential that the public servants already in charge with this process [electronic service delivery] are trained accordingly. Subsequently, the trainees will be able to disseminate the acquired knowledge and best practices. The courses will focus on the advantages of using open data for the administration, business sector and society. The trainees will be taught how to publish and use open data based on best practices”.

In Turkey's 10th Development Plan (2014-2018), Item 132 says that “there is a need for a more efficient public management and stronger justice system for qualified individuals and a strong society. In this context, constitution of a justice system that protects the rights of all citizens, reduces the uncertainties and increases the predictability in the economy; existence of a public management which maximizes the use of ICT and which is flexible, participative and transparent in the processes of

decision-making and implementation and has sufficient institutional capacity and existence of a strong civil society has priority”.

Lifelong Learning Strategy Report (2014-2018), Item 4.2. emphasizes the importance of “the dialog” between the CSOs and importance of CSO for lifelong learning implementation. In addition, Item 2 also stresses the importance of using technology for lifelong learning.

4. E-learning projects implementation risks

A successful e-learning project aims to implement a strong and structured risk management approach (Turkish Informatics Association, 2015). This approach will consist of the following activities:

- **Risk identification:** the identification of uncertainties with potentially negative consequences for the project is the foundation of the risk management process (Islam & Ryan, 2015);
- **Risk analysis:** it quantifies the threat posed by each risk. It also helps determine the intensity with which the risk can affect the project and indicates what resources to apply in order to control or eliminate the risks. Risk analysis should be an on-going process. Any new or changed risks will be incorporated into the analysis from the project’s start to its completion (Miorando et al. 2014);
- **Risk mitigation:** this is the action taken to eliminate, reduce, or minimize the impact of project risks. In this activity, the management should identify and propose the risk mitigation measures (the set of actions directed at minimizing the potential negative impacts of risks) (Zhang & Yang, 2014);
- **Monitoring of risk mitigation:** during this activity, the management should implement and direct mitigation actions, monitor the mitigation actions to determine whether they achieve the goals they were designed for and adjust the mitigation strategies as needed. It will further be taken action during the project to identify risks and minimize their impact and the likelihood of their occurrence (Zhang & Yang, 2014).

The table below summarizes the risks that can intervene in an e-learning project’s implementation and in the strategy for managing and minimizing these risks. The identification of risks is partially based on the risks outlined in this action.

Table 1. Identified risks	
Key Risks	Risk Management Strategy – Action Items
1	<p>Bureaucratic Delays</p> <p>This type of delays should be foreseen and carefully addressed beforehand;</p> <p>Flexibility of the team to provide ad-hoc and practical advice on implementation measures;</p> <p>Ongoing dialogue with key counterparts to ensure early identification of potential “trouble spots”.</p>
2	<p>Inability of Contract/Project Manager or key staff of beneficiary and target groups to participate in relevant project activities during the project’s implementation</p> <p>It should be ensured by the Beneficiary that relevant staff maintains their commitment to the project for the contractual period;</p> <p>Specific attention towards the planning and monitoring of the process.</p>
3	<p>Contract estimates given in the action prove to be too low regarding the scope of work</p> <p>Clear identification of the project’s scope, expectations and outputs;</p> <p>Design of the cost approach.</p>
4	<p>Lack of interest and suitable cooperation of the relevant bodies</p> <p>Identification of this risk in the early stage of the project’s implementation;</p> <p>Specific attention to the implementation of communication plan for raising awareness about the project’s objectives and benefits that could increase the participation.</p>
5	<p>Non-availability or limited mobilization</p> <p>Close cooperation and precise planning with the Beneficiary has to be</p>

of project staff for the training activities may have a negative impact on the possibility of providing the most effectively assistance	ensured; Information on the project's activities is disseminated in a timely manner.
6 Being late in getting the necessary permissions for access to the resources	The management should handle this issue on time.

5. Method. Building a dissemination plan

The objective of a Dissemination Plan is to identify and organize the activities to be performed in order to promote the exploitation of the action's results and the widest dissemination of knowledge from the action. Special attention will also be paid to the transfer of knowledge from other EU countries (Georgescu & Popescul, 2015).

To fulfil the aims of this action, it should be made by various focus groups and committees through formal and informal mechanisms, especially via dialogue (Calabrese & Mastroberardino, 2015). Clear channels of communications between the action partners as well as with the wider community will play a crucial role in the success of the action.

The internal communication infrastructure must include provision of convenient and appropriate mechanisms for facilitating the free flow of information (strategy, administrative and practical) across the project's sites as appropriate for the development of an extensively distributed but coherently managed single action.

An infrastructure for communications (and therefore dissemination) should be established, by building a robust framework in which dialogue and interaction can take place (Georgescu & Popescul, 2015). This equally applies to internal and external communication.

5.1. Establishing constant conduits within and without the community

These will be used to disseminate information and solicit input into the action work. Contact can be maintained and facilitated through:

- **Electronic mailing lists**

Internal Lists: an electronic mailing list should be established for the action which aims to provide a mechanism for internal project communications. Currently, this includes members of the action's team from each partner site.

External Lists: digital archiving covers many areas and it may be difficult to reach all stakeholders without using several existing lists to communicate to the wider community. Although there may be advantages in establishing a new overarching list, it will be useful to use existing mailing lists for external communications (Herkert & Nielsen, 1998).

- **Electronic mailing lists**

Focus groups should be used as a mechanism for external communication. The purpose of these groups is to provide a feedback loop for formative evaluation, as a means of involving into the action all the stakeholders and also as a means of communication and dissemination. Regular focus groups should be organized to solicit input from the community's wider action (Carey, 2015).

- **Working groups**

Similarly working groups for internal action can be used to manage the project's work and provide an effective mechanism for formative action evaluation. The work of these groups should be focused on specific practical issues (Carey, 2015).

5.2. Developing a publication programme

At a minimum, this should comprise:

- Targeted informational literature designed to raise awareness about the action and its activities;
- Instructional literature derived from experience across the action. Such literature may include methodological guidelines as well as strategic guides for good practice (including organizational and financial implications for CSOs) (Tenopir & King, 2014).

5.3. Developing effective mechanisms for disseminating material

• The World Wide Web

In addition to the use of the electronic mailing lists, a Web presence should be established. This should include:

- information about the action and its activities – including contact details, background information, working papers, events (seminars, workshops, conferences) etc.;
- instructional materials as discussed above (in this respect, the Web acts as a principal means of publication);
- frequent news and updates in order to keep the community informed.

For internal communication, the Web site may also be used by the action as the principal means of distributing administrative, policy and procedural documents for the use of the action's members. Where necessary, documents and sets of documents may be accommodated on password protected pages and thus made accessible to selected individuals and/or groups (Carpenter 2012).

• Printed publications

It might be a good idea to maintain printed copies of selected informational/publicity and/or instructional materials for distribution either freely or on a cost-recovery basis.

• Promoting dissemination, advocacy and other events

Conferences, workshops, seminars will be organised by the project to raise awareness about the action's activities, resources, etc., as well as to act as training venues for disseminating instructional material as required by a particular stakeholder community or communities.

In addition, a good idea is to supplement such events with those which attempt to address issues from an integrative, cross-sectorial, or horizontal perspective not necessarily available to some of the stakeholder communities (Dimitrios, Sakas & Vlachos, 2014). Where appropriate, the action should work with other programmes and organisations on this type of events.

• Supported and assisted dissemination

There should be made plans to hold a series of dissemination events specifically aimed at CSOs towards the end of the action. This series of events should provide on-site support for institutions concerned with digital preservation and developing sensible long-term strategies for access and preservation of electronic materials. The action will bring its knowledge and experience to these

events as a way of providing support and hands-on assistance to CSOs within the context of their local situation (Dimitrios, Sakas & Vlachos, 2014). These events may be based on the experience of the action's test-site libraries.

6. Discussion, conclusion and estimated results

Increased understanding of the CSOs – including all the steps and elements they need to undertake in adapting certain training content to the e-learning or blended learning context, is the result that should be expressed as a goal from the very beginning. By that, it must be taken into consideration (1) the increased critical thinking of CSOs regarding the Web and the advantages and disadvantages of applying e-learning and blended learning approaches to trainings and capacity building programmes of the organizations (Zacharis, 2015), and (2) the gained knowledge on how to adapt the open source platforms (like Moodle, for example) in order to carry out the training with the e-learning and/or blended learning components (Vrabie, 2013). If e-learning projects succeed, there will be other groups that will benefit directly from that. We might include on these list: representatives of CSO counterpart institutions, members of CSOs – for example staff members at CSO liaison offices, as well as CSO network and support organisations. This will help to establish a development of permanent dialogue among partners, authorities and the civil society, to connect with partners and to make an enabled environment for civil society as an institutional actor considerably effective and efficient in policy making.

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