MIDTERM EVALUATION

Project: “Provision to the improvement of living conditions of IDPs and returnees from readmission process in Serbia and support to the sustainable return to Kosovo*/Economic Strengthening for a Sustainable Return to Kosovo”

Coordinator of the Action: CARE Deutschland e.V.

Project implemented by: CARE International Balkan, Serbia office

Contract number: 2018/397-386

Project duration: 24 months (July 11, 2018 – July 11, 2020)

Project period included in the Midterm Evaluation: July 11, 2018 – October 31, 2019

Midterm Evaluation Report prepared by: Sibina Golubovic, CARE Emergency Response Team Leader
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>IDP</td>
<td>Internally Displaced Person</td>
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<td>CSO</td>
<td>Civil Society Organisation</td>
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<td>SCRM</td>
<td>Serbian Commissariat for Refugees and Migration</td>
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<td>MTE</td>
<td>Mid-term Evaluation</td>
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<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<td>PMU</td>
<td>Project Monitoring Unit</td>
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<td>MOU</td>
<td>Memorandum of Understanding</td>
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<td>TOR</td>
<td>Terms of Reference</td>
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<td>PBS</td>
<td>Public Service Broadcaster</td>
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<td>I(NGO)</td>
<td>International Non-Governmental Organizations</td>
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<td>EC</td>
<td>European Commission</td>
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<td>RTS</td>
<td>Radio Television Serbia</td>
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<td>IOM</td>
<td>International Organization for Migration</td>
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<td>DRC</td>
<td>Danish Refugee Council</td>
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<td>ASB</td>
<td>Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund</td>
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<td>IPA</td>
<td>Instrument for Pre-Accession</td>
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Executive Summary

Purpose and scope of the evaluation
The mid-term evaluation (MTE) was implemented to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the project progress, to summarise the achieved results and determine directions for further project interventions. The project underwent a number of changes from the initial phase throughout the duration of the first year and beginning of the second year of implementation, and therefore the goal of the evaluation is also to provide a better understanding and deeper insight into those changes and compare the achieved results against the initial plans, and flesh out lessons learnt and recommendations for the further course of the project. The evaluation was done as an internal assessment, and a participatory and self-reflecting exercise, with support of CARE and Nexus project teams.

Evaluation background
The project “Economic Strengthening for a Sustainable Return to Kosovo”, contract number: 2018/397-386 is being implemented over a period of 24 months, from July 11, 2018 to July 11, 2020. It is funded by the Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Serbia and implemented in Serbia, specifically South Serbia, Pcinja District, the City of Vranje, and municipalities Vladicin Han, Surdulica, Bosilegrad, Trgovicte, Bujanovac and Presevo, by CARE and local CSO Nexus as a project partner, and municipality of Vranje, as the supporting project partner.

The overall goal of the project is to enable IDPs and returnees from the readmission process to exercise their full rights, supported by enabling migration policies and processes in Republic of Serbia. This wider impact is planned to be achieved through reaching the specific objective - to support the sustainable process of return to Kosovo, for IDPs and readmissants - persons returned to Republic of Serbia according to the Readmission Agreement in the process of reintegration. The Action was envisaged to provide actions to support a sustainable return of beneficiaries interested to move their households and businesses to Kosovo*. As the narrative interim report demonstrated, there were some alterations in the setup of the project as a result of external political circumstances, which influenced these activities.

Evaluation process and methodology
The overall objectives of the MTE are:

1. To assess the project’s current performance against the below criteria for standard evaluations as relevant (e.g. at MTE stage efficiency and effectiveness will have higher relevance than assessing sustainability).
2. A qualitative review of progress against the project logical framework.
3. To make recommendations to improve current project implementation to achieve objectives and maximise impact
4. To identify lessons learned and recommendations to improve future programming.

The midterm evaluation took place in November 2019, during the second year of the project. The evaluator conducted a desktop research which included review of the project proposal, baseline study, with accompanying materials and annexes, interim narrative report, and monitoring tools, and reviewed the project log frame. CARE project team (evaluator, Project Manager and Regional Director of CARE) conducted a workshop with Nexus project team in Vranje as the main project partner, and several interviews - with local trustee of Commissariat for Refugees and Migration/SCRM), and head of public service department in municipality of Vranje. Interview was also conducted with Mirjana Sevaljevic and Radmila Majstorovic from the Serbian Government Office for Kosovo and Metohija in Belgrade.

Such form was selected so as to provide a participatory approach to evaluation, capturing the perspectives of key stakeholders. CARE and Nexus project teams, as the primary implementors, conducted in-depth consultation and reviewing of the project for the purpose of the evaluation, however, qualitative consultative process was ongoing since the beginning of the project.
Key findings

❖ Relevance: The Action has been assessed as relevant and important, especially from the aspect of addressing vulnerabilities of the target group: IDPs from Kosovo, on top of sharing the issues of poverty and high unemployment with general population, especially in poorest areas such as south Serbia, have particular problems regarding access to property in Kosovo. The target group is in need of proper information and advisory services on how to obtain their rights and, in addition, they need concrete support for resolving their economic difficulties. Although the Action was designed as a support to sustainable return, with changes to the specific objective and outputs, as proposed by the Narrative Interim Report and this MTE, the Action would increase its significance by supporting economic betterment of the targeted groups, and improving their economic status, while still leaving the option of the return open, should the circumstances allow for it.

Thematic scope has been well identified by CARE and the partners as relevant. On that track, the project logic has been described as comprehensive, well designed, based on lessons learned from other projects similar in nature, developed in a transparent and participatory process with a holistic and a well balanced approach toward addressing burning issues –but also taking into consideration the local, national and regional needs, capacities of local organizations and specifics of the local gaps and context. Further, the project logic was described as comprehensive and well designed; with phase approach to development of entrepreneurial ideas, and gradual scaling up of the support to target group.

❖ Effectiveness: The overall results accomplished during the first year of the project implementation have been assessed as positive. Two thirds of the intended activities have been or are in progress, according to the planned timeline, though it has to be noted that the Action suffered a delayed inception period and was late in starting the output related activities. In addition, the number of planned beneficiaries within a target group was not reached, at least not in all activities. The corrections proposed in the Interim Narrative Report and this MTE aim to correct the targets to a realistic scope, based on the experiences of the first project year.

❖ Efficiency: CARE and Nexus have used the available resources strategically and efficiently and the overall management has been assessed as effective, supportive and nurturing. All important issues were raised with the PMU, the donor, or with relevant partner/stakeholder on the local or national level; the process of consultations and discussions on relevant issues was transparent and timely. However, communication and closer cooperation with local stakeholders remains an area which could benefit from improvement.

❖ Sustainability: Since the project is in the second year of the implementation and in-kind grants have not been distributed, and vocational trainings have not been implemented yet, it remains difficult at the time of drafting MTE to assess the potential sustainability of the Action. It is certain that the changed focus of the Action from sustainable return to increasing skills and employability of the target group would certainly contribute to building a stronger and more resilient target group, provided with business skills through trainings and advisory services of Nexus. However, having in mind that target groups are facing multiple vulnerabilities, further support to the target group is beyond doubt very much needed.

❖ Monitoring and learning: The Action has designed a simple and easy to use monitoring tool which tracks the progress per objective, and outputs, maintained by the project partner Nexus, as the field operating arm of CARE. So far, the project has demonstrated a sound management structure, which enables monitoring and learning; the changes which had been noted were communicated to the donor and immediate changes were proposed. There are no proposed changes to the monitoring tools at the time of drafting this MTE report.

❖ Assessment of the specific management arrangements (staffing structure, quality of partnership relationships, technical assistance provided): Management structure on level of CARE is sufficient and adequate for the project of this size and budget, and it is possible to track and monitor all aspects of the Action. Staffing structure of CARE and Nexus has been assessed as adequate, with even distribution of tasks and delegation of duties; approach to management of both organizations is complementary with CARE managing nation-wide stakeholders and Nexus being in charge of the local partnerships. The Action envisaged use of local resources throughout the project, and this has been one of the strong advantages of the project. However, forging closer ties with partners,
especially on the local level, which could lead to more fruitful cooperation and enhanced project results, has not been fully established.

**Recommendations for the remaining course of the Action:**

Based on discussions with participants in the MTE, as well as analysis of achieved results, the following steps have been recommended by the evaluator to be implemented during remaining course of the Action:

1. **Building stronger ties and partnerships on the local level:** It is of utmost importance to have the full and welcoming participation of all local stakeholders for implementation of the Action, and though the project is in the second year, it would be still quite relevant to work on establishment of those connections on the local level, by both partners. Efforts should also be invested into development of stronger cooperation with the Trustee for Refugees and Displaced Persons of the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration in Vranje by both partners.

2. **Ensuring clear and direct communication channels through greater presence in the field:** The project teams are advised to increase time spent in the field and engage in communication with local stakeholders and partners as well as with the target groups. More local project-related and induced events could contribute to removing any obstacles along the way of project implementation, while ensuring stakeholder communication and collaboration.

3. **Maintaining a dynamic pace of the project:** It is recommended to keep the project pace under tight control in the remaining part of the second year of the Action, to pinpoint any issues that might cause further delays and readily and quickly tackle them to enable smooth running of the Action.

4. **Visibility and outreach:** The Action results, if possible and should budget allow for it, could be documented through appropriate media content to increase visibility of the project and ensure greater outreach of project results.
1. **Intervention Logic of the project**

The project “Economic Strengthening for a Sustainable Return to Kosovo” is contributing to the facilitation of access to rights for IDPs and returnees from the readmission process (readmissants), supported by enabling migration policies and processes in the Republic of Serbia. The goal of the project is to support the sustainable process of return to Kosovo, for IDPs and readmissants - persons returned to Republic of Serbia according to the Readmission Agreement in the process of reintegration.

The Action is envisaged to undertake concrete actions to support a sustainable return of beneficiaries interested to move their households and businesses to Kosovo*. It is implemented over the period of 24 months in southern Serbia, in Pcinja district.

The Action is primarily envisaged to work on increasing employability and self-employability of beneficiaries, by:

- organising trainings for business development planning,
- open call for application for financial support to third parties,
- providing in-kind grants for business start-ups to the most successful candidates, and
- organising vocational trainings for owners and potential employees of the business start-ups.

This goal was intended to be facilitated through the initial stage of the project, which included assessment of current economic status and capacity of IDPs and readmissants in Pcinja region and their attitudes towards the return to Kosovo to obtain relevant information around the constantly changing economic status of IDPs and readmissants, as well as review the current state strategies on the issue of return to Kosovo and existing programs and stakeholders involved; workshops with representatives of local authorities and media of Pcinja district to present the results; production of information-sharing materials for the project outreach campaign and organisation of the outreach campaign - announcing information on support for the return to Kosovo offered by the project; and lastly, widening the reach of the project to include the possibility for applicants from other parts of Serbia to participate, mainly from the neighbouring Niski and Jablanicki districts, and maintain cooperation with the local and national stakeholders that may assist with reaching potential applicants.

In addition, the Action envisaged:

- capacity building for partner organization Nexus to serve as a regional advisory service for administrative issues regarding relocation to Kosovo,
- provision of administrative and legal assistance regarding relocation issues by Nexus
- go-and-see visits to Kosovo, and
- organisation of transportation for in-kind grant beneficiaries and their businesses to Kosovo.

These activities and expected results are structured within the project into three outputs:

**Output 1:** Support for sustainable return to Kosovo offered by the project is widely promoted to IDPs and readmissants in the target area through an info-sharing campaign.

The aim of the project organised outreach campaign is to reach the widest possible number of potential beneficiaries: citizens with status of IDPs and returnees according to the readmission agreement with the EU, directly and through an intense campaign in local media. Apart from the involvement of the local and regional media in Pcinja District, to implement this component, the project sought cooperation with local stakeholders – local authorities, local Refugee Trustees, but also the Office for Kosovo and Metohija of the
Republic of Serbia. The outreach campaign was planned and designed on the basis of the initial assessment of the status and capacity of beneficiaries.

**Output 2:** IDPs and readmissants who wish to return to Kosovo have raised their capacity for self-employment, for a better chance of a sustainable return.

To contribute to better chances for a sustainable return to Kosovo, the Action worked on increasing employability and self-employability of beneficiaries, by organising trainings for business development planning for 160 participants, providing in-kind grants for business start-ups to 80 most successful candidates and organising vocational trainings for 240 beneficiaries – owners and potential employees of the business start-ups (approximately 3 per supported business).

**Output 3:** A number of project beneficiaries embark on the process of return to Kosovo, supported by the project advisory and organised visits.

Complementing the information sharing around the project opportunities done within the outreach campaign of the Output 1 and the support to employability provided within the Output 2, the project opened the possibility for beneficiaries to obtain information around their particular prospect of return by organising advisory service on legal and administrative issues regarding the return to Kosovo, in the premises of the co-applicant Nexus in Vranje.

**Target groups of the project**

The Action defined as direct beneficiaries: staff of Nexus, municipal authorities of Vranje, 8,000 IDPs/readmissants from Pcinja District reached by the info campaign, around 500 beneficiaries receiving advisory/legal advice, 400 benefiting from go-and-see visits, 240 receiving vocational and other trainings, and 80 project grantees for business start-up scheme.

Final beneficiaries are specified as: population of IDPs/readmissants in Pcinja Region (around 16,000); around 1200 family members of the beneficiaries who received project advisory/trainings/grants; city of Vranje and municipalities of Pcinja district: Vladicin Han, Surdulica, Bosilegrad, Trgovište, Bujanovac and Presevo, who are expected to benefit from the introduced advisory service for the issues of return to Kosovo; and municipalities in Kosovo by enriching diversity while also strengthening economic base through work of the businesses supported through the project.

2. **Methodology of the Action**

**Approach:** Methodology for the implementation of the Action is based on working practices of both CARE and its long-term partner Nexus, as a rights-based, consultative, participatory, demand-driven and a holistic approach. All project activities were planned to be executed throughout close collaboration of the two main partners, based on the needs of direct beneficiaries, and with available resources for the activities. The Action and achievement of its goals rely heavily on the development of supporting and nurturing the relationships with and among number of stakeholders, and performing attentive monitoring of the effects of the Action. Involvement of various stakeholders who could support the project-initiated processes is seen as very important: achievement of Project Output 1 greatly involves representatives of the local authorities - the city of Vranje, and representatives of the local authorities of other six municipalities of Pcinja district. The project also implies cooperation with institutions in charge of the return on the national level: Serbian Office for Kosovo and Metohija and Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, as well as other stakeholders, primarily UNHCR and other (I)NGOs who deal with issues of migrations.

**Communication:** The Action utilizes the so-called ‘being close to beneficiaries’ principle, which includes close communication and cooperation with target groups in all project components and that of CARE, Nexus and the city of Vranje. In this respect, the project outreach campaign also included direct information sharing to beneficiaries, through info-sessions, public presentations/discussions around the project opportunities for return that are expected to be organised. It is expected that, within planning and implementing of the capacity building and the support for business start-up, the project would tailor the support to best suit individual needs, bearing in mind the requirements of the labour market.

**Resources:** The project strives to use local expertise within all its components and engage in the largest extent possible external experts from Vranje and Pcinja district (south Serbia area). The extensive project cooperation with local authorities of Pcinja District envisaged by the Action, was expected to strongly contribute to the local ownership over the project results. Trainings were conceived as combinations of
workshops and online or direct mentoring and further coaching by the external business experts, introducing as many elements of self-learning as possible.

**Gender component**: Following the long-term CARE’s commitment and CARE policies, the project design strongly emphasized gender equality prospective in all its components, with particular attention to motivating women and young people to apply for the project support and shedding a light on the project opportunities for women and youth. Gender balanced approach was also embedded into selection criteria for financial support to third parties.

The Action draws heavily from the multiple experiences of CARE in the region with projects similar in nature, as well as from the long-term previous engagement of Nexus in those programs aiming at supporting the uprooted populations, targeting their education, status and prospects. The Action was relying on already established Nexus’ continuous collaboration with local governments of the Pcinja district, primarily with the City of Vranje. The City of Vranje was not heavily involved in the return processes in the previous period, however its representatives possess a great knowledge about the uprooted populations on their territory.

The Action uses experience/recommendations from CARE’s long-term programs of support to local development in the Balkans (Kosovo, Serbia, Eastern BH, Montenegro), through numerous economic development initiatives, mainly aimed at socio-economic inclusion of deprived populations. *Empowerment of Women Vulnerable to Violence and Economic Empowerment of Women* successfully exercised support of self-employment of vulnerable women in Bosnia and Herzegovina and recommended their additional strengthening and sustainability boost through support to establishment of women’s agricultural cooperatives. *Small Grants for Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons* successfully implemented the in-kind grant program for refugees and IDPs in southern Serbia, in Nis, Piroć and Pcinja district, with the outreach, selection, capacity building and procurement requirements almost identical to the proposed Action, providing the exact knowledge and experience that is needed for the project. The comprehensive engagement of CARE within the EC funded *Inclusive Economic Growth and Employment Generation in Eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina – Birac Region* project brought additional awareness of the problems in agricultural business development of the poorer regions and necessity for creation of strong linkages among agricultural producers, local authorities and higher-level stakeholders in charge of agricultural management and development. The EC funded Montenegrin project *Social Entrepreneurship – A Step towards Independence* is exploring possibilities of women’s social/cooperative engagement and creation of sufficient internal capacity (including business management capacity) of women’s groups to reach independence from donors’ funding. The projects of regional agricultural development in Kosovo funded by the Austrian Development Cooperation have provided organisational knowledge and experience for extensive sub-granting activities in agriculture.

3. **Introduction to the Evaluation**

The mid-term evaluation was carried out in November 2019, at the second year of the project, to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the project progress, to work-out lessons learned and to provide recommendations for further action. As described in the Project Application and the ToR for MTE, this was planned to be done as an internal assessment, conducted by the CARE Balkans, and was to cover the first year of project implementation, as a participatory and self-reflecting exercise, a discussion about the achieved results against the initial plans, with defined recommendations and lessons learnt to be installed in the operating plans for the second project half.

The overall objectives of the MTE are defined as follows:

1. To assess the project’s current performance against the set criteria for standard evaluations as relevant (e.g. at MTR stage efficiency and effectiveness will have higher relevance than assessing sustainability).
2. A qualitative review of progress against the project logical framework.
3. To make recommendations to improve current project implementation to achieve objectives and maximise impact
4. To identify lessons learned and recommendations to improve future programming.

The criteria for this MTR are:

1. Relevance, Effectiveness, Efficiency
   - Relevance: The extent to which the project suited the priorities and policies of the target group, and donor
   - Effectiveness: The extent to which the project achieved its objectives
• Efficiency: The extent to which project was managed to get value for money from inputs of funds, staff and other resources

2. Sustainability: To assess whether the benefits of the project are likely to continue after the project ends.


4. Assessment of the effectiveness of a specific technical approach or methodology used (where relevant)

5. Assessment of the mode of delivery, such as the partnership approach adopted

6. Assessment of the specific management arrangements, such as staffing structure, quality of partnership relationships, technical assistance provided

The results of the mid-term evaluation will be used to inform the CARE and Nexus project teams, the donor and the involved stakeholders about the progress of the Action and to enable an evidence-based adjustment of the action if considered justified.

4. Methodology of the Evaluation

The Mid-term Evaluation applied ‘mixed methods’ to ensure relevant and the good quality of data collection and analysis resulting in an objective and sound evaluation.

The MTE was carried out in the phases which included the following activities:

• Desk research phase including the detailed outlining of the evaluation process and the desk review of available project documentation, implemented between November 1 and 10, 2019. The document review included the Project Application Form set (narrative, log-frame, budget), Narrative Interim Report, Baseline Study/Assessment, Monitoring Tool and partners reports, in specific the report on the Call for submission of grants and Call for applications to training programs. These activities were carried out in the period Nov 1-10, as well as an online meeting with the project team to assess the relevant stakeholders and approach. Such form was selected so as to provide a participatory approach to evaluation, capturing the perspectives of key stakeholders

• Field work phase, implemented between November 10-29, 2019:
  - Workshop - one day event with the key stakeholders that have participated in all outputs/expected results; CARE project team (Milan Popovic, Project Manager, Sumka Bucan, Regional Director and Sibina Golubovic, evaluator/Emergency Response Team Leader) conducted a workshop event with Nexus project team in Vranje (Vesna Cvetkovic, Project Manager and Natasa Milosavljevic, Project Coordinator) as the main project partner, to discuss all aspect of the project, analyse the results achieved so far and main issues that appeared during the first year of project implementation.
  - Individual interviews - several individual, one-hour interviews with other important stakeholders:
    ✓ Zorica Peric, Trustee for Refugees and Displaced Persons of the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration in Vranje
    ✓ Maja Jovic, Head of Public Service department in municipality of Vranje
    ✓ Mirjana Sevaljevic and Radmila Majstorovic, Project Managers from the Serbian Government Office for Kosovo and Metohija in Belgrade.

• The drafting phase of the MTE Report, which included analysis of collected data, drafting and producing of the Report, implemented from November 20-30, 2019.

5. Analysis of output activities

The following section lays out the findings of the mid-term evaluation per outputs. This MTE does not reflect specifically upon preparatory activities that CARE undertook in the initial stage of the Action to initiate the implementation/Inception and Cross Cutting Activities/ which include recruitment of staff, orientation and planning workshop, partners’ meetings, signing of partnership agreement, administrative/financial training for Nexus, and other activities which are relevant for this MTE, but might mention them in a relevant context with direct output activities.
Output 1: Support for sustainable return to Kosovo offered by the project is widely promoted to IDPs and readmissants in the target area through an info-sharing campaign.

This output was to be reached through several activities – A1.1 - A1.5 (as per Annex 1.2 – Full Application Form):

- Assessment of current economic status and capacity of IDPs and readmissants in Pcinja region, their attitudes towards the return to Kosovo.
- Workshops with representatives of local authorities and media of Pcinja District, presentation of project assessment findings
- Production of information-sharing materials for the project outreach campaign
- Organisation of the outreach campaign - announcing information on support for the return to Kosovo offered by the project
- Networking with other stakeholders supporting IDPs/readmissants.

The assessment was carried out by ENECA, an external consultant selected by the project, with goal to evaluate the current economic situation of the target group, so as to support planning of project activities, namely, development of information campaign for the target group, as well as other activities, so the widest possible audience is reached by the Action. It was focused on various dimensions of the environment, possibilities and opportunities for employment and regular income generation, education, skills and work experience, legal status, and expressed needs for the actual return to Kosovo, as well as legal regulations, strategies, research, studies, reports and statistical data. The assessment provides multitude of relevant data on the target group and is a solid tool for further planning of the project activities; it provides detailed and relevant data in variety of categories, and has fulfilled its goal; however, as the project team learned, important data collected through this document could have been better utilized had the Action invested further into development of the methodology for accessing the target group (some conclusions outlined by the assessment define the issues that the Action would face when reaching out to the target group, such as for instance, the necessity to build stronger bonds with the stakeholders and to build partnerships on the local level to ensure access to the target group, and one of the problems that would later be recognized by the project team as quite important – to ensure that the beneficiaries would be in the position to receive the support designated by the project, and not lose benefits and status already granted by the Republic of Serbia). The assessment in itself described the majority of challenges that the focus group face, and presented a comprehensive and well rounded document for the purpose of informing the project team on the problems of the target group and serving as a tool for planning. It is based on desk analysis and field data collection - desk research of the documents, focus group discussions and polls.

Upon the completion of the Assessment of status, capacity and attitudes of potential project beneficiaries, the project team led by Nexus organized a series of meetings - half-day workshops with the representatives of local authorities, in the city of Vranje and the municipalities of Pcinja District: on February 22, 2019 project team met with the representatives of city of Vranje, as well as with representatives of the local municipalities of the Pcinja district; after that, it was agreed to organize info sessions across municipalities – March 11 in Surdulica and Vladicin Han, March 12 – in Bujanovac and March 20 in Trgoviste – and those gathered the representatives of the local municipal governments, SCRM and Red Cross of Serbia representatives, and members of various local NGO organizations that expressed interest to join. Upon advice from local trustees from Presevo and Bosilegrad, sessions were not organized in those two municipalities, as none of the members of the target group satisfied the conditions of the open call, which was soon to be publicized. The participants of the workshops were invited to discuss the situation of potential beneficiaries and realistic possibilities for their sustainable return to Kosovo, obstacles, opportunities and trends. Particular emphasis was given to presentation of the opportunities for the return offered by the project and the activities that would be organised to promote these opportunities. However, it was soon agreed to move right into the activity A1.4 – organize info sessions as part of the outreach campaign in order to provide the specific project related information and discuss the issues of interests to the target group. Those events took place throughout March 2019: March 5 in Vranje (informing 33 participants of the session), March 15 in Surdulica (14 participants), March 19 in Vladicin Han (13 participants), March 21 in Bujanovac (10 participants) and March 25 in Trgoviste (7 participants).
Another part of this outreach campaign was developed in cooperation with externally engaged designers to visualize particular promotional materials – posters, banners, folders, notepads and pencils – which were then delivered to the participants at the info sessions, as well as trainings (organized subsequently). The material was developed in communication with the representatives of project partner and followed EU and CARE visibility guidelines.

Finally, the campaign intended to develop video and audio content – programs, as well as written articles, to be placed in local media of Pcinja District, to attract beneficiaries and promote participation in the project; however, this did not take place as described; content was placed on several local and regional television stations, in the period from March 4 to April 1, 2019, such as RTV Vranje, RTV Sit, RTV Focus, TV Vranjska Plus, RTV Bujanovac, Radio Vladičin Han, TV Info pul Vranje, TV KODAL Bosilegrad, and websites Vranje NEWS, Radio Vladičin Han web portal, and web portals of city of Vranje, Nexus and CARE International. The content was the announcement of the public call for participation in the project, which lasted from February 18 until April 1, 2019. Separate articles and video and audio material were not developed at this phase as envisaged; it is anticipated by the project team that media content would be developed to illustrate successful stories from the project and visually document the project. While still a valid point and would benefit to the project, the media content did not fulfill its primary role at this stage – to attract participants and encourage them to participate in the project; which was expected having in mind that cooperation with local media was seen as crucial for the campaign. Further, developed human story media content would have been more far reaching and encouraged wider interest in the project, especially in aired through the national broadcast media, having in mind that public service broadcaster (RTS) and other private television stations with national coverage have undeniably larger reach and wider audience and longer time spent viewing than local television stations (which only hold a very small percentage of the local market). Having in mind the type of audience and local and regional context, the project would have also benefitted from larger coverage in radio newscasts and entertainment programmes, as those traditionally have larger and more faithful audience and satisfy the needs of specific local environments (unlike television stations).

The public call for participation in the project was extended until June 13, 2019, while the second call lasted from June 14 until July 1, 2019, and was also followed by announcements on RTV Leskovac and TV Zona Nis, in the period from May 20 until June 15, 2019.

The project was expected to benefit from the contacts and communication that the City of Vranje has with other municipal authorities of Pcinja Region, and it was expected that the City of Vranje officials would ‘open the doors’ for the project cooperation with all municipalities of the target region – City of Vranje, Surdulica, Bosilegrad, Vladičin Han, Bujanovac, Presevo and Trgovište. Also, during the outreach campaign and further throughout the application processes, CARE and Nexus maintained cooperation with the local and national stakeholders who were seen as relevant in reaching potential applicants, such as the Office for Kosovo and Metohija, SCRM, IOM and UNHCR in Serbia, Danish Refugee Council/DRC and ASB that are implementing IDP and readmission – related projects in Serbia as well, Praxis, Office for legal assistance and support to IDPs in Serbia (funded by EU), etc. However, fruitful working relationship with municipality of Vranje has not been established; at least, not to the level that was expected and that would have made a difference for the project. Planned meetings with the municipality Mayer did not take place, despite numerous attempts to communicate via email and efforts of CARE and Nexus in the field. Closer and more collaborative cooperation would have been quite beneficial to the project, and despite all political obstacles which made some activities difficult to implement, could have significantly improved the visibility and quality of the project. This remains a challenge for the second year of the project implementation.

However, aside all factors and activities that were within the scope of the project team, the most recent political developments and progress with the Brussels negotiation process are unfavorable for a return to Kosovo. Given the hesitance of IDPs from Kosovo to return perceived in the previous years, complexities of the process and ever-changing political environment and security conditions in Kosovo, it was expected that the interest of IDPs and readmissions for applying to project opportunities could be limited.

Output 2: IDPs and readmissions who wish to return to Kosovo have raised their capacity for self-employment, for a better chance of a sustainable return.

This output was to be reached through several activities – A2.1 – A2.6 (as per Annex 1.2 – Full Application Form):

- Revision and updating of the return-related selection criteria for beneficiaries
Application process for project participation in the target region. Selection of beneficiaries for the project support

Organisation of trainings in business plans development for 160 interested beneficiaries

Solicitation for business plans, selection of 80 beneficiaries for the grants scheme

Organisation of vocational trainings for 240 selected beneficiaries

In-kind grants scheme organised for 80 beneficiaries financing their business start-ups.

After reviewing the return-related selection criteria developed within the previous IPA funded initiatives and analysing their effectiveness through exchange of information around the effectiveness of the previous return programs with the stakeholders, the project team produced a list of criteria, which was crosschecked with the Office for Kosovo and Metohija and Commissariat for Refugees, and after the final agreement, a list of revised return-related selection criteria was agreed upon and announced throughout the project outreach campaign and further utilised in the project selection processes. Application forms were designed, to include the reviewed return-related selection criteria, but also to provide a possibility for the applicants to involve the members of their families, or third candidates (of the IDP/readmissants status) in their application, by naming them as their eventual future employees that would benefit from vocational trainings organised by the project.

Two Calls for Applications were launched in the reporting period emphasising agreed upon criteria for the selection of final beneficiaries, both for the capacity building program and vocational trainings and the in-kind grants for the businesses start-up. The first covered Pcinja district only, and was active from February 18 till June 13, 2019, while the geographical coverage in the second one was extended to Niski and Jablanicki districts, and it lasted from June 14 until July 1, 2019. As already noted, there were notably unfavourable political developments during the project implementation period that significantly affected the return process. Consequently, the interest among potential beneficiaries for the provided support for sustainable return to Kosovo was lower than expected in Pcinja region. Therefore, the project extended its geographical coverage to Jablanicki and Niski district in order to reach the widest possible number of beneficiaries. As a result, 113 applications for business start-ups/extension were received, and 28 for vocational trainings. The project provided trainings in business plan development for 109 participants and, at the time of drafting the MTE, was in the process of awarding 103 (instead of planned 80 grants) for business start-ups, and 26 vocational trainings (out of 28 received applications for trainings).

First Call was aimed at received the expression of interest from potential participants and assessing their business ideas; once those were assessed and evaluated, the applicants whose ideas were eligible and sound, were invited to submit a business plan for their businesses. In order to be able to do that, trainings in business writing were organized and carried out by ENECA:

- For the first Call: May 30-31, 2019 for 28 participants in Vranje – who were to submit finalized business plans by June 14; and June 11-12, 2019 for 26 participants in Vladicin Han – who were to submit final business plan by June 25;

- For the second Call: July 4-5, 2019 for 29 participants in Vranje, who were to submit final business plan by July 22; and July 11-12 for 28 participants in Vranje - who were to submit final business plan by July 29.

The trainings covered the topics related to development of the business plans for entrepreneurial activities, but also a wider range of topics around this subject, such as an analysis of competition and sales prospective, importance of good marketing, further business scale-up, later utilization of external investment funding etc. The project envisaged that 60-80% of the participants would submit their applications upon the finished training, so the project should obtain 90-130 finalised business plans. The received applications were evaluated by the project Selection Committee (CARE and Nexus staff). The project Selection Committee finally selected the envisaged 80 candidates for receiving the project in-kind grants, however, expanded the number to 103 (due to the budget reallocation and cancelling some activities, as laid out in the Narrative Interim Report).

Alongside this application process and two rounds of calls, the target groups had the possibility to apply for
vocational trainings; additionally, candidates for in-kind grants were encouraged to apply for vocational trainings themselves, and/or name their potential employees of the eligible status. However, while the number of applications for in kind grants was sufficient to reach the project targets, the interest for vocational trainings was far below from any expectations. The total number of applications received was 11 in the first round, and 17 in the second out of which 26 applications in total met the criteria for project support. The planned target for this output was 240, which is a significant change from the achieved target – almost ten times smaller than planned. Therefore, instead of providing education to individuals, the project team suggested to work in the remaining period with supported business to increase their capacity as per needs, including on the job training and capacity building of their employees. At the time of drafting the MTE, in kind grant agreements were being prepared, as well as preparation for vocational trainings – call for specific services and trainings to be supplied by potential bidders.

As perceived by the Action Application form, the in-kind grant recipients would need to oblige themselves to setup their business in Kosovo and utilise the obtained materials equipment as foreseen within their approved business plan. Upon purchasing the goods and provision of the grants to the beneficiaries, CARE would be the owner of the equipment/materials until the project end, when the ownership will be automatically transferred to the beneficiaries.

In summary, the output 2 of the Action has undergone several changes which can be attributed several factors:

- Insufficient number of applications to Call for vocational trainings, which is severely reduced from planned 240 to 26, and decreased number of participants of business plan trainings, reduced from planned 160 to 113;
- Consequent proposed increase of number of beneficiaries for in kind grants from 80 to 103; and,
- Political situation and lack of safety caused by political developments in Kosovo which rendered the actual final return to Kosovo difficult and unrealistic; therefore, the project team suggested to focus efforts to strengthening of the business operations of grantees in the current place of living and change the overall objective of the project into “Support the prospect of sustainable return to Kosovo by increasing the skills and employability of IDPs and readmissants in their current place of living to provide the necessary basis for an eventual return when the political situation has altered in a way that return becomes more realistic” (as described by the Narrative Interim Report).

The project team implemented all activities as envisaged by the Action under this Output 2 and the invested maximum efforts into ensuring that target are met, to the extent possible in the given circumstances; however, the discrepancies of planned vs actual reached targets imply that the planning process in the drafting of application stage of the Action could have benefitted from more in-depth research of the market, and possibly utilized sources of other stakeholders and their experiences; especially having in mind that several organizations that work with the targeted population face similar challenges and their experiences could be a valuable source of information for planning purposes; the specific type of target group that this project works with – IDPs and readmissants – are usually people who had already received assistance due to their status, and, as highlighted under output 1, stronger communication with local stakeholders might have ensured greater access to the target group. However, this would have also depended on how willing the local stakeholder would have been on sharing information, as in the initial stages of the project they had shown certain hesitation to cooperate.

In addition, the targeted area of the Action seems to have been rather modest in size and scope; namely the project aimed at reaching southern Serbia region, Pcinja district and subsequently, Niski and Jablanicki districts; decision was made to ensure participation of other regions as well, and the project made a decision to extend the call to the entire region of Serbia, which ensured greater number of applications. An additional change was made at this time when project team asked for approval of the Project Management Unit (PMU) and the SCRM to include also the population of IDPs from Kosovo, but with registered residency in Serbia – this ensured another batch of application. According to the some of the stakeholders interviewed for the MTE, the population of IDPs from Kosovo who reside in south Serbia has an additional specific trait – many of them have strong family ties and assets in the south Serbia and might be,
surprisingly, not such good candidates for actual return to Kosovo (in comparison to IDPs from other parts of Serbia, located further from Kosovo).

As the project activities unfolded, CARE and Nexus project teams concluded that IDPs who had already returned to Kosovo, would have also been a good target group for this kind of assistance, but that the prospects of reaching them at this time in the project were limited; the outreach campaign did not target those people and it would be needed to be considered how to reach them from the outset of the Action.

Output 3: A number of project beneficiaries embark on the process of return to Kosovo, supported by the project advisory and organised visits.

This output was to be reached through several activities – A3.1 – A3.4 (as per Annex 1.2 – Full Application Form):

° Capacity building for Nexus to serve as a regional advisory service for administrative issues regarding relocation to Kosovo
° Provision of administrative and legal assistance regarding relocation issues
° Go-and-see visits to Kosovo organised for around 400 beneficiaries
° Organisation of transportation for 80 in-kind grant beneficiaries and their businesses to Kosovo.

Narrative Interim report indicates that the implementation of this activity was affected by the fact that there is a complementary EU funded activity in Vranje - Free Legal Aid for IDPs in Vranje, therefore the team decided not to duplicate these activities, and opted against capacity building of Nexus as a regional advisory service for administrative issues regarding relocation to Kosovo, and sought for other options of capacity building for NEXUS that would allow provision of more appropriate assistance to beneficiaries.

Furthermore, the project was confronted with the inability to conduct any planned activities in Kosovo, e.g. go and see visits, due to the described circumstances, and raised this issue with the donor. The guidance on this was received on January 24, 2019 from the PMU stating that all actions under this Call must take place only in the Republic of Serbia (excluding the territory of Kosovo*, as in line with Annex I to IPA Regulation 231/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 March 2014*, (whereas Annex I for Regulation 231/2014 provides the list of countries and territories that are the Beneficiaries of IPA II)). Therefore, Narrative Interim Report proposes to reallocate funds under this budget line into providing business advisory services to grant recipients to strengthen their capacity for income generation, and therefore increase the sustainability of their return once it happens. With this activity, capacities of Nexus would also be strengthened, but to provide a different type of advisory service from those originally planned, while also serving the needs of the beneficiaries.

Transportation for beneficiaries – recipients of the project in-kind grants to their desired places of return in Kosovo – will remain as an option, however the project team proposed significant reduction of budget funds allocated for this activity and using them for capacity building of Nexus.

6. Logical Framework amendments

Described changes induced justified and realistic proposal of the project team to introduce changes in the logical framework which follow the actual developments in project life and realistically reflect project reality:

- The project team proposed shifting the outcome from supporting the return process to actually supporting readmissants in their current place of living and support beneficiaries in income generation at their current stay. By targeting IDPs who have expressed the willingness for return, but due to the political circumstances the possibility of returning to Kosovo during the project is very low, the project supports the readmissants and IDPs to gain skills, knowledge and resources to start their business or get employment, thus enhancing their resilience and opening the opportunities and a prospect of return. The proposal is to amend the specific objective of the Action – “Support the sustainable process of return to Kosovo, for IDPs and readmissants - persons returned to Republic of Serbia according to the Readmission
Agreement in the process of reintegration” – into “Support the prospect of sustainable return to Kosovo by increasing the skills and employability of IDPs and readmissants in their current place of living to provide the necessary facilities for an eventual return when the political situation has altered in a way that return becomes more realistic”. This MTE fully supports the proposed amendment.

- Instead of providing education to individuals, the project team suggested to work in the remaining period with supported business to increase their capacity as per needs, including on the job training and capacity building of their employees. The targets for the number of IDPs / readmissants who obtained certificates for vocational trainings within the project should be decreased from 240 to 26. Additionally, the target for the number of beneficiaries that have increased knowledge in creating a business plan by 30% should be decreased from 240 to 109. And lastly the targets for the number of completed business plans applications obtained from the potential grant beneficiaries should be decreased from 140 to 106. This MTE fully supports the proposed amendment.

- Due to notably unfavourable political developments during the project implementation period that significantly affected the return process, and low interest among potential beneficiaries for the provided support for sustainable return, following changes are proposed on the outcome level:

  - Output 1 “Support for sustainable return to Kosovo offered by the project is widely promoted to IDPs and readmissants in the target area through information-sharing campaign” to be rephrased as “Support for prospective sustainable return to Kosovo offered by the project is widely promoted to IDPs and readmissants in the target area through information-sharing campaign”.

  - Output 2 “IDPs and readmissants who wish to return to Kosovo have raised their capacity for self-employment, for a better chance of a sustainable return” to be rephrased to “IDPs and readmissants who prospectively wish to return to Kosovo have raised their capacity for self-employment, for a better chance of a sustainable return”.

  - Output 3 “A number of project beneficiaries embarked on the process of return to Kosovo, supported by the project advisory and organised visits” to be rephrased to “A number of project beneficiaries are capacitated to generate incomes and develop business opportunities in the current residence and in event of potential return to Kosovo, supported by the project business advisory services”. The new activities under this output will be 3.1 Capacity building for NEXUS to serve as a business advisory services for grant recipients, 3.2 Provision of business advisory services for grant recipients, and 3.3 Provision of business mentoring services for grant recipients.

This MTE fully support the proposed amendments in outputs.

7. **Key findings**

   - **Relevance**: The extent to which the project suited the priorities and policies of the target group, and donor

The Action has been assessed as relevant and important, especially from the aspect of addressing vulnerabilities of the target group: IDPs from Kosovo, on top of sharing the issues of poverty and high unemployment with general populations, especially in poorest areas such as south Serbia, have particular problems regarding access to property in Kosovo. The Serbian citizens returned from EU countries according to the Readmission Agreement (readmissants) are mainly Roma citizens (above 80%), many of them originating from Kosovo, of lower education and social status, low employability, lacking information about their status, rights, opportunities for improvement of their position, either through integration, or return to Kosovo. There are no clear policies regarding the future of target groups or systematically organised programs to address their needs. All these target groups are in need of proper information and advisory on how to obtain their rights and in addition they need concrete support for resolving their economic difficulties. Although the Action was designed as a support to sustainable return, with rephrasing of the specific objective and outputs, it would be even more relevant in supporting economic betterment of the targeted groups, while still leaving the option of the return open, should the circumstances allow for it.
Thematic scope has been well identified by CARE and the partners as relevant. On that track, the project logic has been described as comprehensive, well designed, based on lessons learned from other projects similar in nature, developed in a transparent and participatory process with a holistic and a well balanced approach toward addressing burning issues – but also taking into consideration the local, national and regional needs, capacities of local organizations and specifics of the local gaps and context. Further, the project logic was described as comprehensive and well designed; with phase approach to development of entrepreneurial ideas, and gradual scaling up of the support to target group. Although the overall objective is not achievable by this project only, the mutually reinforcing outputs leading to the specific objective accomplishment are jointly paving the way toward that long-term impact. All three expected results or outputs are mutually reinforcing and clearly leading toward meeting the specific project objective. They are thereby significantly contributing to the overall project objective which is however not achievable, due to the political circumstances, over the project period.

- **Effectiveness**: The extent to which the project achieved its objectives

The overall results accomplished during the first year of the project implementation have been assessed as positive. Two thirds of the intended activities have been or are in progress, according to the planned timeline, though it has to be noted that the Action suffered a delayed inception period and was late in starting the output related activities. The number of reached beneficiaries within a target group however was not reached, at least not in all activities. The corrections proposed in the Interim Narrative Report and this MTE aim to correct the targets to a realistic scope, based on the experiences of the first project year. Though the proposed targets are significantly lower, they reflect the situation realistically. Most successful so far have been Outputs 1 and 2, while most of the work still needs to be conducted under Output 3 – which has also undergone the greatest changes. The management practices and monitoring tools have been assessed as adequate and useful.

- **Efficiency**: The extent to which project was managed to get value for money from inputs of funds, staff and other resources

CARE and Nexus have used the available resources strategically and efficiently and the overall management has been assessed as effective and supportive. All important issues were raised with the PMU, the donor, or with relevant partner/stakeholder on the local or national level; the process of consultations and discussions on relevant issues was transparent and timely. However, communication and closer cooperation with local stakeholders remains an area which could benefit from improvement, but it highly depends on the interest of local stakeholders to cooperate.

- **Sustainability**: To assess whether the benefits of the project are likely to continue after the project ends.

Since the project is in the second year of the implementation and in-kind grants have not been distributed, and vocational trainings have not been implemented yet, it remains difficult at the time of drafting MTE to assess the potential sustainability of the Action. It is certain that the changed focus of the Action from sustainable return to increasing skills and employability of the target group would certainly contribute to building a stronger and more resilient target group, provided with business skills through trainings and advisory services of Nexus. It is reasonable to expect that improvement would be also noticeable in the grantees’ capacities to access the market and attract new funding. Building of capacities of the partner organization Nexus would result in expanding their scope of interest and influence and providing them with new set of skills to be used for various projects. This remains to be seen and verified in the final evaluation. However, having in mind that target groups are facing multiple vulnerabilities, further support to the target group is beyond doubt very much needed.

- **Monitoring and learning**: The effectiveness of project monitoring and learning processes.

The Action has designed a simple and easy to use monitoring tool which tracks the progress per objective, and outputs, maintained by the project partner Nexus, as the field operating arm of CARE. So far, the project has demonstrated a sound management structure, which enables monitoring and learning; the changes which had been noted were communicated to the donor and immediate changes were proposed. There are no proposed changes to the monitoring tools at the time of drafting this MTE report.

- **Assessment of the specific management arrangements**, such as staffing structure, quality of partnership relationships, technical assistance provided
Management structure on level of CARE is sufficient and adequate for the project of this size and budget, and it is possible to track and monitor all aspects of the Action. Staffing structure of CARE and Nexus has been assessed as adequate, with even distribution of tasks and delegation of duties; approach to management of both organizations is complementary and well rounded: with CARE managing nation-wide stakeholders and Nexus being in charge of the local partnerships. The Action envisaged use of local resources throughout the project, and this has been a strong advantage of the project: local organization ENECA, as well as project partner Nexus have been trustworthy partners which implemented assigned duties accordingly. Vocational trainings will also utilize local capacities, while Nexus will develop its capacities to provide support in development of businesses initiated by the in-kind grants. Technical assistance provided by all three outputs is a system of complimentary services. However, forging closer ties with partners, especially on the local level, which could lead to more fruitful cooperation and enhanced project results has not been fully established.

8. Recommendations for the remaining course of the Action:

Based on discussions with participants in the MTE, as well as analysis of achieved results, the following steps have been recommended by the evaluator to be implemented during remaining course of the Action:

1. **Building stronger ties and partnerships on the local level**: both project teams have invested efforts into establishment and maintenance of relationships with national and local stakeholders; however, good working cooperation with the municipality of Vranje has not been established, and meeting with the Mayor have not taken place, as well as signing of the MoU with the city. Though formal in nature, these are needed: it important to have the full and welcoming participation of all local stakeholders for implementation of such an Action, and though the project is in the second year, it would be still quite relevant to work on establishment of those connections on the local level, by both partners. Efforts should also be invested into development of stronger cooperation with the Trustee for Refugees and Displaced Persons of the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration in Vranje by both partners.

2. **Ensuring clear and direct communication channels through greater presence in the field**: It has been noted by the project teams that issues in communication with local staff of the municipality of Vranje appeared but were not noticed at the time. Only later, in retrospect, it became evident that such communication glitches basically slowed down further communication on the local level. The project teams are advised to increase time spent in the field and engage in communication with local stakeholders and partners as well as with the target groups. More local project-related and induced events could contribute to removing any road blocks along the way of project implementation, while ensuring stakeholder communication and collaboration.

3. **Maintaining a dynamic pace of the project**: as said, the project faced some delays in the initial phase; in addition, due to the low turnout of interested parties, the public calls were extended; and the vocational trainings should have already started. Therefore, it is recommended to keep the project pace under tight control in the remaining part of the second year of the Action, to pinpoint any issues that might cause further delays and readily and quickly tackle them to enable smooth running of the Action.

4. **Visibility and outreach**: the Action results, if possible and should budget allow for it, could be documented through appropriate media content to increase visibility of the project and ensure greater outreach of project results.

9. **Lessons Learned:**

1. **Ensuring better communication with target groups during development of the Action (in the project planning phase), and in the inception period of the Action**: experience of other international organizations that work with the same target group, as well as government institutions, shows that continuous communication with this target group is very important; the project should take efforts to pre-identify the target group and customize, to the extent possible, support that would be delivered.
2. **Better planning of the project results and targets:** project activities and set results have been adequately planned and represent a complimentary system, which provides all the needed elements for gaining entrepreneurial skills and setting up small businesses; however, the experience of the first project year demonstrates that the targets had been set very ambitiously, and, in some the activities, by far exceed the possibilities of the target groups.

3. **Outreach campaign to include human interest story:** the outreach campaign could have yielded better results by engaging viewers via national broadcasters and through content which spoke directly to the target group. Influence and viewing of local and regional television stations is dramatically different from those of the PBS (public service broadcaster), and though it is widely considered that local media takes precedence over national in local environments, it varies from region to region, depends on the actual local media outlet and specific political circumstances, the type of media (radio vs television) etc. PSB could have produced better results, but again, not through mere visual display of the text of the public calls, but through live, human centered television content, the one that would engage the viewer and get him/her interested in the Action.

4. **Building strong partnerships on the local level and ensuring clear communication channels:** as it is of utmost importance to have the full and welcoming participation of all local stakeholders for implementation of such an Action, establishment of close local connections is crucial for project success and should be cultivated with attention. The project teams should increase time spent in the field and engage in communication with local stakeholders and partners as well as with the target groups.