The European Union Development Policy between Intention and Public Perception:

Analysing the Role of Feedback from Project Beneficiaries

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Abstract

The European Union's development policy has the primary goal to eradicate poverty at the global level and to promote sustainable development. But is the EU doing enough effort to engage the voices and the needs of the poor in order to deliver locally informed aid projects? Emerging from this complex question, the following research explores the importance of a feedback mechanism between the EU and beneficiaries of its funded projects, through analysing its impact on the public perception of the EU as a development actor.

The exploration is tridimensional and begins with a social constructivist explanation on the importance of communicative action and socialization for norms sharing, by bringing examples from the metamorphosis of the EU's development policy. After an in-depth analysis of the EU's performance in providing participatory development project management, the research dwells into the case-study analysis - its third and ultimate dimension. There, the impact of the exercise of feedback on public perception and awareness of the EU as a development actor is of most interest. Interviews with beneficiaries of EU development projects implemented in Moldova reveal polarized opinions and division lines across the society that is the biggest recipient of EU aid per capita in the European Neighbourhood.

Key words: feedback, development policy, European Union, public perception, actorness, participatory development

Words: 19,963

Abbreviations

ACP	African, Caribbean and Pacific Countries
CBMs	Confidence-Building Measures
DCI	Development Cooperation Instrument
EDF	European Development Fund
DG BUDG	Directorate-General for Budget
DG DEVCO	Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development
DG DEV	Directorate-General for Development
DG NEAR	Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations
DG RELEX	Directorate-General for External Relations
DG Trade	Directorate-General for Trade
EB	Eurobarometer
EC	European Community
EEAS	European External Action Service
EEC	European Economic Community
ENI	European Neighbourhood Instrument
EP	European Parliament
EU	European Union
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MS	Member States
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
RQ	Research Question
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
TEU	Treaty on the European Union
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
UN	United Nations
WTO	World Trade Organisation

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Introduction

In 2016 the United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka visited the small town of Căuşeni in Moldova to launch a public art installation named "Bright Future" that symbolizes equality and a life free of violence for women and girls. Dazed by the unprecedented meeting of such a high official, some of the participants to the discussion have memorized their contributions on the importance to fight against domestic violence beforehand. Some of those were so well informed that one might rightfully ask why is there still such a high rate of domestic violence against women in Moldova. Many years earlier, Robert Chambers - a development practitioner - defined it even more accurately, as "the phenomenon of the short rural visit in which highly placed officials are coming to a small village and the locals are putting their best face on" (Chambers, 1981: 4). From the same perspective, this research will analyse the European Union as a global developmental actor and namely its performance in providing a (better) feedback mechanism between EU-funded projects and its beneficiaries.

1.1 The Problem

The EU is striving to reach the poorest, most marginalized people from the most remote areas of the globe to deliver its development aid to (The New European Consensus on Development, 2017). The identified problem is, however, the gap between EU development intention and its perception by direct and indirect beneficiaries, especially in strategically important countries such as Moldova - the immediate EU neighbour situated at the crossroads of the Western and Eastern geopolitical influence spheres and the largest recipient of EU aid per capita in the European Neighbourhood (eu4moldova.md). Through problematization of the EU development policy's general intention it is intended to analyse whether the EU has articulated a stable, mandatory and institutionalised mechanism for interaction with beneficiaries that would ensure their input into the process of planning, implementation and evaluation of EU-funded development projects. More, the importance of feedback will be assessed as an important and yet unexplored tool to improve perception and raise awareness about the EU performance as a development actor.

1.2 Aim and Research Question

Therefore, the *aim* of this research is to assess the extent and importance of interaction in the form of feedback between beneficiaries of EU development programmes and the developing agency of the EU. The importance of such interaction is analysed in rapport with relatively low levels (34% of EU citizens in 2010 as reported by Flash EB No 298, 2010: 5) of awareness and attitude towards the EU as an international development actor, while it is recognized as the world's biggest provider of Official Development and Humanitarian Assistance (OECD, 2019:6). Therefore, the initial assumption is that through a standardized, mandatory and institutionalized feedback mechanism between the developing agency of the EU and the consulted project beneficiaries, the DG DEVCO would be able to articulate demand-driven assistance and locally informed action which is crucial in responding to the local specificities of the developing country or community. More, such interaction might be an essential tool in consolidating the EU's international actorness, a goal pursued by the EU in its foreign policy.

Based on the identified issue, the study is designed to answer the following research question:

How does feedback performance of development projects impact the public perception and awareness of the EU as a development actor and agency?

In order to do so, the analysis will first go through two important stages, paving the path for answering the research question. The first is to establish the importance of an institutionalized feedback mechanism for the direct and indirect beneficiaries of the EU-funded development projects. Then, the research will identify whether feedback mechanisms and other participatory procedures are used in the EU's development project management.

From a political science perspective, the research explores the connection and potential between two perspectives that are not often discussed together: the participatory performance of development work on one side, and the public perception and awareness of the EU as a development and international actor on the other side. Thus, the research corroborates data both from development practice and perception literature, completed with findings of the conducted interviews. Moreover, zooming out towards a larger perspective, this research opens a room for

further discussion on the division of competences between the EU and the MS in this policy area by launching the idea that a better feedback exercise between beneficiaries of EU projects and the EU itself might deliver the added value that some scholars suggest is needed in order to avoid the renationalization of EUs development policy governed by the principle of subsidiarity (Holland and Doidge, 2012: 10-11).

1.3 Research Design: From Methods to Operationalization

The research is designed to answer the RQ and test the validity of the theoretical approach by applying it on the selected case-study. Firstly, the research tests the social-constructivist theoretical approach in explaining the evolution of EU development policy in terms of norm resocialization and reorientation. Then, it tests whether essential elements and processes of the theoretical perspective (socialization, social learning) find applicability in the development project implementation and evaluation procedures. In order to do so, the analysis of the EU's development projects evaluation methodologies is made. The methodologies are analysed and categorized based on their participatory input (see section 3.4.3). Furthermore, the research discovers the potential for improving public awareness and attitudes towards the EU as a development actor, by applying the logic of social constructivism on EU's external development action and notably its deficiency of self-promotion through communicative action and interaction with ultimate beneficiaries of development policy, compared to the classic information campaigns and dissemination of published materials (brochures, leaflets and documents) that may not reach the poorest potential beneficiaries or that may be incomprehensible to them.

Moving on to the practical and most contributory part of the thesis, in order to corroborate relevant data sources and their input into the research, the case-study is identified as the most pertinent research method that also facilitates data triangulation. Therefore, the *Support to Confidence Building Measures Programme (IV)* is an EU-funded development programme and implemented by the UNDP in Moldova between 2015-2018, that makes the case-study of this research. Since it is a complex programme with many sub-projects and involved stake-holders, it is found important to explore data sources available on this programme that would bring relevant information to answer the RQ and meet the research's general aim. Specifically, the research will

analyse project documents, final reports, media reflection of the programme, relevant sub-project implementers' reports, and comments on the programme's Facebook page posts.

To complement the results of theory application with empirical data, the research resorts to conducting semi-structured in-depth face-to-face interviews with beneficiaries and other stakeholders of the two selected sub-projects of the programme. Since the roles of ultimate beneficiaries, implementing NGOs and local governments are discussed throughout the research in relation to the RQ, the list of interviewees includes beneficiaries of both of the sub-projects, facilitators and NGOs members involved in the implementation of the projects but also an interview with a representative of a local public administration institution from a village under the geographical scope of the project. A total number of seven face-to-face interviews and a shorter chat discussion were conducted. The interviewers were identified through a search in the local and national media sources in Moldova telling the stories of the beneficiaries' participation in the projects. Another method was their identification through the Facebook page of the respective project and a subsequent search of other beneficiaries' names in their friends lists. The only selection criteria was the willingness of the participants to participate in an interview, since it was realised that out of a number of seventeen contacted beneficiaries in the case of the first project, seven replied to the message received on the same social media platform, and only three agreed to participate in an interview. In the case of the second project, the contacts of the facilitating teams were obtained by contacting Keystone Moldova - one of the project implementing organisations. They have also submitted their own evaluation report on the project. The facilitating team from Căuşeni have provided the contact of one of the end beneficiaries in the project having people with disabilities as target beneficiaries.

The questions for the interviews follow the main goal of the research to investigate the idea of a feedback mechanism between the EU-funded projects outside the Union and its beneficiaries, to explore the potential of such a tool in improving public perception and awareness of the EU as an international development actor. Therefore, two blocs of questions are formulated: one on the performance and perception of the EU as an international development actor, and the other on its performance in applying participatory procedures to project planning, implementation and evaluation. The sets of questions can be consulted in *Table 4.1* (see Appendix A).

The data gathered during the semi-structured in-depth interviews is analysed using the Thematic Analysis Method. This qualitative research method allows for the thematic coding to be done both before conducting the interviews, by coming up with the subjects discussed through the interview questions, but also after the interviews, to allow for the additional relevant information gathered outside of the question's scopes to be included into the analysis. Kathryn Roulston presents this approach to the analysis of qualitative data as one of the most commonly used, which facilitates the reduction of irrelevant data to the conceptual categories, categorization of data into thematic groupings and reorganization of data through its interpretation by the researcher, using excerpts from interviews to link assertions of the research with evidence gathered through the interviews (2010: 151-2). Therefore, two thematic blocs of questions were articulated before the interviews: the first being based on question on EU perception and awareness of its development assistance to Moldova, and the second bloc containing questions on the specific project the beneficiaries or facilitators participated in. The questions have been formulated during memo writing, and namely during the process of formulating general ideas and questions on the research and familiarization with the subject, all kept in a journal. Following the idea presented by Roulston, coding of the interview transcripts, coagulated common aspects and themes "directly derived from words and phrases uttered by the participant[s], as well as codes relating to the research questions posed" (2010: 151). The coding resulted in the thematic representation (Roulston, 2010: 154) of the relevant data. The formulated categories resonated the interview questions and were formulated as follows: (1) perceptions of the EU as a development actor, (2) opinion on the impact and effectiveness of the project, (3) the project's feedback performance and (4) identified issues about the project or its unintended consequences, also based on the additional information provided by the interviewees beyond the scope of the pre-set interview questions.

While interviews with different stakeholders are representative for the discussions in this research, they cannot and are not representative at country level and policy level due to their reduced number, their possible bias and the lack of a quantitative methodological orientation of this research. To overcome this shortcoming, the research resorts to other quantitative and qualitative data sources to ensure data and methodological triangulation. Out of the four approaches to triangulation defined by Denzin (1978, cited by Seale, 1999: 53-6, in Roulston,

2010: 84), the two types of triangulation used in this research are "data triangulation in which multiple sources of data about a phenomenon across groups of people, settings, place and time are sought" and "methodological triangulation, in which multiple forms of data are used (for example, individual interviews, focus groups, observations, and documents)." (in Roulston, 2010: 84). In contrast, Sechrest and Sidani do not differentiate between types of triangulation, but come up with a common definition for complementary measures that bring four important benefits to a research: (1) their importance for verification purposes, (2) the benefit of providing some basis for estimating the possible errors in the measures of central interest, (3) to facilitate the monitoring of data collection, and (4) for purposes of probil a data set to test its meaning (1995: 85). Henceforth, the need for triangulation and multiple alternative methods is also explained through the impossibility to conduct an error-free method of inquiry and to identify the direction and extent of this error (Jick, 1979, Rossman and Wilson, 1985, in Sechrest and Sidani, 1995: 84), but also through the need for converging and validating results and for the complementarity of the gathered information (Breitmayer, Ayres and Kraft, 1986, Fielding and Fielding 1986, in Sechrest and Sidani, 1995: 84). Therefore, for data triangulation, sources such as mass media, official EU and projects implementers' websites and social media pages, national and EU opinion barometers are consulted. To ensure methodological triangulation, forms of data such as press articles, relevant documents and literature, commentaries to social media posts and public opinion barometers are explored. Finally, through the thematic analysis, the data accumulated under the thematic categories is analysed and interpreted using excerpts from the interviews and in relation with the RQ.

1.4 Literature Review

Democratic legitimacy is a current issue that is often brought into discussion in the matter of European Union policy-making. But what is the democratic performance of the Union regarding a specific policy area that - theoretically - has to be designed in a way to meet the needs of ordinary people that are not necessarily citizens of the Union? Where is the European development policy situated on the graph that has altruism, democratic participation, international actorness, and awareness and perceptions of the EU as variables? What are the EU's motivations for building a development policy? "Is it an optional policy choice or a core

function?" (Holland and Doidge, 2012: 13) The issue of incomplete democratic legitimacy of the European development projects originates in the policy's original purpose and evolution throughout years. Initially, it was based on economic aspects of interaction through trade between the Community and the selected countries of the developing world. Specifically, the French initiative to use the the Community architecture as a means to maintaining its political influence in its colonial possessions (Holland and Doidge, 2012: 2) constituted the foundation stone of what is today the EU's development policy - a capacity and resource-intensive area of EU activity with highly altruistic ambitions. Such a qualitative leap, illustrates the constant reformulations of the policy from the Yaoundé to Cotonou conventions and further. However, it is also considered a self-interest motivated policy due to the EU's dependence on resource supply for its economy. Another example is that the EU becomes a less attractive destination for economic migration, once the living standards in the developing and poorer countries improve (Lavenex and Kunz, 2008; Holland and Doidge, 2012: 13). From another angle though, the EU's commitment to regional integration and regionalization is perceived as a core element to development and thus an essential altruistic rationale that drives EU's development activity (Holland and Doidge, 2012: 14). The main objective of its development policy and namely the eradication of poverty is codified under Article 161 (a) of the Lisbon Treaty. This corollary of rationales demonstrates the various intertwined interests vested by the Union. Nevertheless, the way in which the EU is delivering development projects and assistance - which involves its is of higher importance here.

1.4.1 Development: Conceptual Clarification and Model Identification

To put this into a rather global perspective, a consultation of the literature on both EU development policy and development as a practice, accentuates aspects of ideology and chronological evolution of these concepts over time. For example, Potter et al. underline the close connection between development policy and planning, which is done by pursuing and applying a certain prevailing ideology and theory - be it Keynesianism or neo-liberalism - which illustrates the way development is perceived and thus applied as a policy (2018: 6). Such a clarification is essential in order to be able to analyse the actions of a specific development agency as that of the EU in this case.

Equally important, the substance of development together with the perceptions attributed to it have changed over time. Thus, early ideas on development emerged already in the Enlightenment Era, promoting the ideas of progress, rationalism and knowledge as synonymous to development (Potter et al., 2018: 9, 91, 101). More, already then the idea of development was linked to a wider process of westernization in terms of science, religion, and principles of justice (Power, 2002: 67, in Potter et al., 2018: 9). Therefore, since its first use as a concept and influenced by major political and economic events development - if analysed in a simplistic chronological order - has been envisaged as a civilising mission under colonialism, as economic growth between the 1950s and 1970s, as a neo-liberalist intervention followed by a period of critique against development and lately as a sustainable movement (Potter et al., 2018: 3-49). Such dynamics yield an important and relevant early conclusion to be taken into account throughout this research and namely that development is not an apolitical or neutral process *per se* (Potter et al., 2018: 4) with interests vested both by the developing agency (in this case the EU), but also by the recipients and the intermediaries (NGOs) between these two.

1.4.2 The EU's Model of Development Between Intention and Perception

At this point, it becomes important to understand that the EU does not perform actions of development in a vacuum, and that it thus applies a specific model of development, which is characterised as the Western model. At the EU level it is expressed by the Cotonou Convention over development, which synthesized the essence of EU's development policy paradigm by orienting its role towards regional integration, democratic conditionality and trade facilitation. (Holland and Doidge, 2012: 78-79). Additionally, this Western model of development is illustrated by the coordination between bilateral and multilateral action and aid demonstrated by the collaboration between the EU, the UN , the IMF and the WTO to achieve the SDGs set out in 2015 (Holland and Doidge, 2012: 79; Tisch and Wallace, 1994: 121; Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014: 212). A deeper analysis of the Western model by Tisch and Walace have identified characteristics relevant to the research question, and namely that under the Western model of development, projects are managed by expatriate professionals in what concerns the design, implementation and evaluation of projects. This is primarily due to the belief that "outsiders can

encourage change more effectively than nationals, and it is easier for donors to control project funds" (Tisch and Wallace, 1994: 121). Such aspects highlight the issue of lack of local population participation to projects and their administration conducive to participatory change, since the people are the most aware of local needs and salient issues (Tisch and Wallace, 1994: 131). More, the scholars underline the short-time horizon and fragmented character of the Western development assistance by comparing it to a "pump" that initiates growth to be spread and self-sustaining (Tisch and Wallace, 1994: 121) under the trickle-down effect. A similar logic of spill-over is used by Keukeleire and Delreux to portray EU's development policy as a political spillover to enhance the European integration (2014: 211-214).

A further analysis of the relevant literature yields scholarly agreement over the importance of including civil society in the implementation and evaluation process (Holland, 2002: 75, 94; Holland and Doidge, 2012: 76, 106, 175, 187; Tisch and Wallace, 1994: 117-135; Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014: 29). More, Holland and Doidge have identified this need codified into the Cotonou Convention over EU's development policy, which illustrates the recognition of this need by the agency of the EU by the proposal to involve legitimate and representative groups of civil society even at the stage of development policy formulation. However, the scholars underline the gap between this intention and the actual institutionalisation of a functional mechanism to achieve this objective (Holland and Doidge, 2012: 76).

Having in mind the historical evolution of development as a concept and of its perceptions, the most important shifts in the EU's development policy paradigm has been the transcendence beyond the mere scopes of historical colonial ties and selective, geographical and/or strategic interest. Instead, the turn of the century brought a more inclusive and altruistic paradigm codified in the fundamental treaties of 1993 and 2009, and which is directed towards ensuring a sustainable socio-economic development of the developing countries, eradicating poverty and engaging multilateral, coordinated, coherent and complementary effort to address these issues (Holland and Doidge, 2012: 5-6,64,71; Holland, 2002: 27). The inclusion of these objectives into the official treaties underlines the reorientation of the attention from the primary interests and views of former major colonial powers such as France and the UK as members of the Community, towards the actual needs of the developing countries that were previously of

secondary importance (Holland and Doidge, 2012: 53). It also offered the EU an opportunity to enhance its capacity and credibility in its international actorness amidst accusations of incompetence and legitimacy crisis in spheres of internal and external action (Holland and Doidge, 2012: 71). But, at the same time, a shift in the geographical prioritization of EU developmental action has also been observed. Specifically, the Union is becoming primarily focused on providing assistance to its immediate vicinity and closer to home (Holland and Doidge, 2012: 8, 59, 65, 110; Holland, 2002: 9, 17) illustrated by the reorientation to Eastern European countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The issue arising at this point is whether there is a gap between the EU's actions and its general intention self-perception regarding development and the perception of those targeted by the policy, both direct and indirect beneficiaries. Therefore, the performance of the EU to gather feedback from development project's beneficiaries is directly proportional with the public perception of the EU, which is another loop that feeds back into the EU's inner perception. This inquiry brings into the discussion the external perceptions of the EU, the importance of which "has a bearing on the effectiveness of the EU and helps to shape the roles and identity of the Union itself" (Elgström, 2007: 950). Moreover, it is argued that evaluating external perceptions of the EU allows one to measure "important indicators of how well intentions have been translated into observable actions" (Rhodes, 1998: 6, in Elgström, 2007: 950), meaning the evaluation of performance, or an exercise of feedback, in other words. The result of such measurement is defined as the "capabilities-expectation gap" (Hill, 1993, 1998, in Elgström, 2007: 951). There is also a social constructivist element in the process of shaping internal EU identity and foreign policy roles based on the external perceptions. That is the continuous interaction and renegotiation between EU's own perception of roles and identity on one side, and external expectations on the other side (Elgström, 2007: 952). The same element of intersubjectivity is found in Bretherton and Vogler idea that "third party understandings about the EU and its roles form a part of the intersubjective international structures that help shape the practices of both Member States and the EU as such" (in Elgström, 2007: 952).

Some scholars suggest that the external perception of the EU depends on the focus area of its action. Therefore, while those who find the EU a great power and leadership might concentrate

on its economic and trade policies, those who find it a weak actor, focus their analysis on security and defence policies. Confusingly enough, those who analyse the EU as a development actor are in between these two perceptions, together with those who focus on the EU as a normative, civilian or ethical power (Chaban, Elgström, Kelly and Suet Yi, 2013: 435). Others defined the EU's development policy as a means to spread its normative power, considered however a soft power (Eeckhart, 2004, in Chaban, Elgström, Kelly and Suet Yi, 2013: 438) or as a source of money for the developing countries (Chaban, Elgström, Kelly and Suet Yi, 2013: 440-45). Therefore, this research contributes to filling the gap in analysing the external perception of the performance of the EU as a development actor through its direct and indirect beneficiaries and by means of project management analysis, rather than a general perception of promoted norms.

1.5 Thesis Structure

The introduction to this research is followed by three chapters. The second chapter introduces the arguments connecting the social constructivist theoretical approach and the issue of a deficient feedback mechanism between the EU and the beneficiaries of its funded projects. The third chapter defines the function and importance of such a feedback mechanism in development projects management, as well as it presents the reasons for a reluctance to implicate such a participatory method in the planning, implementation and evaluation of a project. The fourth chapter represents the case-study itself in which the theoretical analysis from the previous chapters is completed with empirical findings gathered via the conducted interviews with beneficiaries of the two projects of the case-study and other important stake-holders. It provides the main answers to the RQ. The conclusions of the research are presented in the fifth and final chapter.

2 The Mutually Transformative Relation Between Development and Attitudes Formation from a Social-Constructivist Perspective

The relevance of the social constructivist approach to this research stands in its explanatory capacity both regarding the fabric of the EU's development policy and its (trans)formation over time, but also in explaining the capacity of interaction and mutual constitution (Giddens, 1984: 362; Wendt, 1987 in Wendt, 1994: 385) in the relation between agency (the EU) and structure (direct and indirect beneficiaries of EU-funded development projects), including public perception formation as a result of such interaction. When it comes to agency, Wendt identifies it as the state that has both a corporate and a social constitution (1994: 385). The interests generated by the corporate identity provide motivation for action and are prior to interaction, one of the main of such interests being the exercise of "development, in the sense of meeting the human aspiration for a better life, for which states are repositories at the collective level" (Wendt, 1994: 385). At the same time, the social constitution of agency is seen as "a key link in the mutual constitution of agent and structure" (Wendt, 1994: 385) since together with interests it is situated in a continuous process through interaction, and defined as sets of meanings that an actor attributes to itself (individual properties, or internal self perception and intention of the EU), while taking into account the perspective of others (social structural properties, or perceptions and awareness of direct and indirect beneficiaries on the EU) (Wendt, 1994: 385). Applied to the situation of the present research, the agency of the EU as a development actor is engaged in a mutually constitutive relation with the social structure it instantiates (project beneficiaries and society in general) in the process of pursuing the agency's corporate goal of development. What matters most in such a process is interaction, as an essential element for the formulation of the sets of meanings about the actorness of the EU in the area of development. Therefore, this reiterates the goal of this research to analyse both the framework, importance and pace of such interaction, instantiated through the mechanism of feedback in development project management, but also to assess the impact of it on the awareness and public perception formation, as an illustration of the mutuality of the constitution between agency and structure explained above through the work of Wendt.

2.1 Understanding Development from a Social-Constructivist Perspective

By applying the social constructivist matrix on the development work, Tisch and Wallace insist on development as a social and dynamic process with induced and empowering rather than imposed changes that occur in people's perspectives on their socio-political lives (1994: 21; 41). Therefore, social change through socialization and persuasion - the main mechanisms of social-constructivism - is crucial in development work, since the sense of social values, cultural norms and beliefs in developing countries may be different than those in the Western countries and development agencies (Hira and Parfitt, 2004: 27-8), a blueprint that is often applied on the developing countries despite its probable replication impracticality.

This theoretical approach also helps to explore the question of feedback and public perception asked by this research. One of the fundamental premises of social constructivism stands in its social ontology, placing the interaction between humans, their ideas and experiences at the center of society, organized into social communities (Risse in Wiener and Diez, 2009: 145). More, discussing European integration, it is perceived and explained by social constructivism as a process, an intersubjective relation and a constant and mutual constitution of social structures and agents (Risse in Wiener and Diez, 2009: 145), an argument similar to Wendt's perspective on states (Wendt, 1994). Such a position is punctual taking into account the continuously transforming and reproducing polity of the EU never heading to a final stage. In short, since social constructivism involves mutual participation of actors for the social change to occur, it is found explanatory for the logic of participatory practices of development work able to induce local societal change.

Specifically, the considerable advantage of this theoretical approach is that it allows for institutional, ideational, normative, perceptive and identity change to happen in any direction (depending on the socialized norms), being triggered by a crucial process of "induction of actors into the norms and rules of a given community" (Zürn and Checkel in Checkel, 2007: 265) - socialization. In its turn, socialization represents one of the stages of the process of European integration and creation of new institutions as perceived by social constructivists. It is defined as

a cognitive and not just behavioral process that triggers the process of social learning and thus the acquisition and internalisation of new norms, interests and identities (Wendt, 1992: 399).

The same logic is provided by the participatory methodologies presented as drivers for change not just in the practice of development, but also at the society level. In *Figure 2.1*, Robert Chambers presents the mutually transformative relations between participatory methodologies in development and factors exposed to change: behaviours, attitudes, mindsets, methods and relationships, which, in their turn are intermediary to change spilling over to persons, professionals and institutions. He explains that all participatory methodologies entail approaches, methods and processes that influence relationships and affect behaviour, attitudes and mindsets that then become part of professional, institutional and personal change (2008: 178). The last part of his explanation where attitudes and behaviour become part of personal, professional and institutional change is explained by social constructivists as norm internalization leading to identity change (Checkel, 1997: 474-477) and driven by communicative action (Elgström, 2000: 458; 461). While the similarities between the functioning logic of social constructivism and participatory methodologies are striking, the difference with the participatory methodologies stands in the possibility for change to either occur in any circle of the diagram and spread through the arrows, or be launched by the practice of participatory methodologies (Chambers, 2008: 178).

Furthermore, since Chambers argues that lack of time, space and resources to debate methods and approach represent the institutional reality in which logframes, targets and the pressure to spend budgets constain and stifle creativity (2008: 183), it becomes unclear how can participatory methodologies be put on the development institutions' agenda and be introduced into the bureaucratic practice. In contrast, from a social constructivist perspective, norm diffusion starts from the moral entrepreneurs who try to persuade other actors from a higher institutional level to adopt a certain behaviour and further certain norms to the policy agenda-setting (Elgström, 2000: 461). Nonetheless, the core premise relevant to this research is that interaction through deliberative and communicative action may carry persuasive character and lead to change of practices and adoption of new ones at the decision-making level.

Figure 2.1 Participatory methodologies as drivers for change
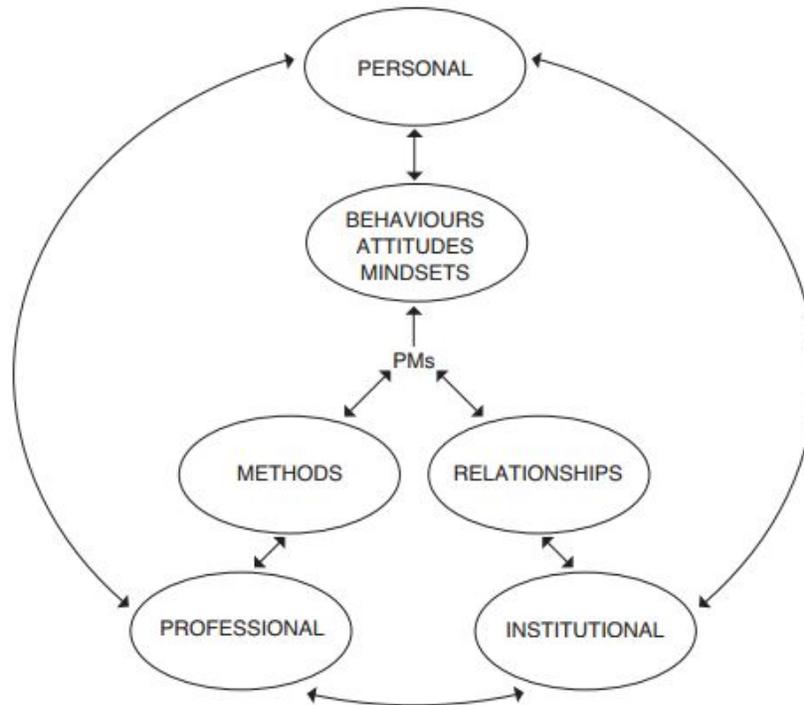
Source: Chambers, R., (2008) *Revolutions in Development Inquiry*, Institute of Development Studies, p.179.

Illustrative to the cooperation building capacity of communicative action is the definition brought by Habermas. The sociologist clarifies that the interacting actors seek to negotiate their definitions and understandings of a certain situation in order to reach - through agreement - a common coordination of their plans of action (1984: 86). Therefore, this definition brings another argument in favour of an improved feedback mechanism between the EU and beneficiaries of its development projects.

2.2 The Social-Constructivist Theoretical Approach Explaining Qualitative Changes in EU's Development Policy

The below instances taken from the evolution of the EU's development policy do not intend to narrate the entire and complex evolution of the policy, but to rather illustrate the capacity of social constructivism to understand and explain processes of sometimes cardinal change brought to the functioning of the policy. Therefore, a snap time-lapse analysis of the EU's Development

Policy evolvement yields an example of the social constructivist premises at work. Scholars agree that what is today the EU's development policy originated under the economic and political postcolonial interests of four of the six founding states of the then-European Community (EC) (Tisch and Wallace, 1994: 60; Bretherton and Vogler, 2006; Hira and Parfitt, 2004: 3,10; Hout, 2010: 4; Holland and Doidge, 2012; Van Reisen in Andrew Mold, 2007; Young and Peterson, 2013; Salm in Kaiser and Meyer, 2013) that lasted between the 1950s and 1990s (Carbone, 2011: 1, in Hill and Smith 2011). Evidence of that is the codification of these interests into the Articles 131-136 of the Treaty of Rome and defined as "special relations" (Treaty establishing the European Economic Community, EUR-Lex:11957E/TXT) between the Community of non-European countries and territories and the EEC member states. The association of these "special relations" intended "to further the interests and prosperity of the inhabitants of these countries and territories in order to lead them to the economic, social and cultural development to which they aspire" (Treaty establishing the European Economic Community, EUR-Lex:11957E/TXT). In other words, the main aim of this unilateral association was "'Europeanising' the former exclusive relations between colonisers and colonised" (Van Reisen in Andrew Mold, 2007: 33). Both Yaoundé conventions and the first Lomé convention sought to transform the policy by adapting it to the changes brought by more and more former colonies gaining their independence. However, the policy still sought to pursue its "sense of obligation and historical responsibility for Europe's colonial past" (Carbone, 2011: 3) but also its economic interest of association with the markets of countries that provided rich resources and raw materials, while neglecting the poorest countries. The political interest was to halt the spread of communism in Africa (Holden, 2009:126 in Kaya, 2017:185). The momentum for change was created when it was realized that all pre-existing conventions have worsened the economic situation for the developing countries (Carbone, 2011: 4), that the aid intended for the poor have actually failed to reach the poorest people (Carbone, 2011: 4), which raised EU's concerns at increased illegal and economic migration towards the EU (Hira and Parfitt, 2004: 12, Holland and Doidge, 2012: 13), and that the procedures of foreign aid have become highly bureaucratized (Tisch and Wallace, 1994: 83; Holland, 2002 in Carbone, 2011: 4). Moreover, following the second enlargement, the accession to the EC of countries with little interest in the ACP countries and with a rather global perspective on development and the reduction of poverty as in the example of Sweden, challenged the Community with reproducing both its apparently pre-fixed

policy interests and the development policy as a whole (Vernier, 1996: 8 in Holland and Doidge, 2012: 62; Young and Peterson, 2013: 501; Arts and Dickson, 2004: 2-3). This shift in the focus of the EU development policy towards a more ambitious and altruistic approach is defined by some as the "Nordicisation" or "like-mindisation" of the policy, meaning the impact of the ideological core of the progressive member states (Elgström and Delputte, 2016: 39), and representing another instance of the social-constructivist approach at work. Another trigger for changing the spectrum of EU's development policy closer to home and its neighbourhood was the fall of communism and the power vacuum that emerged above the Eastern post-communist states (Tisch and Wallace, 1994: 60; Hira and Parfitt, 2004: 11, Holland and Doidge, 2012: 5; 59; 65). But it is also noteworthy that the nudging for a change towards a more social development policy had already started in the 1970s, when European socialist parties endorsed a rather globally oriented development policy and campaigned for the adoption by the EC of the Second International UN Development Strategy as a development policy model based on concerted action and increase in development assistance (Salm in Kaiser and Meyer, 2013: 38-40). Special policy networks of transnational and societal development actors were created in order establish the EC development agenda, to move it away from its initial post-colonial orientation, but also to disseminate ideas and development proposals to the public, in order to formulate the aims of the policy, to gain support for more globally oriented development efforts, and stress the need of such a policy at the core of the EC (Salm in Kaiser and Meyer, 2013: 46-48; 52).

These instances of socialization and learning among policy network actors constantly debating the Community's development agenda are punctual illustrations of the social constructivist approach at work. A policy that was originally orchestrated by and for the benefit of a few countries with 'special relations' with their former colonial possessions was headed for a systemic change, now debated by transnational and societal actors that would not have a say in the policy's agenda-setting initially. Persuasion - another social constructivist element for triggering normative and social change - for changing the scope from regional to global has gained terrain namely grace to the multitude of actors involved and the internalization of newly debated and learned norms. One could infer that such a change in the spectrum is part of a greater process of identity change at the EU level, and namely the becoming of an international actor with an external identity and perception. Specifically, Stephen Hurt makes a pertinent

observation on how the EU development policy is not the result of existing in a vacuum but rather materializes in the context of other organisations' development practice and visibly internalizes and promotes the values of the UN's Millennium Development Goals (2010: 6). To resume, the demonstrated capacity of social constructivism is to illustrate the possibility for restructuring a policy by involving a multilateral framework of actors, notably societal actors, by constantly debating the purpose of it and by seeking public support. Practically, it could be used as an appropriate precedent in order to advocate the need for engaging beneficiaries of EU-funded projects as an epistemic community in articulating the projects' purposes, to trigger the process of social learning, and to feed back into the procedure of the development policy for improvement reasons.

Henceforth, such policy dynamics are illustrative for the explanation brought by social constructivism to the evolution of the EU's development policy. The pluralism of interests and the diversity of transnational development actors and stake-holders played the driving force for socialization and production of interests throughout the ever-evolving development policy. More, the potential of such an exercise of social constructivism stands in furthering europeanization and integration by enhancing the public opinion and awareness of EU-funded projects beneficiaries. This makes the analysis of public feedback importance in EU policy-making necessary.

However, despite the discussed capacity of social constructivism to trigger social learning and its insistence on the need for social change, some scholars insist on the economic character of development interests and argue that the overarching nature of the EU's development practice is fundamentally neoliberal, serving capitalist interests and insisting on market-based reforms in the recipient countries (Hout, 2010: 8). More, another disadvantage of applying social constructivism to the functioning of development policy is the fact that social change might take the time of generations (Tisch and Wallace, 1994: 96) which makes it difficult to measure and to track social change back to the participatory practices of development.

3 The Comparative Advantages and Disadvantages of Feedback

3.1 Feedback and the Socialization Loop

To begin with, when making a parallel between socialisation and the institution of feedback, the latter can be analysed as an illustration of the first: a set of communicative actions and interactions that lead to an intersubjective change between the development agency of the EU and the structure - beneficiaries of EU-funded projects. This relation of mutual constitution between the processes of feedback and socialization also falls under the explanatory capacity of social constructivism. Specifically, some scholars agree that the processes underpinning feedback include learning processes (Siebenhuener, 2008, in Rhinard and Sjöstedt, 2019: 20) and persuasion practices (Checkel, 2001, in Rhinard and Sjöstedt, 2019: 20). More, this answers the question on the importance of 'customers'' feedback in EU-funded projects by approaching the agency and the structure and involving both into a mutually transforming process in which they exchange interests, values understandings, perceptions, local and contextual knowledge and needs. Put simply, they exchange feedback. More than that, if socialization is perceived as the result of feedback exchange, one could infer that feedback is an essential element in order for socialised norms and priorities to be established. One of the outcomes of such a process is informed action, which further illustrates the importance of feedback for enhancing societal participation to tailoring EU-funded projects. More, it improves the reputation of a community-oriented development actor and helps it in "matching development aspirations with actions" (Holland and Doidge, 2012: 89).

In order to elaborate more on the question on the importance of feedback in EU-funded projects, the research consecutively consults both literature on EU doreign policy and literature on international development in general.

3.2 The Importance of External Feedback for EU's Internal Change

Mark Rhinard and Gunnar Sjöstedt stress that feedback effects of EU actions abroad had been rarely examined, even though feedback on EU performance and impact outcomes has the capability to trigger not only external change but also changes to the EU itself, notably its general and specific characteristics (2019: 9-11). In *Figure 3.1* the authors illustrate the mechanism of feedback which gathers from performance and impact of EU actions abroad and feeds back into the system of policy-making that establishes EU's autonomy for action, its value and policy cohesion, and also very important, its capability to act and to use policy instruments, seen as central aspect to the definition of actorness (Bretherton and Vogler, 2006: 30 in Rhinard and Sjöstedt, 2019: 13). Adjusted to the scope of the present research, *Figure 3.1* represents a normative ideal for the exercise of feedback in external development project management, as well as to the internal decision making process of the EU.

Figure 3.1. Key components of our approach
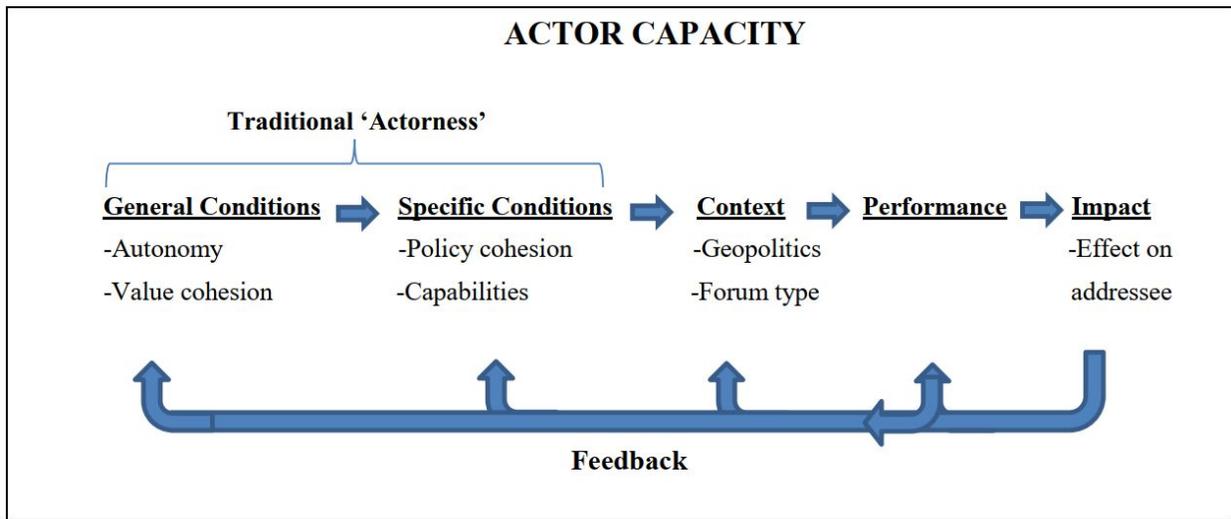
Source: Rhinard, M., and Sjöstedt, G., (2019) "The EU as a Global Actor: A new conceptualisation four decades after 'actorness'", *The Swedish Institute of International Affairs*, No. 6/2019, p. 11.

One of the advantages of such a feedback exercise is that it builds a feedback loop with performance by feeding back into it after using it as an actual source of feedback. Equally important, the mechanism of feedback is developed as part of a bigger analysis regarding actor capacity or, in other words, "not only what the EU is but also what it does." (Rhinard and

Sjöstedt, 2019: 5). Hence, the need to establish feedback mechanisms and to shift the debate from traditional 'actorness' to 'effectiveness', the first being perceived by Rhinard and Sjöstedt as rather descriptive (2019: 2; 9). The article demonstrates the importance of feedback loops originating in EU action through these 4 arguments: (1) successful external impact of the EU could generate more internal value and policy coherence as well as motivation for new policy initiatives (Ginsberg 2001, in Rhinard and Sjöstedt, 2019: 20); (2) internally acquired coherence or the actual loss of it could either enhance EU's internal and external identity, extend its supranational authority for action through its added value and foster the integration process, or develop an international reputation for weakness and ineffectiveness of the Union and determine member states to pursue individual foreign policy strategy; (3) the EU could gather more resources, instruments and capabilities to support further action based on previous successful results and learned lessons; (4) the mechanism of learning from missions performed outside of the EU will enhance its future performance, while the ignorance of a learning mechanism could trigger the retrenchment of member states to pool their capabilities for common EU action (Rhinard and Sjöstedt, 2019: 20-23).

3.3 The Comparative Advantages and Disadvantages of Feedback in Development Projects

Another explanation for the need for a feedback mechanism in EU-funded projects could be found in the literature on development. Specifically, it would allow the application of the trusteeship filter on the EU's development action abroad. Trusteeship is defined as "[t]he intent which is expressed, by one source of agency, to develop the capacities of another. It is what binds the process of development to the intent of development" (Cowen and Shenton, 1996: x, in Allen and Thomas, 2000: 41). It also raises three crucial questions about the agency that claims trusteeship for the development of others: (1) Does it have legitimacy to act on their behalf? (2) Does it have the power and the capacity to do so? (3) Can the interests of those being developed be represented through the actions of an agency 'entrusted' with acting on their behalf? (Allen and Thomas, 2000: 41). At the same time, if trusteeship is equated to legitimacy, it is also considered "a subjective quality, defined by others' perceptions" (Hurd, 1993: 81, in Elgström,

2007: 952). Therefore, feedback highlights the importance of evaluation in development projects, the first being a procedure of the last. In its turn, the importance of evaluation stands, on one hand, in the virtuous circle of learning that it creates by gathering lessons from project implementation to be used for future project selection, and on the other hand, in its accountability check of resources (Hira and Parfitt, 2004: 141).

3.3.1 Arguments for the Need to Ask for Feedback from Customers of Development Policy

Borrowing from the theory of policy feedback, the argument that positive feedback leads to policy stability and even path dependence, while negative feedback creates pressure for policy change (Young, in Wallace, Pollack and Young, 2015: 68) is also valid for understanding the need for a feedback loop between the development policy-makers and project beneficiaries.

From a postmodernist perspective, authentic development should meet the desires of the local population and engage both the development actor and the beneficiaries into an active and mutual transformation (Hira and Parfitt, 2004: 28-9). More, together with the social-constructivist exercise of persuasion, it is argued that through a dialogue, rather than the imposition of Western cultural values, norms should be freely chosen and mutually agreed at the society level in order for these to be internalized and included in the culture (Hira and Parfitt, 2004: 28). Tisch and Wallace, who are international development practitioners, characterize the issue as follows:

> "Expatriate advice is lightly regarded by villagers, who have much more experience with local conditions. Communication is complicated by cross-cultural misunderstanding. The expatriates go home, leaving some villagers better off and others with more problems than before. This experience of development assistance is typical of many activities based on the Western (and dominant) model of foreign-aided development." (1994: 15).

This raises the issue of unintended consequences for project beneficiaries discussed in detail in section 4.3.4 with excerpts from the conducted interviews. More, unintended consequences are

also depictive of the problem of treating projects as temporary interventions (Tisch and Wallace, 1994: 10; Hira and Parfitt, 2004: 34-5), that of high bureaucratization of development agencies (Hira and Parfitt 2004: 38; Easterly, 2002) as well as the issue of the EU's development policy patchwork nature (Holland and Doidge, 2012: 37; Hira and Parfitt, 2004: 38), which in the pursuit of a certain rule-bound and rigid structure of aid projects in which donors seek control aver aid spending, unconducive to flexibility needed in development and neglecting of the fruitful practices of lesson learning and comprehensive evaluation for goal pursuit.

Moreover, notably because of the highly bureaucratized procedures of delivering aid, it becomes very difficult for a certain citizen in a poor country to ask for help to fix a pothole in the front of his house, and to convince that his need is more prevalent than other problems somewhere else. Moreover, William Easterly argues that also because of such a complex bureaucracy and hierarchy of involved actors and procedures, the poor person is not able to deliver feedback in case of his dissatisfaction with the result, simply because there is no such feedback mechanism (2002: 224). At the same time, even if such a mechanism is in place, it is also important for the feedback to be processed and listened to, not just gathered. This makes feedback without accountability, a rather useless policy instrument (Easterly, 2006: 23). Based on the complexity of bureaucracy in certain agencies, Easterly draws two models of development agencies: Planners and Searches. While bureaucratic 'Planners' are not focusing on feedback from the poor and beneficiaries get some assistance where that is not needed, while missing on the most urgent issues, in the case of the 'Searchers', their advantage is conducting field-work and making contact with the beneficiaries through feedback mechanisms and surveys that they design in order to learn from the locals' experience and needs (Easterly, 2006: 125). Henceforth, getting feedback from beneficiaries turns into benefits even for the developing agency, such as the incentive to respond to feedback and exert more effort, the advantage to measure concrete outcomes and the opportunity to outcompete other agencies in terms of project effectiveness (Easterly, 2002: 226). Also, by directly addressing the beneficiaries, development agencies could bypass national or local governments that are corrupt, lack popular support and accountability, manipulate reports to show successful funds-management, or simply do not have the interest in poverty reduction (Easterly, 2002: 243-44). In such cases, the civil-society approach to development can bring about change by improving social organization and demand of

accountability from governments. The paradox stands in the fact that while foreign development agencies require the consent of the local government to run aid projects, they can also - through insistence on the freedom of media and protection of human rights - become agents of change in the locals' perception and attitude towards their own government (Hira and Parfitt, 2004: 23, Tisch and Wallace, 1994: 65). However, such change requires, again, a constant communication mechanism between the agency and the beneficiaries, that would allow for elements of trust and awareness to appear between the two entities, especially when the society's trust into government is absent for the same reasons.

From the bottom-up perspective, the exercise of feedback allows to hold development actors accountable for the implementation of their projects and pressures them to adopt more specific goals in order to shift from ineffective generalists to more effective specialists (Easterly, 2006: 23). Such a bottom-up perspective in the form of positive-feedback loop oriented to solve customers' problems lays at the foundation of what Easterly calls the "greatest bottom-up system in history for meeting people's needs" - the free market (2006: 63). The scholar is presenting the market as the model to be followed by Western assistance in treating aid beneficiaries as customers, which would yield the continuous incentive to adapt and innovate their products to the customers' needs (Easterly, 2006: 64).

To emphasize, a feedback mechanism in the post-project evaluation stage appears as a highly necessary practice, since knowledge about local social constraints is directly proportional with the ability to design pertinent solutions to existing problems (Tisch and Wallace, 1994: 100).

3.3.2 The Reluctance in Asking for Feedback

The exercise of gathering feedback is, however, twofold. While the benefits for the beneficiaries are clarified in the previous section, there are also reasons why developing agencies are reluctant to institutionalize a feedback mechanism. These reasons are presented in this section based on the consulted literature but also through the anticipation of the empirical findings of the conducted interviews, in order to illustrate the theoretical arguments identified. Firstly, the receival of negative feedback would hit into the reputation of a certain development agency that

becomes blamable for the negative outcomes, and thus hinders the accumulation of prospective resources for future projects (Easterly, 2002: 226; 237; 2006: 23). Secondly, since some of the agencies monopolize the 'service aid delivery, the competition pressure from other agencies disappears (Easterly, 2002: 226; 241; 244). This monopoly also means that there is no division of labour among development agencies focusing on particular issue-areas, which undermines the possible gains of specialization and improvement through constant feedback (Easterly, 2002: 241).

The problem of bureaucracy in development donor agencies is acknowledged both by scholars and development practitioners. As discussed earlier, the formulation of rigid bureaucratic practices and conditionalities by development agencies oriented to prevent the misuse of funds by corrupt governments and recipient agencies is another distraction from focusing on evaluation practices and dialogue with the project's ultimate beneficiaries. Hira and Parfitt argue that while the bureaucratic control throughout the project design intends to prevent misuse of funds, it is actually conducive to increased formalism and goal displacement from the staff that is concentrated on intermediate targets and loses sight of the overall project purpose, by leaving little room of maneuver for project recipients' participation (2004: 41-9). The issue of disbursing funds and using all the allocated resources in the budget to motivate project importance (Tisch and Wallace, 1994: 83-4; Hira and Parfitt, 2004: 120) is another distraction from achieving sustainability in development goals and adjusting those to local needs. Other than that, the fear for mistakes in the context of rule-bound bureaucracies is suppressing innovative initiatives and the learning potential of such development agencies, which also depends on feedback mechanisms of information sharing (Chambers, 1997 in Hira and Parfitt, 2004: 119). A very tight and rigid budget is another bureaucratic element of development projects that hinders the participatory activities in a way that it cannot cover issues that arise under a feedback exchange session.

An illustration of this problem can be found in the evaluation report requested from Keystone Moldova, one of the implementers of one of the sub-projects under the case-study that gathered feedback from the local implementers and identified issues that were not initially included in the budget and it remains unclear whether the gathered feedback was transmitted back to the EU and

whether there was any response to it (see section 4.3.4). All in all, as Hira and Parfitt observe, "[t]he essence of participatory work is that many development activities cannot be preplanned and budgeted because they emerge out of the discussions between facilitators and beneficiaries" (2004: 120). Moreover, when the implementing agency is not obliged to demand feedback from beneficiaries, it remains a question of its conformity to good practice and ethical norms to do so (Hira and Parfitt, 2004: 125). At the same time, following Jacobs' idea that "badly implemented feedback systems can generate misleading data for decision-makers and deepen power imbalances to the detriment of the most poor and vulnerable people" (2010: 62) and that feedback systems need, therefore, an ethical review, in the case of Keystone, it has been found that the organisation has articulated an *Ethical Framework for Constituency Feedback* (Keystone, 2009 in Jacobs, 2010).

From another perspective, development agencies can be reluctant to implement a mechanism to collect feedback due to the inability of beneficiaries to provide feedback. Reasons for that might be their perceived lack of resources and power to make their needs known, but also the lack of leverages to hold agencies accountable in case of their failure (Tisch and Wallace, 1994: 3; 60; Easterly, 2006: 23). Another reason identified during the interviews with beneficiaries is the rather cultural norm of 'not looking into the mouth of a gift horse'. Specifically, a few interviewees have provided a similar answer of being thankful for what is already provided by development actors and enough for improving their economic situation to a certain degree, rather than asking for more (Ion Durnea, Interview No.1, 7 March 2020; Petru Bondari, Interview No.2, 8 March 2020). This aspect is problematized by Tisch and Wallace, who stress the imbalanced power relation between donors and recipients, the latter finding themselves in a weaker position and being reluctant to refuse aid projects despite their inconsistency with the locals' needs (1994: 60). The interviews also uncovered the problem of public disinterest to identify and communicate local issues to the EU development actors. This issue is akin to the argument made earlier by Easterly (2002: 243-44; 2006: 23) on the distrust between government and public and thus the inability to provide feedback and demanding accountability. In contrast, when discussing European political participation, Andrew Moravcsik argues that it is namely lack of issue salience and not lack of opportunity that holds citizens from participating in those opportunities provided to them. More, scholars consider that in order to overcome apathy and

give citizens a reason to care about EU politics or a certain development project, it is necessary for them to have an interest and a stake in it (Moravcsik, 2004: 360-61), or to have dedicated efforts such as work and resources to feel ownership over the project (Hira and Parfitt, 2004: 105). This vision is countered by Tisch and Wallace, who believe that it is not an inherent lack of initiative and curiosity that are the reason for beneficiaries' conservativeness, but rather a history of living at subsistence levels (1994: 108). At the same time, the problem of issue salience and its prioritization is confirmed both by the authors as well as by most interviewees to this research, discussing "the daily battle of subsistence living" (Tisch and Wallace, 1994: 109) that challenges the poorest people to acknowledge their resources to act and take initiative, and who are argued to be the very targets of EU development strategy. Making a parallel with the EU-funded projects and their beneficiaries, and having in mind the the idea of people becoming the agents of their own development (Allen and Thomas, 2000: 41), one could infer that the establishment of a feedback mechanism could play the role of that stake given to the beneficiaries to encourage participation when the opportunity is provided. More, it could arguably enhance the people's self-perception of power and leverage over their own government that would positively influence their capacity for mobilization and demanding accountability. However, the issue of incentivized action through having a stake in the outcome is also applicable for implementers of an aid project, who "do not have to live with the result of their work" (Tisch and Wallace, 1994: 102).

Another reason behind the reluctance to make feedback a mandatory project evaluation practice is the diversity of motivations to give aid, ranging from selfish to altruistic or combined. When the political motivations such as strategic and economic interests prevail, the risk is that the mere provision of aid will outbalance the project's successful implementation (Tisch and Wallace, 1994: 57-8)

Equally important, difficult measurability is yet another cause that stands in the way of concentrating actions towards establishing a feedback mechanism in every aid project. This is also the weakness of social constructivism in proving and measuring societal change as a result of socialization and feedback exchange. As Tisch and wallace accurately express it, "[n]umbers of computers and vehicles are easy to count, but behavioral change - the key to long-term

development - is particularly hard to measure. It is easier for forestry projects to focus on seedlings planted than on surviving trees or villagers' attitudes toward conserving and regenerating forest resources." (1994: 84). Likewise, it is easier for the EU to give grants for businesses on both sides of the Nistru River, than to measure the level of acquired trust between people living on both banks.

However, in order for all the enumerated advantages to outweigh the disadvantages of gathering feedback from the beneficiaries, development aid bureaucracies should function as a free market (Easterly, 2002: 226) and treat project beneficiaries as their customers, which is not necessarily the case neither at the global level, nor at the European one. Such analysis requires a closer look to the EU's DEVCO department.

3.4 Feedback in DG-DEVCO Projects

The EU's 2019 annual sustainable development report suggested that "the EU needs to make its operations and decision-making more participatory" (IEEP, 2019: 28). The search for feedback procedures in the implementation of EU-funded projects yielded a confusing picture. On one hand, working papers and brochures published by the EU are actually advocating for more feedback gathered from the beneficiaries (Capacity4dev, 2014), while on the other hand, the analysis of the identified case-study project illustrated a more complex picture (see Chapter 4). Concisely, just as participation is considered by some a cliché or a buzzword in developmental work (Van Reisen in Mold, 2007: 253; World Bank, 2000: 22, 79-87 in Hira and Parfitt, 2004: 158) "evaluation as currently practiced in development project administration is a virtue very often preached but rarely practiced" (Hira and Parfitt, 2004: 141). The official website of the EU stipulates that independent external experts are hired to conduct project evaluations in conformity with the methodology defined by the evaluation unit of the DG DEVCO (ec.europa.eu, Project and Programme Evaluations). However, it remains unclear whether the results of these evaluations are publicly accessible. In other cases, the implementing organisations conduct participatory post-project evaluation with the facilitators and beneficiaries (as in the discussed case with Keystone Moldova), while it remains unclear whether the selected evaluation procedure was a requirement of the project or the NGO's own initiative. Another

finding illustrates that some projects do not gather any feedback on the implementation of the project, its utility for locals and the attainability of its scope, from its beneficiaries. Therefore, in this subchapter, the research focuses on DG DEVCO, by analysing strategic issues of its competences and methodologies applied in development work.

3.4.1 The EU Development Policy Framework

This section proceeds with analysing the EU's development policy framework. Hence, the EU's development policy finds its legal basis in both the TEU and TFEU but also in agreements such as the Cotonou agreement valid until December 2020. The Cotonou Agreement promotes important principles such as poverty eradication (Article 1) and societal participation to development (Article 33(4)) that can be used as a legal basis for establishing participative post-project evaluation methods such as beneficiaries feedback mechanisms. Strategies such as the 2005 European Consensus on Development or the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are also used to shape the policy framework and demonstrate the multitude of actors and approaches involved in the policy's agenda-setting, as well as the nature of continuous negotiation regarding the policy's priorities marked by the finite character of certain agreements. The overarching goal and tendency of the policy expressed through these documents is the eradication of poverty at the global level. This corresponds with the latest reorganization of this policy at the turn of the millennium and its alignment to the UN Millenium Goals (Commission, 2000a in Bretherton and Vogler, 2006). As participative tools of development projects evaluation were recognized as one of the most effective practices both for the sake of the developing agency and its beneficiaries, it is interesting to assess the policy tools and practices both promoted but also practically applied by the EU in the area of development assistance.

3.4.2 Institutional Dynamics

Putting on the same table the issues of internal policy coherence and coordination among policy decision-makers (Bretherton and Vogler, 2006: 30) but also the issue of goal displacement in development projects (Hira and Parfitt, 2004: 41-9), it can be argued that both of the issues are connected by a mutual causal relation, both influencing the quality of policy outputs. Put in the

context of Rhinard and Sjöstedt's (2019: 20-23) discussion on external feedback for the EU's external action, the chain of consequences locks into a vicious circle by influencing internal policy coherence based on the EU's external performance. More, the extent to which such problems of internal coherence are resolved also influences the ability of the EU to make use of its policy tools (participatory evaluation is one of such tools) which account for its actor capability (Bretherton and Vogler, 2006: 31). This might be one of the impediments for the added value the EU seeks to bring to the development policy in order to avoid its renationalization (Holland and Doidge, 2012: 10). Practically, these issues are illustrated by the continuous 'turf wars' between the different fragmented institutional structures designed, merged, separated and transformed for the EU's external action that also includes the area of development. Specifically, the EU's administration in the area of development fragmented from 2 DGs with external competences in 1984 to having 7 such DGs in 1997 (Holland and Doidge, 2012: 121), worsening bureaucratic gridlock issues, overlapping competences and triggering more goal displacement. For instance, internal incoherence and poor performance within DG External Relations, created in the first place to overcome this fragmentation of EU external policy between numerous DGs, led to further fragmentation by distributing its functions to other separate structures: DG Trade and EuropeAid (Bretherton and Vogler 2006: 31). More, while it sought to separate responsibility for policy making and project implementation (Holland and Doidge, 2012: 121), it failed again to ensure a division of labour compared to other DGs and most importantly, "it placed too much emphasis on correct procedure, rather than the speed of delivery or sensitivity to local needs" (EuropeAid, 2001: 163 in Holland and Doidge, 2012: 122). This is complementary to the issue of staff being concentrated on intermediate targets and losing sight of the overall project purpose, already discussed by Hira and Parfitt (2004: 41-9), or the issue morale loss because of the frequency of institutional changes and stuff being incorporated from one institutional structure to another (Bretherton and Vogler, 2006: 31).

Another hindrance to the well-functioning of EuropeAid was incomplete authority over the cycle of project management, the programming stage being still run by the DGs for External Relations and Development (Holland and Doidge, 2012: 123). Only in 2010 this issue was resolved by merging EuropeAid and the remainder of the DG for Development, which created the new Directorate General for Development and Cooperation (DG DEVCO) retaining both policy and

implementation competences, but also gaining large but not full control over two of the seven main external relations budget instruments: the DCI and the EDF (Holland and Doidge, 2012: 126). However, the remaining DG for External Relations was replaced in 2010 by the EEAS (a structure created by the Council), which is now a competing structure with the DG DEVCO (a structure of the Commission) in terms of having authority over the geographic desks evenly represented by its staff and controlling the remaining five budget lines for external action (Holland and Doidge, 2012: 124-13). This power (im)balance is perceived by the EEAS as a contribution to policy complementarity and as "[a] continual operation [that] will guarantee that the political expertise provided by the EEAS will be optimally combined with the development expertise of the Commission"(EEAS, 2010/311(5)). Conversely, Holland and Doidge consider that through such delimitation, "[...] responsibility for key development instruments is now institutionally separated from the geographic desks to which those instruments apply."(2012: 129). With this in mind, one could argue that more knowledge of the local context could be gathered as a result of the exchanges between the EU Delegations - now part of EEAS diplomatic service - and the local governments and with the society. At the same time, one should take into account the risk of politicization this could bring to the development policy. Holland and Doidge (2012: 130) but also Hurt (2010: 13) pertinently warn about the risk posed by EEAS' foreign policy strategic considerations and efforts to discipline local governments to the developmental needs of the local society. The highest risk is that failure to meet conditionalities imposed on governments would mean reductions in development assistance and a sacrifice of populations' need for poverty reduction, which is the main aim of EU's development policy (Holland and Doidge 2012: 130). The fear for that is confirmed through the interview with a Kenyan businessperson, who associated the EU's development action with the risk of sanctions and funds withholding (Chaban, Elgström, Kelly and Suet Yi, 2013: 440). This highlights the need for participatory methods in development and the capacity of EU development policy to by-pass unresponsive governments and design projects directly for potential beneficiaries. Such a transformation would arguably approach development actions with the EU's development goals and enhance both local and international public attitude and awareness towards the EU as a development actor.

3.4.3 DEVCO Project (Evaluation) Management: Is There a Feedback Mechanism?

If one would compare the EU's development project cycle to the EU policy cycle, the similarities are striking. The similarity of problems in the last evaluation stage is also surprising. *Figure 3.2* represents the project management cycle provided by the Commission (2004: 16), while *Figure 3.3* illustrates the EU policy cycle adapted by Young and Quinn (2002: 12). Since this research is focused on feedback mechanisms in post-project evaluation, the analysis will zoom into the evaluation stages of both these cycles to identify common problems and their sources.

Figure 3.2 The cycle of operations
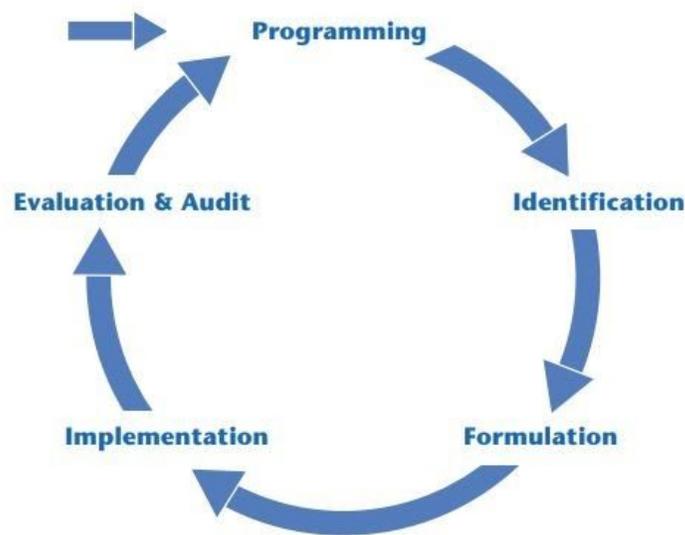
Source: European Commission, (2004) "Project Cycle Management Guidelines", in *Aid Delivery Methods: Supporting Effective Implementation of EC External Assistance*, Vol. 1, p. 16.

In both cycles in the evaluation stage the discussion revolves around the process of feedback as an important element for ensuring legitimacy for the entire cycle, and especially for the legitimacy of its outputs. For reasons of policy improvement at the EU level, the stage of policy implementation is followed by the stage of feedback which allows for the "intended, inadequate, and unintended effects of policies [to] often feed back into the policy process." (Young, in Wallace, Pollack and Young, 2015: 47), through mechanisms such as evaluations of effectiveness, political feedback loops and spill-over (Young, in Wallace, Pollack and Young, 2015: 67).

Figure 3.3 The Policy Cycle
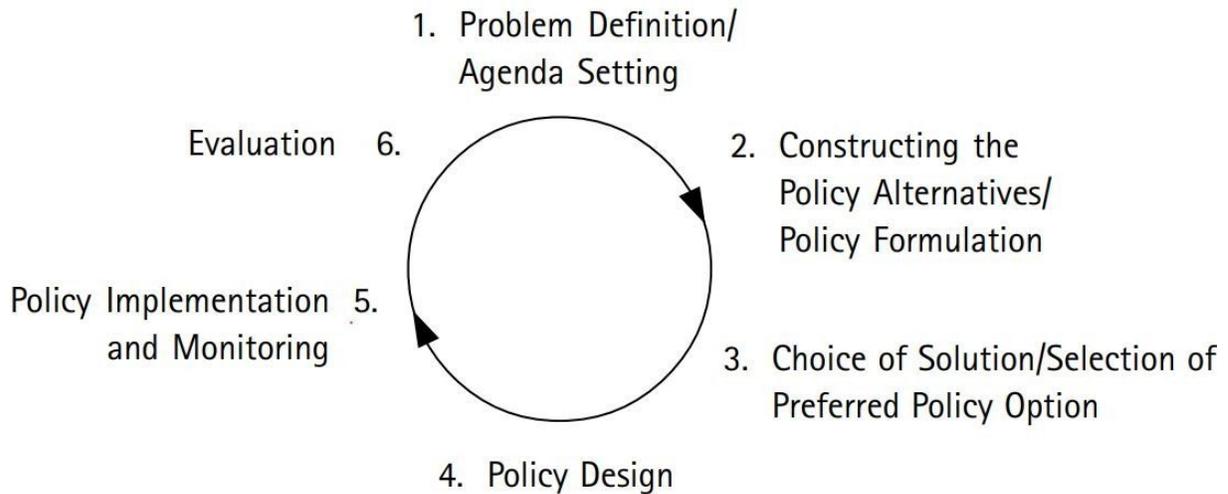
Source: Young, E., and Quinn, L., (2002) "Writing Effective Public Policy Papers: A Guide for Policy Advisers in Central and Eastern Europe", *in Local Government Public Service Reform Initiative*, Open Society Institute, p.12.

The arising issue with such mechanism stands in the distance between the policy makers (the European Commission) and policy implementers (Member States) that stretches the feedback loop and makes it difficult for the EU to monitor both the effectiveness and other effects of a policy (Young, in Wallace, Pollack and Young, 2015: 67). Likewise, it is problematic for the EU to evaluate the effects of a development project, since it is most often the local NGOs that implement the project and have the competence to gather feedback. Otherwise, when local implementation depends on local governments, the success of evaluation will reside on the relation between those governments and societies (Young, in Wallace, Pollack and Young, 2015: 67-8), excluding EU's direct access to the society, but also highlighting the need of such an approach to EU's development policy. *Aid Delivery Methods: Project Cycle Management Guidelines* is the main manual used by the European Union to design and implement development projects. When it comes to evaluation, the manual provides that its aim is to "determine the relevance and fulfillment of objectives, developmental efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability." (European Commission, 2004: 46). Moreover, it stresses the participation of stakeholders to evaluation as an underpinning principle, along with impartiality and independence, credibility and usefulness of evaluation (European Commission, 2004: 46).

The manual also presents 2 types of evaluation for external cooperation programmes. The first is *Evaluation of individual projects* which relies on the competences of either EuropeAID (now DG DEVCO) or that of the EU Delegations. The important element here is that the evaluation financing is provided under the same project/programme funds (European Commission, 2004: 47). The issue with such financing stands in the bias it produces for the impartiality and disinterest of the evaluation team (Hira and Parfitt, 2004) that is dependent on an employment contract from the donor agency (Holden, 2009: 28). This type of evaluation is relevant to the discussion in this research. The second is *Evaluation of the results of country/regional and sector policies and programmes, of programming performance and of the policy mix.* In this case, the evaluation is conducted by the Evaluation Unit - a structure in the DG DEVCO that has a separate budget and is independent of the operational services. Such evaluations are more often conducted than those for individual projects (European Commission, 2004: 47).

Important for the research, the evaluation criteria used by the Commission include effectiveness, which "should include specific assessment of the benefits accruing to target groups, including women and men and identified vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly and disabled." (European Commission, 2004: 49). Presumably, such assessments might involve the exercise of feedback mechanisms, although the manual does not provide a clear definition of what do such 'specific assessments' entail and whether they are recommended or mandatory, since the manual uses the word "should".

Since the EU's development policy exists in a wider international framework, the established in 2011 DG DEVCO uses a common project evaluation methodology with the OECD elaborated in 2006 by a joint effort of the DG RELEX, DG DEV and EuropeAid. The Volume 4 of this methodology provides the concrete tools used for evaluation of projects and wider programmes. This includes the following 12 tools: problem diagram, objectives diagram and impact diagram, decision diagram, interview, focus group, survey, expert panel, case study, context indicators, SWOT, multi-criteria analysis and cost-effectiveness analysis (DG RELEX, DG DEV, EuropeAid, 2006). It is interesting to see how participative are these evaluation tools proposed by DEVCO.

The paper endorses a homogeneous usage of different tools at different evaluation stages to facilitate a triangulation of information, but also based on the degree of difficulty of the intervention, the quality of the available expertise, the nature of information to be collected and the multiplicity of interlocutors (DG RELEX, DG DEV, EuropeAid, 2006). This makes clear that it is up to the discretion of the evaluation team which methodology to choose and apply to the project evaluation. Based on the tools' description of necessary human and financial resources, the *Table 3.4* below represents an organisation of these twelve evaluation methods based on their participatory input from the project's end beneficiaries.

The evaluation methods are listed in an ascendent manner, the ones at the top of the *Table 3.4* being the most participative, and the ones at the bottom involving only the evaluation team and often lacking local contextual knowledge. Some of the methodologies are found in two categories since they may be implemented with either no participatory input, or are conducted with participation of local elites. More, the figure illustrates that along with the raise of the participative character of evaluation methods, the financial costs for conducting them also increases. Specifically, these include costs for remuneration and salaries of locally recruited interviewers, moderators and experts, costs for their training, long distance transportation costs especially in the conducting of interviews, but also interpreting, catering and other logistics costs (DG RELEX, DG DEV, EuropeAid, 2006: 52; 57-60; 68). Thus, one could arguably affirm that the high financial costs of participative evaluation methods lead to their avoidance or seldom application by the evaluation teams, despite clear encouragement from the European Commission to use all of them in combination for different evaluation stages. Interview, survey, focus group and case study are the most participative evaluation methods that establish a feedback mechanism with the end beneficiaries. For instance, the focus group is presented as a result-driven qualitative survey meant to gather beneficiaries' opinions, behaviours and expectations from the policy or project that engages them and has impact on their lives (DG RELEX, DG DEV, EuropeAid, 2006: 54). On the opposite end are the evaluation tools that do not require such high financial costs and are thus not involving beneficiaries participation.

Table 3.4 Evaluation Methods Provided by DEVCO

The Participatory Input of the Evaluation Method →		The Evaluation Method's Financial Costs →
	Tools that primarily engage end beneficiaries' participation:	
	Interview Survey Focus Group Case Study	
	Tools that engage the participation of strategic stake-holders and local experts (elites) other than the end beneficiaries:	
	Focus Group Case Study Expert Panel Multi-Criteria Analysis SWOT	
	Tools that require mainly the participation of multidisciplinary evaluation teams with knowledge of the Commission's development procedures:	
	SWOT Problem Diagram Objectives Diagram and Impact Diagram Decision Diagram Context Indicators	

Source: Generated by this research based on the information provided in DG RELEX, DG DEV, EuropeAid, (2006) "Evaluation Methods for the European Union's External Assistance", in *Office for Official Publications of the European Communities*, Luxemburg.

One example is the context indicators method, which is used to provide depictive information regarding a variable such as political stability or corruption that are found in the assisted country. The advantage of such a method is that it can be applied by the evaluation team, excluding the need for recruiting other staff, and at zero cost, since information can often be found on the internet (DG RELEX, DG DEV, EuropeAid, 2006: 89-98). Interestingly enough, the Problem Diagram evaluation method that analyses the validity of the project's logframe matrix - which is the starting point for every project proposal and is based on the problems and objectives diagrams - is found at the bottom of *Table 3.4* among the most non-participatory evaluation methods. Its stated disadvantage is not having enough knowledge of local context (DG RELEX, DG DEV, EuropeAid, 2006:89-98), and thus transforming into a blueprint methodology (Hira

and Parfitt: 2004: 51). Therefore, one could lawfully ask how can an evaluation method that lacks sufficient understanding of the local context be able to assess the validity and conformity of the project's objectives and their prioritization with its applied strategy and local issues' urgency? This highlights the need to confer coercive effects to the combination of such methods with participatory evaluation methods. In cases when the evaluation shows a mismatch between project objectives and its strategy and expected outcomes, the manual suggests a reorientation of the project or its interruption (DG RELEX, DG DEV, EuropeAid, 2006: 50). However, Hira and Parfitt mention that despite poor execution of some projects, they are almost never interrupted due to the multiplicity of vested interests and lack of other attractive projects to disburse funds for (2004: 155). Such a perspective uncovers the (im)balance between strategic interests of donor agencies on one hand, and the need to engage beneficiaries preferences on the other hand. At the EU level, this is relevant when discussing the politicization of development policy highlighted by the competition between the EEAS and DEVCO in development planning.

Another interesting finding on DEVCO's project evaluation performance is that evaluations are more often conducted for bigger programmes having geographical, sectoral or budgetary focus rather than for individual projects that are of smaller size. From a critical point of view, such an approach to evaluation risks generalisation and superficiality, since the scarcity of individual projects evaluation might be conducive to lack of contextual knowledge and local project ownership, but also sustainability failure. At this point it becomes very interesting - and yet impossible - to determine which of the discussed evaluation methods are predominantly applied by the evaluation teams. Some scholars share the critique brought by Chambers to development agencies and stress that "[u]nfortunately, most of the agencies who have adopted participatory techniques have done so in a very cursory manner, paying lip service without really changing their practices." (Hira and Parfitt, 2004: 151; Chambers, 1997). Furthermore, it remains unclear whether evaluation reports are taken into account for future project proposals, since it is argued that loan officers are incentivized to actively stimulate the activation of budget towards new projects (Hira and Parfitt, 2004: 145).

4 Case Study: Assessing Feedback Performance in the Support to Confidence Building Measures Programme (IV) and its Impact on the Beneficiaries' Perception and Awareness of the EU as a Development Actor

4.1 Project Description and Selection Motivation

After the Cold War, the Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) tool became popular among international organizations working with crisis and conflict management in order to build trust and enhance cooperation (Kavanagh and Crespo, 2019: 187). The tool was also adapted by the EU in its foreign assistance and development work, as part of a wider programme outside the EU and run by the Council of Europe: *Confidence-Building Measures across the river Nistru/Dniester (CBMs) programme* launched in 2010 in Moldova (Council of Europe, 2020). The *Support to Confidence Building Measures Programme (IV)* (2015-2018) is the latest finalised programme of this kind in Moldova, funded by the EU and implemented by the UNDP. As a selected case-study, it provides the possibility to access the evaluation findings and lessons learned and the opportunity to put the programme's objectives into the actual political and social context of Moldova in order to discuss questions of participatory practices in project evaluation but also public perceptions of the EU as a development actor.

The overall objective of the programme is rather ambitious and seeks to provide "a framework for engaging in development interventions across the security zone on both sides of the Nistru/Dniestr River, in line with agreements reached in the 5+2 negotiation process [...] comprised of a series of activities that will strengthen, regularize and intensify interaction between otherwise divided societies, aiming to establish this interaction as a norm." (UNDP Moldova, 2014: 4). The identified social-constructivist element in this objective, is the intention to socialize the norm of communication and interaction between two communities, part of a frozen conflict. The ideological substrate also resembles the transactionalist approach on the

establishment of security communities as a result of increased social and economic exchange between entities that become integrated (Deutsch, 1957).

To narrow down the research, two sub-projects run by the programme will be analysed: (1) *Increased cross-river cooperation of business actors leading to improved employment opportunities and livelihoods across the Nistru River* and (2) *Social services for persons with disabilities to increase the confidence between the both banks of the Nistru river*.

4.2 Research Limitations

The results of this research may not be representative due to the small number of interviewees, but it provides qualitative data that is interesting to evaluate since an overlapping of the messages provided was still observed. To complete the interview findings, the research makes use of data triangulation including project papers and reports, media reports, national opinion barometers, but also relevant papers from EU Publications and Eurobarometer graphs when discussing public perception of the EU in Moldova.

Specifically, the posed research question can not deliver a fully representative answer since the number of interviews draws a rather qualitative than quantitative picture when it comes to Moldovan society's perception of the EU as a development agency. A higher number of conducted surveys could be more indicative of a clearer picture. And yet, the conducted interviews are illustrative for the low level of awareness of the EU as a development agency and the accessibility of its projects.

Another limitation of the research is the acknowledged subjectivity of opinion and analyses provided. To overcome that, the effort was to provide contrasting perspectives to all matters addressed and to provide critique to the theoretical approach as well as to the entire research through this research limitations section.

4.3 Thematic Analysis of Data

This section of the research embodies the empirical work conducted to answer the proposed RQ. As described in the methodology section, in the pre-interview phase, the two blocs of questions have been categorized into themes of further analysis of the data gathered. These questions and the identified themes of analysis are presented in *Table 4.1* (see Appendix A). The main findings of the conducted Thematic Analysis are presented in *Table 4.2* (see Appendix B). This section proceeds with an in-depth analysis of the identified themes by using excerpts from the conducted interviews, as well as other qualitative and quantitative sources of data.

4.3.1 Perceptions of EU as a Development Actor

The overall perception of the EU is perceived as positive. None of the interviewees provided a negative opinion on the EU. However, despite the insistence to get an opinion on the EU's performance as a development actor, all eight of the respondents had the initial tendency to speak of the EU as a geopolitical direction advocated by half of the society's opinion. They highlighted the deep dividing lines across the society, between proponents of the West and those of the East. Ion Veste, the mayor of Zaim, a village under the coverage of both projects, mentioned that it was unclear to him where this division came from. He saw the disappointment of people in the Moldovan government throughout the years as a possible cause to that. At the same time, he noted that the EU was the only proper model of development for Moldova and it's only chance for prosperity since it was the only source of development assistance he had experienced during his mandate (Interview No.3, 10 March 2020.). Eleonora Barcari, who is a member of the mobile team created to provide social services to people with disabilities in Moldova, mentioned that there are still people with a certain nostalgia for the soviet times who feel distrurbed when they see the EU flag on project banners. However, she saw in the EU an important source of support for people with disabilities, a category she found marginalized not only by the rest of the society, but also by the local and national authorities (Interview No.4, 10 March 2020). Likewise, Petru Bondari, who started a team-building company with the help of the EU, observed that unlike the Moldovan government, the EU helped the SMEs to develop.

When asked whether the EU was visible enough at the society level, and whether it was accessible for the ordinary citizen to find about the EU and the projects it organizes in Moldova, the respondents delivered different perspectives. They converged that the EU was not visible enough but they found different explanations to that. One explanation was that Moldovans were not ready and skillful to apply for European grants and the press was not doing a proper job spreading useful information. A beneficiary believes that "the information that has to reach the ordinary citizen does not reach him. It only reaches those who know where to look for it, and those are very few. Whenever I participated in different trainings, there were the same people, the same faces (Petru Bondari, Interview No.2, 8 March 2020). For him the conclusion was that there is still a need for a lot of efforts for the people to open up and for the EU to improve its formation skills it does not have as compared to other influential actors.

Another explanation, contrasting the previous one, stands in the lack of interest of the ordinary citizens to inform themselves about the EU and the development possibilities it brings for Moldova. This validates the discussion on the issue salience and sense of ownership in development practice. But, while the mayor blamed the lack of awareness on people's disinterest to inform themselves, others explain this based on the survival mode of people's everyday lives (Veronica Sîrbu, Int No.6, 10 March 2020), or based on the country's political actors who pursue their own interests and spend little or no effort to make the EU more visible (Ion Durnea, Sergiu Stefanco), or who had through their action weakened popular trust into higher authorities, including the EU (Ion Munteanu, Interview No.5, 10 March 2020).

To complete the interview findings it is important to assess the general situation of public perceptions on the EU's development assistance and financial support to Moldova. A paradox is found in the national-territorial autonomous unit UTA Găgăuzia that hosts a community with turkish origin. While the territory is a considerable recipient of EU funds and projects (5,3 mln EUR for the years 2016-2017 and more than 40 mln EUR for the last decade (zdg.md, 26 March 2018)), the public attitude is still predominantly pro-Russian. As a comparison the amount of help given by Russia to Găgăuzia amounts to ~1,1 mln EUR for 2016 (zdg.md, 26 March 2018). The investigative journalists from Ziarul de Gardă (ZDG) questioned the opinion of people from Gagauzia about their attitude and awareness of the EU and came to the conclusion that people

are generally unaware of the assistance the EU provides to Găgăuzia. Paradoxically, even if people affirmed they did not benefit from Russian assistance, their opinion of Russia was very positive and they were unaware of the support provided by the EU to Găgăuzia. Some of them admitted that they knew about the infrastructure innovation projects that were implemented in Găgăuzia, but they did not know who were the sponsors (zdg.md, 26 March 2018). Mihail Shalvir, Director of the Centre for Regional Initiatives, explains this paradox based on the poor informing of the population about the EU-funded projects implemented in the autonomous region and their impact on people's everyday life. Moreover, the government and mass media in Găgăuzia are also pro-Russian, which leads to wide mediatization of Russian assistance even if the EU assistance is more considerable. But the most essential element to consider when understanding public opinion formation in Găgăuzia is their doubt in unconditional help (zdg.md, 26 March 2018).

Another explanation stands in the campaign launched by the pro-Russian parties to discredit the EU with myths and false rumours, easily believed by people with low knowledge on the EU, who thus accept negative stereotypes as the truth (Całus and Kosienkowski, 2018: 15, in Flenley and Mannin, 2018, 99-113). The result of such propaganda is reflected in the unconstitutional referendum organized in February 2014 in the autonomous region with a 70% turnout, out of which 97,2% of voters were against closer EU integration and 98,4% of voters chose closer relations with the Russia-led CIS Customs Union (rferl.org, 03 February 2014). This tendency is confirmed through the presidential elections from 15th November 2020, showing that 95% of people from Găgăuzia voted for the pro-Russian candidate and incumbent president Igor Dodon, and against the pro-European integration candidate Maia Sandu. Therefore, Shalvir sees the solution in the correct informing of citizens by the European partners regarding the motives of EU's assistance to Găgăuzia (Shalvir, in zdg.com, 26 arch 2018), a solution similar to that of Całus and Kosienkowski who insist on "a consistent or broad-based information campaign which could counter Russian propaganda" (2018: 15, in Flenley and Mannin, 2018, 99-113).

At the national level, the public perception about the assistance provided by the EU for Moldova is more positive and the awareness of it is higher. The most recent 2020 *Annual Survey Report on Republic of Moldova* provided by ECORYS, an international research company, shows a high

percentage of public awareness of the financial provided by the EU to Moldova, which amounts to 83,2% for the past 5 years (see *Figure 4.3*). This is backgrounded by the report's finding on the generally positive perception of the EU by the majority of Moldovan citizens (61%) as compared to 29% of citizens who feel neutral about it and 9% who have a negative perception about the EU (ECORYS, March 2020: 8). Such a high percentage of those who feel positive about the EU might be explained by the fact that Moldova is the poorest country in Europe (https://worldpopulationreview.com) and dependent on EU aid. A similar pattern of perception of the EU as a great developmental global power was identified in Kenya and the Pacific, regions among the poorest locations dependent on EU financial assistance (Chaban, Elgström, Kelly and Suet Yi, 2013: 445). At the same time, the ECORYS report acknowledges the Moldovan society's divide between West and East proponents, related to the citizens' mother tongue: native Romanian speakers being mostly pro-EU (68%), whereas Rusian speakers being either neutral and reserved to adopt a position (55%) or openly negative (14%) (ECORYS, March 2020: 8). This last aspect resonates with the findings of the above discussion on Găgăuzia; but also with the opinion that the EU did little to combat Russian propaganda mainly receptive by people with pro-Russian views (Całus and Kosienkowski, 2018: 15, in Flenley and Mannin, 2018: 99-113). More, it clarifies that the geographical aspect is also important for the process of creation of external perception of the EU. Thus, even if the poverty state of the country might cause dependence on the EU's money, the geographical situation at the crossroads of the West and the East nurtures a clash of geopolitically opposed perceptions.

A similar survey with a similar sample of 1113 individuals was conducted in November 2017 by the Public Policies Institute, a Moldovan research institution, on the public awareness of the amount of the EU financial support to Moldova (see *Figure 4.4*). The results show a somewhat similar picture as in *Figure 4.3* regarding the awareness of the amount of assistance coming to Moldova from the EU. The important element here (see *Figure 4.4*) is the higher percentage of respondents who are unaware of such financial support at all (17%) as compared to the average of 9.4% of those unaware according to *Figure 4.3*.

Figure 4.3: Public Awareness of the EU's Financial Support to Moldova
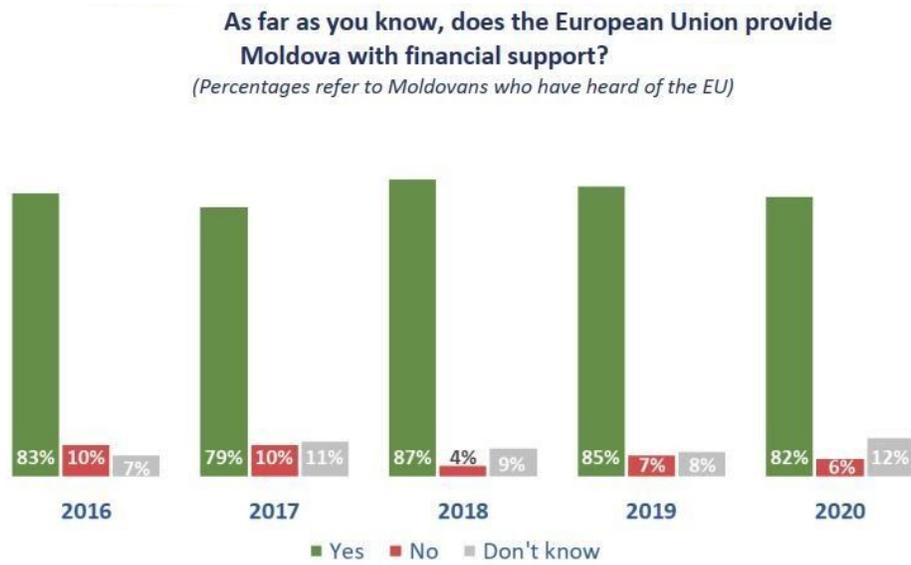
As far as you know, does the European Union provide Moldova with financial support?
(Percentages refer to Moldovans who have heard of the EU)

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Yes	83%	79%	87%	85%	82%
No	10%	10%	4%	7%	6%
Don't know	7%	11%	9%	8%	12%

■ Yes ■ No ■ Don't know

Source: ECORYS, (2020) "Annual Survey Report: Republic of Moldova. OPEN Neighbourhood - Communicating for a stronger partnership: connecting with citizens across Eastern Neighbourhood", 5th Wave (Spring 2020), *EU Neighbours east*, p. 13.

Figure 4.4: Public Awareness of the Amount EU's Financial Support to Moldova

Over the last 5 years, the Republic of Moldova has benefited from financial assistance from several countries. In your view, how much financial support these countries have provided?
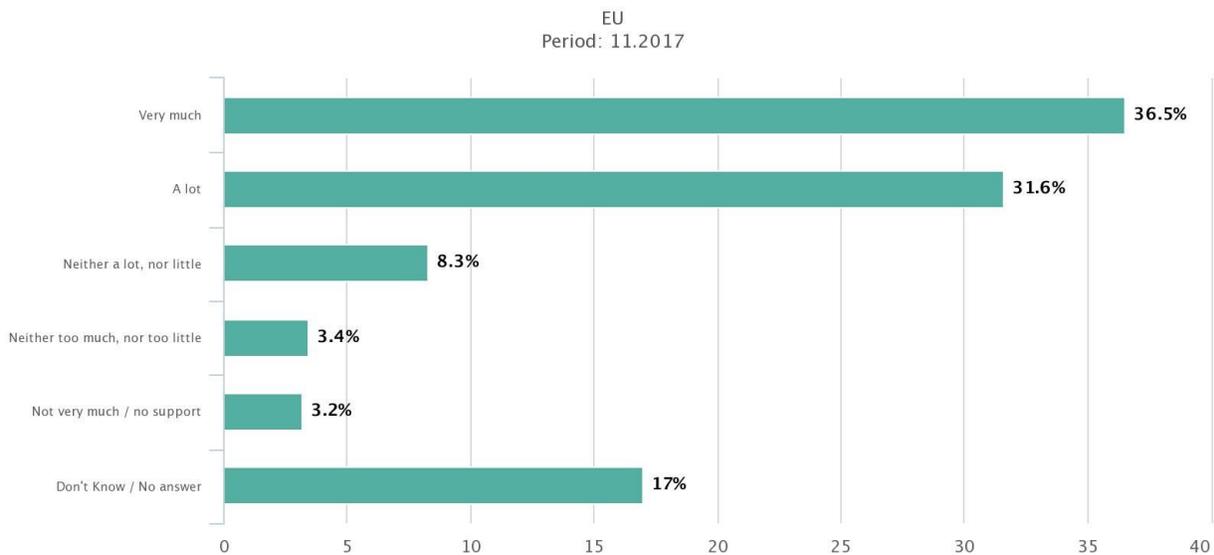
EU
Period: 11.2017

Very much	36.5%
A lot	31.6%
Neither a lot, nor little	8.3%
Neither too much, nor too little	3.4%
Not very much / no support	3.2%
Don't Know / No answer	17%

Source: Institute of Public Policies, (2017) "Public Opinion Barometer: Republic of Moldova", available online at http://www.bop.ipp.md/en/result/bar#.

Equally important, the ECORYS report provides (see *Figure 4.5)* that on average, for the past 5 years (2016-2020), the percentage of those who believe in the effectiveness of EU development assistance (49,6%) is almost equal to the percentage of those who doubt or disagree with the effectiveness of it (47,4%). This again, directs the attention towards the mid-term and especially post-project evaluation stage, and the importance of participatory input into the evaluation methodology and technique. A similar ratio (50,25% vs 49,75%) is observed when inquiring about specific programmes funded by the EU in Moldova (ECORYS, March 2020: 14). However, 49, 75% of lack of awareness of a specific programme might not necessarily mean lack of general awareness of the EU development assistance to Moldova. Similarly, when asked whether a community development project was implemented in the respondent's locality with financial help from the EU or the US, 53,5% of the respondents answered negatively, while only 35,3 were aware of such projects (see *Figure 4.6)*.

Figure 4.5: Public Perception on the Effectiveness of the EU's Financial Support to Moldova
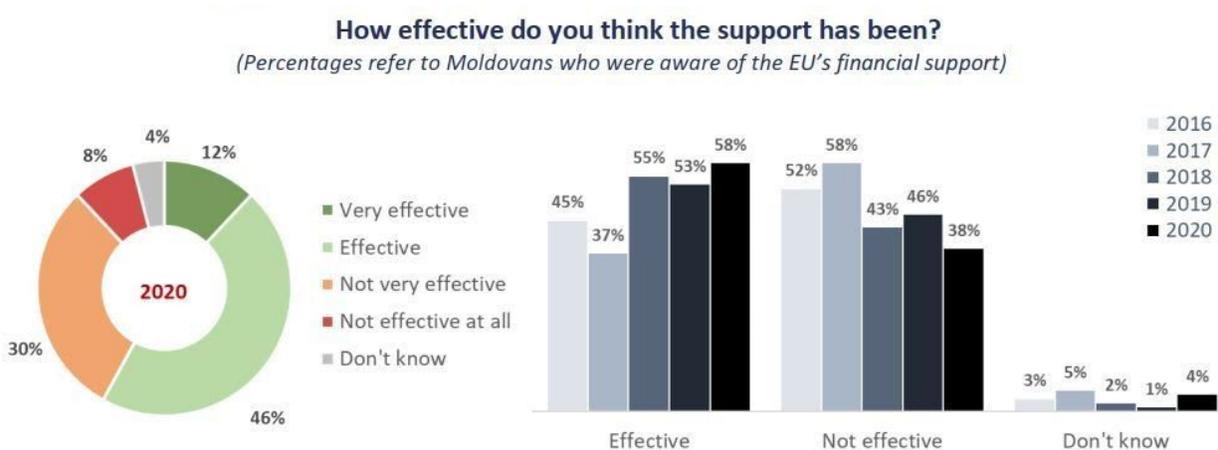
Source: ECORYS, (2020) "Annual Survey Report: Republic of Moldova. OPEN Neighbourhood - Communicating for a stronger partnership: connecting with citizens across Eastern Neighbourhood", 5th Wave (Spring 2020), *EU Neighbours east*, p. 13.

Added to that, 11,3% were unsure of either of the possible answers. Corroborating this with the interviews findings, some of the interviewees claimed that the EU is not sufficiently visible at the society level. Some of them found about the project they participated in, from a local business incubator he was usually in contact with (Ion Durnea, Interview No. 1, 7 March 2020).

Figure 4.6: Awareness of EU-funded Projects in the Respondents' Localities

From what you know, was a community development project achieved in your locality or another locality, with
financial support from the European Union or the USA?
Period 11.2013

Yes	35.2%
No	53.5%
I don't know	11.3%
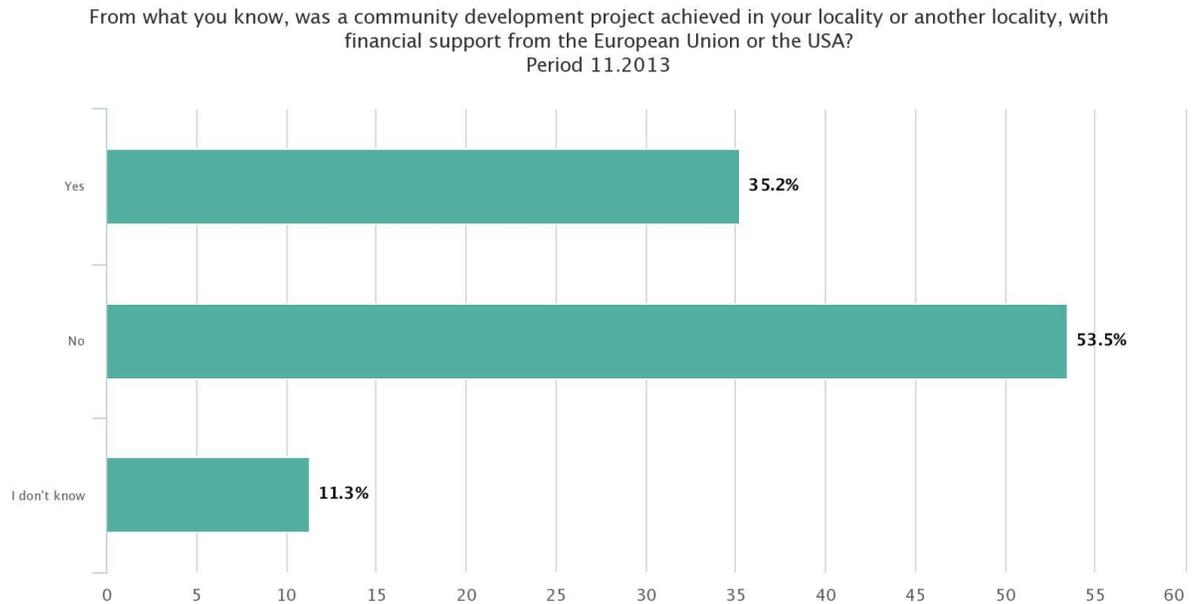
Source: Institute of Public Policies, (2013) "Public Opinion Barometer: Republic of Moldova", available online at http://www.bop.ipp.md/en/result/bar.

Petru Bondari found the project advertisement on civic.md, which is an informational website for the associative non-governmental sector from Moldova. Petru considers this website to be, however, a niche resource for those who have tangencies with the field. Other than this resource, he said he was informing himself via relevant Facebook pages (Interview No.2, 8 March 2020). Sergiu Stefanco, at his turn, found about the project from a friend who works in the field and helped Sergiu with all the paperwork he found overwhelming (Interview No.7, 11 March 2020).

To emphasize, proper information dissemination would bring the EU the benefits of another unexploited resource: the spillover effect of development and positive perceptions of development. As the respondent shared, their circles of friends and family found out about the benefits of EU-funded projects by virtue of their participation in these projects. Petru Bondari said that through his participation he obtained a strong argument about the benefits of EU-led development assistance to Moldova in front of his pro-Russian friends (Interview No. 2, 8 March 2020). This is another illustration of the socialization exercise presented through social constructivism. For Ion Durnea, his own participation meant a consolidation of the desire of the Moldova's adherence to the EU (Interview No. 1, 7 March 2020). Petru Bondari revealed another

interesting spillover effect. Since, with the help from the EU grant, he arranged a team-building resort in the village of Pohrebea, he started having customers from abroad. Then, Petru observed that at the sight of the tourists, his neighbours and other locals started to clean and fix more around their houses. Some of them arranged stalls on the streets and started selling homegrown goods to the tourists (Interview No. 1, 8 March 2020).

Finally, the negative impact of improper information dissemination on the EU development activity is presented in the *Aid Transparency Index 2020.* It is assessing the performance of aid donors in publishing documents and information on their development activities including project results, evaluation reports, audit and budget management in the commonly approved International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) Standard, in the absence of which, "stakeholders monitoring donor projects have no way to gauge the effectiveness and value of aid spending, to assess the impact of projects, or to extract learning from successful and unsuccessful projects" (Publish What You Fund, 2020: 5). The IATI Publishers List includes the European Commission DG DEVCO, which has committed to publish in the IATI registry since 2011 (Publish What You Fund, DG DEVCO Datasheet 2020) . The 196 datasets provided by DG DEVCO provide various country-profiles of their interventions that mainly contain quantitative data on the amount of aid and number of development activities and interventions (iatiregistry.org, XI-IATI-EC_DEVCO). The overall transparency index scored by DG DEVCO in 2020 on a 100 points scale is 76.5 points as compared to 65.9 points in 2018. The improvement of the score by 10.6 points between the 2 years, maintains the DG DEVCO in the "Good" performance category of aid donors, ranking the 16th out of a total of 47 aid donors analysed and failing to enter the "very good" category because of its inadequate publication of performance-related data (Publish What You Fund, 2020: 17, 27). For comparison, the DG was in the "Fair" category in 2013 (Publish What You Fund, DG DEVCO Datasheet 2020). Also, while DG DEVCO scored best at presenting finance and budgets information (22.1/25) and at presenting project attributes (19/20), it scored worst at providing performance data (5.1/20) since "[i]t did not publish pre-project impact appraisals at all, and we found some country-level evaluations in other formats" (Publish What You Fund, DG DEVCO Datasheet 2020). Broken down, the performance component of the analysis monitors published information on the (1) objectives' achievement, (2) pre-project impact appraisals, (3) reviews and evaluations, and (4)

results (Publish What You Fund, DG DEVCO Datasheet 2020). Therefore, while DG DEVCO scored ~2.5/20 at aspects (1) and (4), it scored 0/20 at providing information and publishing documents regarding both pre-project impact appraisals and results of their development projects. The importance of availability and public accessibility of such information stands in its possibility to improve "engagement with stakeholders and governments in partner countries. Using data to engage directly with development partners can help to build trust between donors, governments, and communities. This can also be a way to construct feedback loops to continuously improve and build trust in the aid data." (Publish What You Fund, 2020: 5). More, the report suggests that "[b]y publishing timely results and evaluations—both positive and negative—aid donors can monitor the progress of interventions and learn from what works, what does not work, and why" (Publish What You Fund, 2020: 9). These findings overlap with the ones from the interview results on the feedback performance of the projects, analysed in the next section.

4.3.2 Beneficiaries Opinions on the Impact and Effectiveness of the Projects

The overall goal of the project was to increase trust between people living on both sides of the Nistru river, separating Moldova from the Transnistrian-Moldovan Republic self-proclaimed in 1992. None of the beneficiaries believed that the scope of the project was achieved or that it corresponds with the social and political realities of the country. Even the objective to create cooperating business communities was not achieved, according to the beneficiaries. Ion Durnea said that during all common project activities, the beneficiaries from Transnistria sat together and only spoke between themselves, since they were also Russian-speaking, as compared to the Romanian-speaking beneficiaries from the right bank of the river. More, he observed that the desired cooperation bonds between entrepreneurs failed to be established both across and along the river also because of the diverse areas and orientations of their businesses (Interview No. 1, 7 March 2020). Sergiu Stefanco, another beneficiary, related that he tried to cooperate and associate with a beneficiary from Transnistria whose business was related to Sergiu's activity area, but the entrepreneur was reluctant. He believes that the cause to that is the fact that after less than 2 years after the finalisation of the projects, out of 15 entrepreneurs from the right side of the river, only a few are still functioning (Interview No. 7, 11 March 2020). Petru Bondari

believes that the project had a reversal effect, as compared to its overarching goal. He related that the Transnistrian authorities were monopolizing the participation in the project and were impeding the participation of the Romanian-speaking citizens from the left bank of the river (Interview No. 2, 8 March 2020). In the national level context, the perceptions of the beneficiaries are sustained by the realities of the relation between Moldova and Transnistria and the unconstructive actions of the Moldovan government to improve it. Therefore, while the EU appeals through such projects to the cooperation of the people from both sides of the river, the national government antagonizes the relations between people through political actions such as declarations recognizing the Transnistrian leader as president (zdg.md, 29 July 2020), through declaring the Transnistrian $6 billion debt for natural gas from Russian GazProm as a debt of Moldova (unimedia.info, 18 January 2019), but also through coercing voters from Transnistria to participate in Moldovan parliamentary and presidential elections, by bussing them into Moldova, forcing or bribing them (euronews.com, 1 November 2020).

Otherwise, regarding the scopes of the sub-projects targeting business support and accessibility to public services for people with disabilities, the beneficiaries found these more appropriate to the needs of the local population since they do not feel the same support from the state regarding these issues (Petru Bondari, Eleonora Barcari). For example, Eleonora Barcari declared that people with disabilities are marginalized not only by the society but also by the authorities. She and her team struggled to obtain the support of local authorities in the implementation of the project oriented towards offering different kinds of support for people with disabilities. Representatives of local government affirmed that facilitators were "informing too much the beneficiaries about their rights and possibilities" (Interview No. 4, 10 March 2020).

4.3.3 The Projects' Feedback Performance

None of the interviewed beneficiaries of both of the sub-projects were involved in a feedback session during or after the implementation of the projects that would involve engaging their opinion regarding the organisation and implementation of the projects. In the case of the first sub-project addressed to entrepreneurs, participants were asked to submit financial reports as well as reports on delivery and receipt of purchased equipment. Ion Durnea recalled that the last

common interaction of the beneficiaries and implementers altogether was the moment of receiving the grant, when everybody shook hands and took pictures (Interview No. 1, 7 March 2020). At the same time, Ion believed that gathering feedback would be only necessary for the implementers to draw statistics, and not for the beneficiaries themselves. More, he declared that it was the job of the NGOs to identify the problems and request financing from the EU for their solutioning. When it comes to ordinary citizens, he claimed that they had no interest in communicating their problems: "How could ordinary people communicate about identified issues? Should they call Mr. Tapiola and tell him they don't have a sewage system? In our society people do not have the interest. Why would aunt Frosea, who is with Russia, care about who built the sewage system? It is good that it was built. It does not matter if it was the EU." (Interview No. 1, 7 March 2020). On the contrary, Sergiu Stefanco, believed that before every project, the EU should have conducted a study in every locality under the project's coverage to assess the actual needs of the beneficiaries. He said that the local implementers delivered a totally different and positive picture to the EU, since they had the interest to further apply for EU-funded projects and deliver a good implementing reputation and gain credibility (Interview No.7, 8 March 2020). For the business sector, Sergiu, who is a member of the shepherds' federation suggested that the EU talked directly with the beneficiaries, since most of them talked English and were members of epistemic communities. At the same time, the entrepreneur mentioned that he understands that the opinion of beneficiaries in the implementation and evaluation of projects is not actively engaged because the EU always receives positive reports from the implementing intermediaries (Interview No. 7, 8 March 2020). In the discussions with local implementers it was found that the reports they send to the bigger projects' implementers (in this case the UNDP and Keystone) do not necessarily involve the beneficiaries opinion. Eleonora Barcari, the head of the mobile team created to assist people with disabilities affirmed that beneficiaries' opinion is essential because they could formulate their needs and problems best, but despite that, their opinion is rarely asked (Interview No.4, 10 March 2020). From another perspective, Ion Munteanu, a legal adviser working for a local public association, believes that the opinions of the beneficiaries are reflected in the narrative reports they submit to the implementers and sponsors. This is because they work closely with the beneficiaries, as compared with the implementers they report to (Interview No.5, 10 March 2020).

4.3.4 Identified Issues About the Projects (Unintended Consequences)

One such unintended consequence, already discussed before, is the reverse effect of the programme under the case-study, and namely a possible further antagonization of relations between people due to arbitrary actions of authorities on both banks of the river. The lack of a thorough analysis of such issues might be conducive to the failure of the overall project objective but also to the formation of an attitude about the EU as a development actor that is actually unaware of the local realities, needs and sensitivities.

Another identified issue discussed in Section is the mainstreaming and imposition of norms without communicative action that would imply clarification of these norms, their socialization and internalization by the beneficiaries. One such example is gender mainstreaming in EU development projects. Ion Durnea declared that he was disturbed by the accent the EU puts on women's participation in business. Specifically, when asked what would he change in the way the EU delivers development assistance, Ion claimed that he was confused that 50-60% of the project's beneficiaries as well as in other grants ought to be women, since "a man always has a business plan, a better idea and is always two heads higher [a.n. two steps ahead] than a woman" (Interview No.1, 7 March 2020). Making a parallel with the principles of external perception creation, which on the long run, has to be based on normative consent (McCormick, 2006; Zielonka, 1998, in Elgström, 2007: 952).

Another issue identified by a beneficiary is the disparity between the project's implementation and the actual needs of the entrepreneur. The sheep cheese-making manufacturer claimed that there was a bigger need for a bigger grant that would allow an increase of productivity, than a two-weeks instruction on the bases of accounting and numerous departures to different pricey hotels and meetings in beautiful conference rooms, which the entrepreneur described as a waste of necessary money (Interview No. 7, 11 March 2020). He explained that in order to increase productivity and breed more sheeps, he needed a milking room that would cost 30-40.000 EUR, as compared to the grant of maximum 15000 EUR. That would help him to create more jobs in the village, which he saw as the biggest problem of his community and the main reason for economic emigration of the population also towards the EU (Sergiu Stefanco, Interview No.7, 11 March 2020). During the implementation of the project Eleonora Barcari found some issues that

remained unsolved after the finalisation of the projects. These issues are also found in the report solicited from Keystone, the implementer of the project offering support to people with disabilities. Specifically, Eleonora related that the narrow scope of the project to involve beneficiaries up to 35 years old, left out a big number of other people with disabilities who reached out to them but could not be helped under the project. Moreover, each beneficiary could only be included in the project for one year. Besides that, the project did not cover expenses for materials and toys that were necessary to be left for some beneficiaries who did not have the scarce resources to acquire them independently or for speech therapists. The biggest issue, however, was the lack of cooperation from the local authorities to support the continuation of the projects after the finalisation of its EU-funding (Interview No.4, 10 March 2020).

4.4 Main Research Findings

One of the main findings of this research is that the problem of ensuring a sustainable and structured channel of feedback from the beneficiaries of EU-funded projects is manifold and ranges from people's lack of active input and mobilized societal pressure, to the Union's failure to provide an institutional platform for such exercise. More, the research uncovers a tangible gap between the EU's development policy intention and its public perception. In Moldova, the perception of the EU is rather a geopolitical question. Ordinary citizens and beneficiaries still lack full awareness of the magnitude of EU's development assistance to Moldova, which ranks the highest in the Eastern Neighbourhood in per-capita terms (eu4moldova.md). Two major identified causes to that are: (1) high bureaucratization of project management practices and the lack of sufficient an sustained participatory input from direct beneficiaries in a form of a mandatory and institutionalised feedback mechanism that would feed into the planning, implementation and evaluation of development projects; (2) the counterproductive actions of local self-proclaimed pro-European governments that have worsened people's perception of the European integration path through corruption scandals they have been involved in (Całus and Kosienkowski, 2018: 15, in Flenley and Mannin, 2018, 99-113), but also through taking credit for EU funded projects and pursuit of other political interests. Another identified sub-cause but insufficiently explored is the distancing of the EU from the beneficiaries through a hierarchy of intermediaries that ensure the implementation of projects, such as local NGOs. Such distancing

means a stretching of the feedback loop between the EU and beneficiaries of its projects, which makes their interaction difficult to organize. Therefore, the perception becomes dependent also on the implementers of EU-funded projects. This could, however, give the EU an enhanced role as a development agency through becoming more vociferous in demanding more active or mandatory use of participatory evaluation methods by project implementers.

In the analysis preceding the case-study chapter it was found that the importance of a feedback mechanism between the EU and beneficiaries of its development projects stands in the lessons learned locally that can be applied to future projects' planning. However, after conducting the interviews and analysing the main project management and evaluation manual provided by DG DEVCO it was discovered that there is no sustained and mandatory feedback mechanism involving direct and indirect beneficiaries of EU-funded projects, the implementers being free to choose among the evaluation methods. Also, the establishment of such a mechanism is obstructed by the rigidity of the bureaucratic procedures of project management. Furthermore, beyond the findings of the interview, reports such as The Aid Transparency Index confirmed the EU's poor stakeholder input into the project planning, implementation and evaluation, recognized as essential in building trust between the donor agency and the local stakeholders and development partners (Publish What You Fund, 2020).

This leads to the main question posed by this research and namely the finding that participation to project evaluation and thus information availability on projects performance and effectiveness have a direct impact on the public attitudes and awareness of the EU as a development actor. However, it is important to note that in the case of Moldova, despite the insufficient interaction between the EU development agency and project beneficiaries, the general public perception of the EU is rather positive, however still perceived as a geopolitical direction or development and economic model. But, when it comes to the public awareness on the EU's development activity in Moldova, it is still rather low. Therefore, it becomes important to distinguish between perception and awareness in such analyses, since it was discovered that direct beneficiaries of EU-funded projects - especially grant beneficiaries - tend to deliver an implicitly positive perception regarding such assistance. Other than that, the impact of feedback on public perception of the EU-funded projects is demonstrated through the opinions of beneficiaries who

share positive attitudes about the EU's development activity, but, at the same time, have ideas on how their needs could have been better approached. These ideas were, however never asked from them, but could play an important role in improving their perception of the effectiveness of the EU's development action. Therefore, the main finding of the present research is that the possibility for interaction with beneficiaries (both direct and indirect) of EU-funded projects through a sort of a feedback mechanism is a (yet) unexploited resource in boosting and improving public perception and awareness of the EU as a capable development and international actor. This is also because such beneficiaries are and could act as repositories of a spillover effect both in perception of the EU terms as well as in information dissemination.

5 Conclusion

Narrowed down through its research question, the main goal of this work was to problematize the exercise of feedback between the EU and beneficiaries of its funded projects by discussing its importance both for the EU's development actorness, but most importantly, by analysing the impact of such a feedback mechanism on popular perception and awareness of the EU as a development actor.

Firstly, in order to be able to discuss the problem of a feedback exercise, it was essential to establish its conceptual clarification as well as to put its importance into a debate that uncovered both advantages of a feedback mechanism as well as arguments disencouraging its establishment by development agencies and project evaluators. It was then discovered that while the advantages mainly entail project effectiveness improvement, projects adjusted to concrete local needs and building of trust between the project implementers and the beneficiaries, the hindrances to a large use of such participatory exercises are mainly bureaucratic and material in nature.

Secondly, it became important for the logic of the research to localize the performance of the EU in using participatory methods such as feedback mechanisms in the planning implementation and especially evaluation of its development project. The main finding in this case is the observation that the most participatory evaluation methods proposed by the EU for project management raise the highest material and financial costs. Therefore, the choice of the evaluation method is left to the discretion of the evaluation agency or the project implementers. Since the evaluation organizations fall under rigid bureaucratic procedures, they are often reluctant to ask for feedback from beneficiaries as discussed in section 3.3.2.

Thirdly, when it comes to the research question, by inquiring the interviewees about their perception and awareness of the EU as a development actor and agency, the main observation is that while perception of the EU as a development actor remains positive, the awareness of its funded projects and their accessibility is rather low and needs improvement. More, it was mentioned that such a positive perception of direct beneficiaries could be biased by their

dependence on EU-funded projects in order to improve their economic condition. At the same time, by completing interview findings with additional data, it was found that the national Moldovan perception of the EU as a development actor is both geopolitical and polarized between the West and the East. When it comes to awareness of the EU's developmental work, the analysis identified several issues such as public unawareness of existing local projects funded by the EU that is caused both by the issue of authorities taking credit for the implementation of EU-funded projects, as well as by the issue of misleading and propagandistic media reports that favour geopolitical interests.

Henceforth, these findings lead the research to its main conclusion and namely the demonstrated importance of an improved mechanism of feedback between the EU and beneficiaries of its funded projects. Despite its material and financial costs, an institutionalised communication channel provides an unexplored resource for improving public perception of the EU's actorness in development and beyond. More, through ensuring constant communication with beneficiaries during projects that allow for it, the EU could become more capable in raising awareness about its activity as a development agency and, by that, increase accessibility to its funded projects. Such improvements carry a strategic benefit for the EU in securing its neighbourhood. The main internal benefit for the Union stands in improving its internal policy coherence and bringing more added value at the supranational level to a policy shared with the MS. Also, it might as well contribute to closing the gap between the EU's intention in development policy and its actions and their external perception. Other than that, the discussion on the exercise of feedback brings the issue of democratic deficit, democratic legitimacy and accountability back to the table. However, in this case, these issues transcend the EU borders, illustrating the importance of ensuring channels for external democratic input to inform and influence the internal decision-making process at the level of the EU's development policy. Having these conclusions in mind, the research is completing its function in opening future research possibilities by drawing more attention to the policy of development, often overlooked when discussing the EU's international actorness, but which carries indispensable resources of public perception and awareness for the European Union, as illustrated through this research.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Table 4.1 Thematically Categorized Interview Questions

Questions Blocs for Interview Structure	Identified Themes of Analysis	Thematically Categorized Interview Questions
Questions on the EU	Perceptions of the EU as a Development Actor	What is your attitude about the European Union as an actor in development and assistance (both worldwide and in Moldova)?
		What do you think is the general attitude of Moldovan society towards the EU as a developing actor?
		How visible do you consider the EU to be a development player in Moldovan society? How clear is it to a citizen that certain projects have been organized and/or funded by the EU?
		How and to what extent do you inform yourself about the EU? Is that important to you?
		How informed is Moldovan society about the EU?
		Is there anything that should change in the delivery of assistance by the EU?
Tran-sition questions		Has your perception of the European Union changed after the project? What is the difference with the perception up to the project?
		Do you follow the EU activity more now, after the project? Do you follow other possible projects in which you could participate?
		Has the perception of relatives, friends and relatives about the European Union changed after hearing that you participated in a project funded by the European Union?
	Opinion on the impact and effectiveness of the of the project	What is your perception of the project you participated in and how did you find out about the project?
		What was the purpose of the project? To what extent was it fulfilled?
		During the project, were you informed about who organized the project and who is the financier? - Have you been told anything about the European Union? What? (What is the balance between the presence of the implementing NGO and the EU)

Questions on the project	The project's feedback performance	Did the project you participated in had a feedback session with the participants? Have you been contacted by the organizers after finishing the project? If so, for what purpose?
		After the project was finished, did the organizers somehow ask for your opinion about the project ? If yes, did it help you or not?
		Would you like to be asked for your opinion on how the project was organized or implemented?
		In general, do you consider it necessary for the EU to consult the views of beneficiaries on the implementation, implementation and evaluation of the project?
		Did it happen that during the project you were asked for your opinion about other important issues in your locality, or in the country in general? But do you think this would be necessary? Why?
		Which important problems in your locality or in the country do you think are very important to solve?
	Identified issues about the project (Unintended Consequences of the project)	What advice would you have for those in the European Union regarding the provision of aid and assistance to our country?

Appendix B: Table 4.2 Thematic Analysis Findings

Development Programme	Support to Confidence Building Measures Programme (IV) 2015 – 2018	
Development Projects Names	DP1: Increased cross-river cooperation of business actors leading to improved employment opportunities and livelihoods across the Nistru River	DP2: Social services for persons with disabilities to increase the confidence between the both banks of the Nistru river
Analysed Theme		
Perceptions of the EU as a Development Actor	Generally positive perception of the EU, with a prevalence of perceiving the EU as rather a geopolitical direction and model, rather than an opinion on the performance of the EU's development activity. The public awareness of EU's development assistance remains rather low.	
Opinion on the Impact and Effectiveness of the Project	In both cases, there is a recognized need for such projects supporting the SMEs and people with disabilities, since both groups are often neglected by the local governments. However, the name and goals of the bigger programme were also applied on the smaller projects as well, providing thus a disconnection between the goal of the bigger programme and the activities of the smaller projects, and reducing the overall project effectiveness.	
The Project's Feedback Performance	None of the interviewed beneficiaries were involved in a certain feedback exercise, despite the ideas they had about improving project effectiveness and planning. Therefore, some activities to which they participated during the implementation of the project did not bring any added value to their knowledge and could have been rather focused on beneficiaries issues that were not brought up or found solutions to.	None of the interviewed beneficiaries were involved in a certain feedback exercise, however, some project facilitators provided that often the opinion of end beneficiaries is reflected in the narrative reports of activities that they send to project implementers (often NGOs).
Identified Issues About the Project (Unintended Consequences)	Despite the overarching goal to approach the two banks of the Nistru river, some beneficiaries provided that the nature of the activities they participated in did not improve or establish connections between business communities of the two banks, and even more, have increased animosities in some cases.	The budget of the project did not include important expenditures that arose during the implementation of the project. Moreover, the eligibility conditions of the project and the time-frame available for one beneficiary left out a big pool of people with disabilities who are in urgent need of assistance and remain marginalized by local governments.

Appendix C: List of Interviewees

Inter view No.	Interviewee Name	Status	Interview Date
1.	Ion Durnea	Beneficiary of the *Increased Cross-River Cooperation of Business Actors Project.*	7th of March, 2020
2.	Petru Bondari	Beneficiary of the *Increased Cross-River Cooperation of Business Actors Project.*	8th of March, 2020
3.	Ion Veste	Representative of local authority, Mayor of Zaim (District of Căuşeni, Moldova), a village under the geographical scope of the *Support to Confidence Building Measures Programme* (IV) (2015 – 2018), which includes the other two projects under analysis.	10th of March, 2020
4.	Eleonora Barcari	Project facilitator for the *Social Services for Persons with Disabilities to Increase the Confidence Between the Both Banks of the Nistru River Project*, Head of the Mobile Team of Căuşeni, Moldova.	10th of March, 2020
5.	Ion Munteanu	Legal adviser working for the Public Association *Change for a Better Life* from the city of Căuşeni, Moldova, with experience in implementing EU-funded projects.	10th of March, 2020
6.	Veronica Sîrbu	Member of the Public Association *Change for a Better Life* from the city of Căuşeni, Moldova, with experience in implementing EU-funded projects.	10th of March, 2020
7.	Sergiu Stefanco	Beneficiary of the *Increased Cross-River Cooperation of Business Actors Project.*	11th of March, 2020
8.	Ion Oborocean	Beneficiary of the *Social Services for Persons with Disabilities to Increase the Confidence Between the Both Banks of the Nistru River Project.*	12th of March, 2020

Appendix D: Figures and Tables

Figures

Tables