**Project Completion Assessment**

**CSO Name:** *Soarta Community Association/Associatia Obsteasca ‘Soarta’*

**Project Title:** *Education Against Corruption*

**Grant Amount:** *PTF $38,000 (CSO contribution $8,000)*

**Dates of Implementation:** *30 March 2011-June 2011*

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**Date of PCA:** *November 2012*

**Project Context and Overview**

This is the second of two PTF projects awarded to the Soarta Community Association (i.e. Soarta2). The first project (2009-2010) addressed corruption by monitoring the examination system in 12 selected lycea in the region of Soroca. A Project Completion Assessment (PCA), conducted by an independent evaluator, recommended that PTF continue working with Soarta, to focus on reducing corruption in the examination system in the same 12 schools in Soroca District, the Republic of Moldova. The component of the first project linked to Soarta2 was the monitoring of high school examinations, in order to prevent teachers, students and their parents of corruptive practices. The idea was to elaborate and enforce ethical codes of conduct developed in the first project, and encourage any malpractices to be reported to the Appeal Board and/or the ‘Green Line’ (hot line) in the Ministry of Education. The comprehensive follow-up of these activities was not completed prior to the end of the school year and was a factor in deciding to support Soarta2.

The context of corruption in Moldova is summarized in the PCA prepared in 2010. [[1]](#footnote-1) Corruption is widespread in Moldova, although the efforts by organizations such as UNDP and USAID to reduce corruption have a limited focus on schools and universities. According to Transparency International, education in Moldova is highly corrupt (find reference), and characterized by a vested interest of educators and parents and students in sustaining corruption. It seems to be a mutually rewarding system: teachers top up their salaries and students receive grades higher than merited or earned, thus creating barriers for an entry point to change the system.

As elsewhere, the RM national education budget does not provide adequate support for schools, so parents are encouraged (some may say coerced) to provide extra budgetary support, resulting in large sums of money that move among many hands. Opportunity for little or no accountability exists with every exchange of funds. The situation is exacerbated because many parents work abroad and the gap between their earnings and those of a teacher are wide. Corruption wears many faces in schools, including bold requests from teachers to parents for money to raise student achievement scores. But it may also be less direct, whereby teachers persuade parents to enroll students in fee-based, teacher-led tutoring. Teachers may produce extra materials to sell to parents. Some parents may complain that funds are not used as intended. There is an abundance of accusations and blame for the corrosive situation. The schools in Soroca apparently are typical of other schools in Moldova. The sad reality is that corruption is recognized and accepted by many stakeholders.

The overall goal of Soarta2 was to “reduce the corrupt behavior of students, teachers, parents, school administrators, and government officials involved in the high school academic system in Soroca, in order to improve the quality of the education system.” (PCR 2012)[[2]](#footnote-2) The PCR (p1) describes the objectives as:

1. Building upon the results of the first Soarta/PTF education project, solidify institutional and behavioral changes in the high school education system in Soroca District that will result in measurable reductions in corrupt practices within the system and improvements in the quality of the Soroca educational system; and
2. Begin the design of a third education project to expand Soarta’s anti-corruption education work to (an) additional district (s) in Moldova.

**Project Strategies and Implementation Activities**

The PCR clearly presents the specific implementation activities within each objective, in chronological order. They are summarized below (the numbered activities are keyed to the objectives listed above).

1. *Supporting changes in educational practices in Soroca District* (5 activities). During the length of the project, the staff conducted a review of the current status of the results of Soarta1 by:

- meeting with the Education Department in Soroca to determine whether or not corruptive practices had been reduced;

- conducted a baseline assessment of perceptions in the 12 high schools participating in the project (interviewing 511 pupils, 202 parents, and 204 teachers) to learn whether reducing corruption was even possible;

- consulted with Soroca District and schools and developed detailed proposals and implementation plan for schools, communities and Council, including proposals for sustainability (they organized a meeting with the Chief of Education Department in Soroca and the 12 school directors to encourage them to pay attention to the complaints against teachers and to implement the ethical codes);

- implement agreed 8 month plan in Soroca District, including preparation of teaching and media materials, and community activities (bringing in stakeholders to help reduce corruption – a campaign in all 12 schools to raise awareness of corruption and ways to combat corruption that involved students in writing essays and creating arts projects, plus a Day against Corruption and staff visits to each school to debate issues and identify best practices against corruption -- students not permitted mobile phones during examinations, Ministry set up video cameras in examination room—the Centre for Combating the Economic and Corruption Crimes launched a hot line for citizens; and

- conduct and report second set of data and perception surveys in same location as baseline surveys.

1. *Explore, assess, and carry out planning to expand Soarta approach in other parts of Moldova (2 activities).*

-discuss possibility of expanding Soarta approach to other districts, subject to finding progress in Soroca (letters describing approach sent to Ministry of Education plus all 33 Education Offices in RM and to all parents associations)’

-prepare basic materials and information concerning Soarta approach (the letters contained information about the project, the 3 ethical codes, guides for parents’ involvement and the general public to fight corruption in education).

**Project Achievements and Challenges**

Both Soarta projects began within an environment of systemic, acceptable corruption practices with scant tools and/or procedures to break the cycle of corruption. Corruption was an acceptable ‘business’ practice. Within this environment was the fear among some parents and students that attempts to interfere with or report the corruption practices would result in some form of punishment for students. In addition, rural residents whose financial resources were quite limited, often could not compete with their urban counterparts in ‘buying’ into the system.

To Soarta’s credit, it was able to penetrate the system and produce results that raised awareness of bad practices, introduced tools to combat corruption in examinations and reduce corruption in the 12 schools, plus learn more about the level of education quality in the schools. The PCR (pp8-16 including charts) offers the following achievements.

With respect to school and community relationships.

1. *The level of investment of time by parents in school matters improved between the baseline and follow-up surveys -good*. Parents’ attitudes about the potential to make changes in the system improved when the Ministry installed cameras to supervise administration of graduation exams (BAC), although they identified the lack of funds and expertise as challenges to implementing the ethical conduct codes. Parents were active participants in Soarta activities such as workshops, meetings, & contests, plus they contributed to an elaboration of the ethical conduct codes.
2. *Planning for schools was made in collaboration with the community -good.*  Soarta also engaged parents’ associations and the Ministry (in addition to the parents), but similar challenges as mentioned above were reported.
3. *Monetary support for schools from parent organizations rated as average on the survey.* As stated above, rural incomes are low and urban parents have upper limits on what they contribute. The PCR notes that parents are ‘more willing to give money for an immediate results, though it might register in the category of the corrupt acts’ (p9) So the reality may trump the intervention in some cases! Soarta recommends one way to reduce this is to document those donations made as ‘favors and bribes’ to smooth the path to graduation.

With respect to measurements of educational quality.

1. *Educational level of teaching staff is between average and poor.*  Teachers have greater incentives to earn high incomes through private tutoring than improved teacher performance because their salaries remain low. So low-performing students provide clients for tutoring practices. Poor teaching becomes a marketing strategy.
2. *Graduation rate of students.* During Soarta1, mass media reported that graduation rates in 2011 were lower than 2010 because students had to rely more on their own knowledge than the previously relied-on bribes. But Soarta2 was unable to provide graduation data on 2012 because they were unavailable when the PCR was written. The report does note that employment rates for graduates is poor because of the mismatch between skills and work, and the limited work opportunities.
3. *Satisfaction level with educational quality.* The PCR reports that the survey showed no change in the perception of the quality of the education system, noting the highest level of mistrust was from students in rural areas (29%), although parents from both rural and urban revealed mistrust of the system. However approximately the same number did not believe other systems were any better. But they seem to believe the system should be different (how and what these differences might be is not included in the survey).

With respect to the measurements of corruption. Examples of these measures are given below.

1. Schools adopted the ethical conduct codes. Education Ministry supported this.
2. Complaints on hot line against teacher coercion re tutoring = 21.
3. No cases reported of corrupt procurement practices.
4. No cash donations from community funds – donation must be in school accounts.
5. Complaints on hot line re teacher ‘sale’ of grades=56 but no reported sale of grade promotions.
6. Hot line complaints of obligatory tutoring by teachers (87), teacher absenteeism to conduct non-school business (23).

Challenges. The comments within the survey reports reveal some ambiguity in the reporting – e.g. students, parents, and teachers responses to an item about whether they know anything about corruption in relation to their high schools, show a large number of respondents could not clearly ‘state such facts, or that they were confronted with such cases.’ (p14) Of the 511 student respondents, only 123 indicated awareness of corruption, 20 out of 205 parents, and the teachers ratio was about same as students. However, the teachers were offended by the nature of the question! But the follow-up survey reveals approximately 35% improvement in knowledge of what a corruption practice is.

Reasons cited in the report for not citing corruption include: didn’t know it was possible to report; don’t know where to send complaint; didn’t think it was important; mistrust authorities who receive reports; afraid of consequences of reporting; too complicated. The good news is that in the follow-up survey, all respondents ‘were able to mention the Ethical conduct Codes and related their capacity to make complaints to the information they shared” (p16). Also in the follow-up survey, parents and teachers did not change their attitude about reporting corruption – the fear persists even though they possess new knowledge about corruption. The tools and procedures for reporting come from the authorities who possess the power to punish!

**Project Sustainability**

PTF strives to support grantees whose project results are embedded in agencies and institutions which possess the will to use the power they possess to fight corruption. The reality in many areas of the world is that the ‘will’ is one missing piece in reducing corruption. But changes are possible as CSOs penetrate corrupt systems to work with participants who want to know the difference between honest and dishonest practices and be empowered to take action in behalf of transparency that ultimate benefits citizenry. Change comes slowly and with persistence to grow the critical mass required to bring about systemic change.

Soarta Community Association has successfully penetrated the corrupt negative practices in the examinations procedures in 12 secondary schools in Moldova and broadened the awareness of its successes to all other secondary schools, parents’ associations and the Education Ministry in Moldova. The PCR (pp18-19) provides a summary of the impact and potential sustainability of the project.

1. A major impact has been the installation of monitoring cameras by the Education Ministry during the examinations.
2. The Ethical Conduct Codes pinpoint acceptable and unacceptable practices during the examinations.
3. Parents’ associations are now raising and spending funds only through banking accounts and not by giving cash directly to school educators. Reports are given to the Parents’ Association Senate semi-annually to justify the expenditures.
4. The Education Ministry has agreed to some education reform but not allocated funds to support.
5. Interest in adopting the Soarta approach has been shown by four out of 33 Education General Offices and seven out of 35 Parent Associations.

Soarta presents a thoughtful assessment of the potential for reforming the examination system in Moldova. It recognizes that the projects have created a ‘premise’ for reform in a system that ‘is suffocated by corruption practices and encourages mediocrity” (p18) During the implementation phases, Soarta engaged Ministry personnel in discussions but noted that when it was time for the Ministry to “own” the changes and integrate reforms such as the Ethical Codes, nothing happened. “We noticed they changed their attitude when it came to the implementation of the Ethical Conduct Codes since such regulations could jeopardize their diret financial benefits. Our greatest fear is that in the absence of funds and know-how for the implementation of the Ethical Conduct Codes the previous situation might return.” (p18)

The Director of Soarts, in an interview at the PTF Workshop in Berlin (May 2012) also reflected on the great challenges in sustaining the project gains because of low funds and low commitment to change. The good news is that Soarta has developed useful tools for practitioners and parents, demonstrated their effectiveness as people began to alter attitudes and some behaviors, engaged a broader constituency of educators and parents in other districts in Moldova who want to fight corruption. She told about the length of time required to introduce ways to combat corruption and then build support and feels that even the 12 schools where Soarta has been working for two years are not ready to work on their own. The building blocks are available, installed in some places, and introduced to others. The commitment to improve is demonstrated, but it can’t grow alone.

These achievements and lessons learned are very useful in Moldova and elsewhere when designing broader scale programs . PTF needs to exam similar experiences from other projects and regions as well as strategies for linking these needed reforms to policy and political will. Soarta has been very useful in this regard.

Score: (Total 2.7/3 plus innovativeness =3)

Relevance & Design 4 (addressed a clear need and designed comprehensive approach that included practitioners; community; and national policy makers)

Efficiency & Effectiveness 3 (the length of time required to engage a constituency and the need to repeat the process and the desire for a third year in the same target schools is not efficient; the effects are documented on a small scale)

Impact & Sustainability 2 (seems to be low impact of results on small groups and a lack of will and fiscal support to embed within education system)

Replicability 3 (model can be replicated, materials prepared but is very labor-intensive)

Innovativeness 3 (model used diverse strategies to reach goal)

1. Kauffman, N.J. (July 2010) Monitor the Examination System in Rayon Soroca PCA, pp2-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Education Against Corruption. Project Completion Report (PCR). June 2012 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)