



OSCEval News is the evaluation newsletter of the Office of Internal Oversight.

Its aim is to provide insights into the OSCE's work in evaluation, by sharing key evaluation findings and conclusions, as well as new developments regarding the OSCE's overall evaluation culture.

Evaluation is a management tool that contributes to decision-making, strategic planning, and organizational learning.



of OIO and emerging findings.

This edition of OSCEval News is dedicated to

Learning from Working During the COVID-19 Pandemic

A review conducted by the Office of Internal Oversight.

Introduction

Project delivery is a core activity of the OSCE in its work to assist its participating States (pS) in complying with OSCE commitments. The objective of this review was to enhance organizational adaptability and resilience in times of crisis by identifying to what extent the COVID-19 pandemic had affected project implementation, and to learn what worked well in terms of how the OSCE responded and adapted to the situation. It covered the period March 2020 - June 2021, and used the period 2016-2019 as a comparison sample. It is based on three data sources: project budgets and expenditures; an electronic survey distributed to programmatic staff; and focus group discussions.

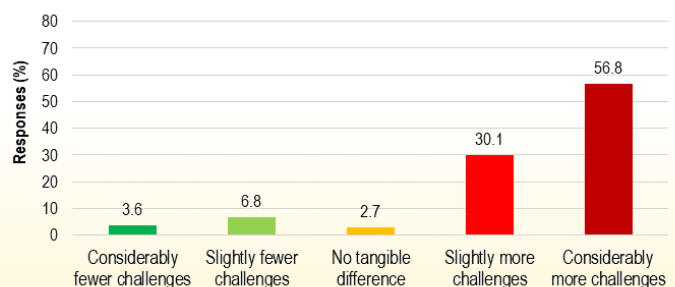
Emerging Findings and Lessons

This review indicates that the OSCE demonstrated resilience, flexibility and ability to learn when dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. While implementation challenges were prevalent and significant across the organization, they have in many instances been overcome during the first year of the pandemic, or alternative solutions were developed to deal with them.

The 10 lessons identified pertain to various aspects of OSCE engagement that are directly or indirectly related to the organization's programmatic work. For instance, the review points to the importance of establishing *inter-departmental consultative*

mechanisms during the early stages of the pandemic. The OSCE's efforts in this area sent a signal of leadership and joint ownership of the response and facilitated decision making. Another key management practice was to *maintain lines of communication* with staff and counterparts.

Graph I: Pandemic Impact on Project Implementation, 2020 and 2021



An additional lesson relates to the importance of *realistic risk assessment and continuous risk management* to ensure business continuity in challenging times. The review highlights shortcomings in this area, and related implications on the implementation of activities. Overall, project implementation was heavily affected by the pandemic, including by the need to adapt projects by postponing activities and/or moving them online, which often required renegotiation of agreements with counterparts. In this connection, staff members frequently highlighted the importance of more flexibility with regard to the *administrative aspects* of project amendments, procurement and recruitment in times of crisis that would allow the OSCE to adapt to stakeholders' needs more quickly.

One key issue that negatively affected programme implementation was the reduced possibility to interact with counterparts and other project stakeholders, which were often not reachable for longer periods of time, and with whom relationships sometimes had to be re-established. In this context, the importance of *establishing good relationships with counterparts* in normal times stood out, as they create the foundation for successful mandate implementation in times of crisis.

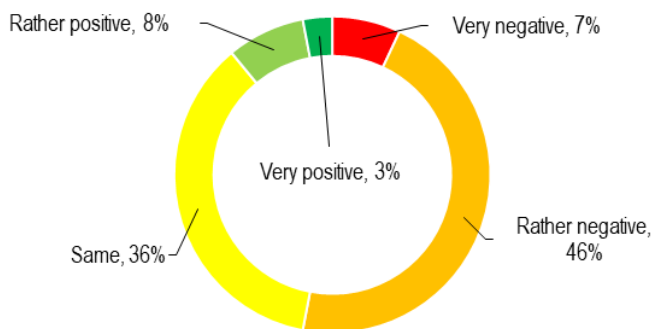
Connectivity and the digital literacy of both staff and counterparts were found to be the essential prerequisites for mandate implementation during the pandemic. On both sides, this was not fully at hand when the pandemic started, and there have been continuous efforts ever since to improve the situation. With regard to the effectiveness of *online programmatic delivery*, the review showed mixed results, and identified a number

of factors that influence the effectiveness of online training, including the digital literacy and connectivity of the training organizers and participants, as well as the purpose of the activities. Some types of interventions seem to lend themselves better to online delivery than others. Insights were also collected on the advantages of online activities, such as the possibility to reach larger audiences and groups who might usually not be in a position to travel, and on their disadvantages such as reduced inter-activity or levels of attention of participants. Most staff stressed the complementarity of online and in-person interventions, and the need to consider how they could be combined for optimal effectiveness and efficiency in the future.



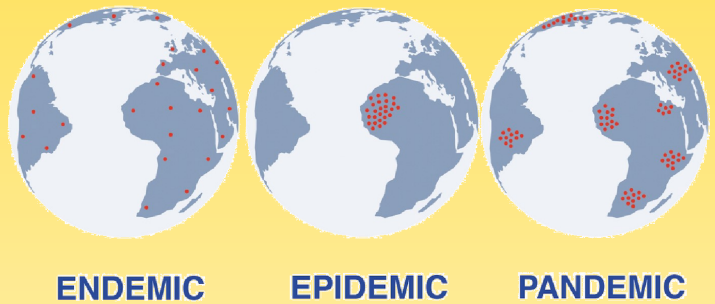
The pandemic affected programmatic delivery as well as those delivering the programmes. The need to *ensure the safety and wellbeing of its staff* was a focus of the organization's response right from the beginning. This review shows that all OSCE officials were affected by the pandemic to some extent in their private as well as their professional spheres. They faced – and are facing – different challenges and had different needs that had to be met, and will have to be met in the future, as the pandemic might develop into an endemic disease and here to stay in the future.

Graph II: Pandemic Impact on OSCE Staff Mental Wellbeing



Fulfilling the organization's duty of care obligations toward its staff, while ensuring mandate implementation at the same time, has put an extraordinary pressure on the organization. The need for *corporate policies and ways of working* that

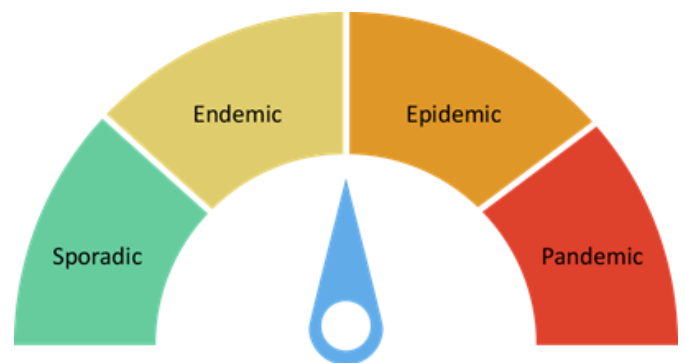
respond to staff members' differential needs while taking management priorities into account was highlighted as an area the organization should focus on in the future.



Action Points and the Way Forward

The need for flexibility, persistence, empathy and ongoing personal and organizational learning stands out, to ensure both mandate implementation and the well-being of the OSCE's staff. The lessons identified by this review constitute inputs for future planning, programming, implementation and staff management. In addition, a number of concrete action points are offered for the way going forward:

- Improve risk-assessment and risk management across the organization, and build management capacities in this area.
- Develop standard operating procedures and processes for emergency situations based on the identified risks. This should include guidance on how and under what circumstances to adapt project management, recruitment and procurement procedures, and how to balance mandate implementation with duty of care considerations.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of online capacity development activities and other interventions, and develop guidance and good practices.
- Provide peer learning mechanisms to facilitate the exchange of lessons learned across the OSCE during times of crisis.
- Update existing work-life balance and remote working policies to reflect the lessons learned during the pandemic with the aim of creating a more agile and resilient workforce.
- Invest in further modernization of the OSCE's digital facilities.



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