OSCE

Office of Internal Oversight

Learning from Working During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Final Report

We might be in the same storm,

but we are not all in the same boat.

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Summary of Findings

I. Many countries in the OSCE region have been particularly hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. The organization was called to respond to these challenges, and to adapt to changing working environments and shifting priorities. Ways of working and collaborating had to be amended to meet the demands of the situation. Given the lasting nature of this crisis, it is expected that many of these changes and new working modalities are not only here to stay, but that they will have to be continuously adapted to evolving circumstances. To deal with these challenges, the OSCE is required to learn lessons about whether/how it has been successful in adapting its programmatic activities and processes to the volatility and uncertainty generated by COVID-19, and in responding to the evolving needs of participating States. More than one year into the pandemic, conducting a lessons-learned exercise hence appears to be timely.

II. Its purpose was to better understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the programmatic work of the organization, and to learn what worked well in terms of how the OSCE had responded and adapted to the situation and what had not, so that the organization can draw lessons from it. The ultimate objective of this exercise was to enhance organizational adaptability and resilience in times of crisis.

III. Overall, what this review indicates is that the OSCE has demonstrated resilience, flexibility and ability to learn when dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. While implementation challenges have been 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. This is thanks to the commitment of OSCE management and staff, and the successful collaboration with the organization's partners.

IV. The lessons identified relate to several different 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* to deal with the implications of COVID-19 during the early stages of the pandemic. The OSCE's efforts in this area set a strong signal of leadership and joint ownership of the response and facilitated decision making. A key management practice when dealing with the pandemic and its impact on the programmatic work of the organization was to *maintain lines of communication* with staff and counterparts. Especially, the importance of communication and collaboration across units and departments was highlighted.

V. Another lesson relates to the importance of *realistic risk assessment and continuous risk management* to help ensure business continuity in challenging times. The review highlights shortcomings in this area, and the implications of these on the implementation of activities. Overall, project

implementation was heavily affected by the pandemic, including by the need to adapt projects to the new circumstances 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 regards 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.

VI. One of the key issues 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 after several months. In this context, the importance of *establishing good relationships with counterparts* in normal times came out, as these create the foundation for successful mandate implementation in times of crisis.

VII. *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 given when the pandemic started, and there have been continuous efforts ever since to improve the situation. With regards to the effectiveness of *online programmatic delivery*, the review showed mixed preliminary results, and identified a number of factors that influence the effectiveness of online training. These include the digital literacy and connectivity of both 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 benefits 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 both could be combined for optimal effectiveness and efficiency.

VIII. The pandemic has not only affected programmatic delivery, but also the lives of those who are making the delivery happen. The need to *ensure the safety and wellbeing of its staff*, has been a focus of the organization's response to the pandemic right from the beginning. What this review clearly shows is that OSCE officials, while all affected by the pandemic to some extent, their private and professional ways were implicated in many different ways. They faced – and are still facing – different challenges and they had different needs that had to be met, and will have to be met in the future as the effects of the pandemic are here to stay for a while.

IX. 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.

X. Going forward, the need for flexibility, persistence, empathy and ongoing personal and organizational learning stands out, both to ensure mandate implementation and the wellbeing of the OSCE's staff members. 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:

a. *Improve risk-assessment and risk management across the organization, and build management capacities in this area.*

b. *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.*

c. *Evaluate the effectiveness of online capacity development activities and other interventions, and develop guidance and good practices.*

d. *Provide peer learning mechanisms to facilitate the exchange of lessons learning across the OSCE during times of crisis.*

e. *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.*

f. *Invest in further modernization of the OSCE's digital facilities.*

1. Introduction

1. The COVID-19 pandemic unleashed its destabilizing effects unexpectedly and rapidly, forcing countries around the globe to deal with its consequences. In addition to its evolving impact on public health, and national economies, there have been implications for security and human life overall that are still to be fully recognized. For instance, data suggests that as a consequence of the pandemic progress on gender equality has been stalling around the globe.[1]

2. Many countries in the OSCE region have been particularly hard hit by the epidemic and are still in the midst of its second, third or even fourth wave. The OSCE was called upon to respond to these challenges, and to adapt to changing working environments and shifting priorities. Ways of working and collaborating had to be amended to meet the demands of the situation.

3. Given the lasting nature of this crisis, it is expected that many of these changes and new working modalities are not only here to stay, but that they will have to be continuously adapted to evolving circumstances. It is also likely that in light of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the regional if not global economy, OSCE participating States will intensify their calls for greater cost efficiency in the delivery of the organization's mandate in the coming years.

4. In this scenario, the organization needs to learn lessons about whether/how it has been successful in adapting its programmatic activities and processes to the volatility and uncertainty generated by COVID-19, and in responding to the evolving needs of participating States. More than one year into the pandemic, conducting a lessons-learned exercise hence appears to be timely.

Review Purpose and Scope

5. The ultimate *objective* of this exercise is to enhance organizational adaptability and resilience in times of crisis. Its immediate *purpose* is twofold:

   i. *To understand the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on the programmatic work of the organization; and*

   ii. *To learn what worked well in terms of how the OSCE responded and adapted to the situation, and what did not, so that the organization can draw lessons from it.*

6. This review had a *cross-organizational scope* and covered the period March 2020 – June 2021, in line with the onset and duration of the COVID-19 pandemic up to when this exercise was conducted. Its focus was on the delivery of the OSCE's programmatic work, which has been affected by the

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[1] See COVID-19 Global Evaluation Coalition. *Lessons from Evaluation. Gender Equality*. (2020)

pandemic, including through travel restrictions, remote working procedures, and lockdowns. Both Unified Budget (UB) and Extra-Budgetary (ExB) funded activities and processes were included.

7. The following criteria were taken into consideration when formulating the key strategic questions that this lessons-learned exercise aimed to respond to: *adaptability* and *inclusiveness*[2]. In addition, the OECD DAC Evaluation Criteria *efficiency* and *coherence* were particularly considered when collecting data on the OSCE's programmatic work during the pandemic. Given the timing of this review a little more than a year into the pandemic, data on *effectiveness,* especially on the mid- and long-term outcomes of OSCE interventions implemented since the onset of the pandemic, was not always available. It was, however, collected to the extent possible. To respond to stakeholders' needs, a flexible approach was adopted when conducting this exercise in that data relating to non-programmatic issues, such as concerns and considerations concerning the duty of care for OSCE staff, which were frequently raised by survey respondents and interviewees, was also reflected in this report.

8. This lessons-learned exercise built on reviews already undertaken on related topics across the organization. For instance, one of the most recent exercises was an OIO audit on the fulfilment of duty of care obligations in ODIHR conducted in 2021, as well as several agile auditing tasks undertaken in 2020 including on the following topics: Critical staff / in-premises contamination prevention; Connectivity; Survey on staff situation, challenges and concerns; Remote working enablers; Detailed update on HR risks; Analysis of the evolution of leave balances; Follow-up on emerging risks handling, and Programmatic delivery in the OSCE. OIO conducted a second survey during the last quarter of 2020 to measure the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on OSCE staff. OIO's Thematic Review of Business Continuity Management in the OSCE, issued in 2020, is also relevant in this context. Other OSCE entities also gathered information on and drew lessons from delivering on the OSCE's mandate during the COVID-19 pandemic, and a paper on the *OSCE Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic* along with a more detailed annex on the security implications of the pandemic was submitted by the Secretariat and Institutions to the CiO in April 2020. During the first half of 2020 TNTD led an initiative to identify the pros and cons of and to gather experiences from across

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[2] *Adaptability* is generally defined as an organization's ability to adjust its structure and business processes and successfully achieve its goals, in accordance with the peculiar characteristics of dynamic environments. (This working definition of 'organizational adaptability' is inspired by a number of sources including: https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/HumanCapital/adaptable-organization.pdf and https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/ready-set-go-reinventing-the-organization-for-speed-in-the-post-covid-19-era#), while in the framework of this exercise *inclusiveness* is understood as the ability of the OSCE to ensure that diverse groups (incl. their needs and voices) are not only represented but also actively included in its programmatic activities and processes. (This working definition of 'organizational inclusiveness' is inspired by a number of sources including: http://www.nonprofitinclusiveness.org/definitions-inclusiveness-and-inclusive-organizations and https://hbr.org/2017/02/diversity-doesnt-stick-without-inclusion).

executive structures with regards to transitioning capacity building activities from an in-person format to a virtual one.

9. It is expected that it will benefit OSCE senior management as well as programme/project managers in OSCE executive structures by providing a number of lessons and recommendations for the way forward.

Review Methodology

10. The review is based on four main data sources: Focus group discussions with OSCE staff from several executive structures; OSCE project budget and expenditures for 1.168 UB projects (implemented from March 2020 – March 2021, for which the non-pandemic years 2016 – 2019 were used as the comparison sample)[3]; data from an electronic survey that was distributed in April-May 2021 to 999 OSCE project staff (response rate 43%); and data collected as part of the OIO agile audits in 2020. Detailed information on the survey with regard to sample size, response rates, margin of error, confidence levels, survey questions and survey response data, are provided in Annex III of this report. External data sources were also consulted in the course of this review, including relevant evaluations and studies of other international organizations[4].

11. Based on the data collected, the review team identified a set of key thematic areas, for which broad conclusions and lessons could be drawn for the OSCE. These are the following: *Management and Governance, Implementation and Partnerships, Duty of Care, and Innovations.* These areas provide the structure of the report. For each one, a short contextual introduction is provided, followed by the identified lesson(s) and related findings and conclusions. The report concludes with a few proposed action points for the consideration of OSCE management, which are meant to help make the organization's programmatic work and the OSCE overall more resilient when faced with major disruptive events in the future. This assessment is based on OSCE staff perceptions. Additional reflections, consultation of counterparts, or research might be required to further substantiate the findings in the future, and as new insights and lessons might emerge as the pandemic and the OSCE's response evolve over time.

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[3] Note that the review focused on client-facing assistance projects, i.e. projects related to the OSCE's three Dimensions benefitting stakeholders in participating States. The criteria for inclusion are detailed and explained in Annex IV of this report.

[4] In particular, a recent report of the COVID-19 Global Evaluation Coalition informed this exercise and inspired the structure of the present report: *The Covid-19 Pandemic: How are Humanitarian and Development Co-operation Actors Doing so Far? How Could We Do Better? Synthesis of early lessons and emerging evidence on the initial COVID-19 pandemic response and recovery efforts.* June 2021.

2. Emerging Findings and Lessons

MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE

12. Context: Similar to other international organizations, the OSCE had to adapt its ways of working and create new governance structures to deal with the effects of the pandemic. A main challenge faced by the organization was to follow through on its commitments related to mandate implementation while ensuring duty of care obligations vis-à-vis its staff. At the level of the Secretariat, an additional layer of complexity involved its obligations regarding the OSCE's political meetings in Vienna and the needs and priorities of delegations.

LESSON I: The establishment of an inter-departmental consultative mechanism to deal with the implications of COVID-19 during the early stages of the pandemic sets a strong signal of leadership and joint ownership of the response and facilitates decision making

13. At the onset of the pandemic, crisis management task forces and working groups were established in several executive structures. They typically involved senior management of various departments, including programmatic, human resources, finance and others; security management and OSCE Staff Committee representatives. The rapid set up of these working groups sent a strong signal that the crisis was taken seriously and that related risks were being managed, and this was appreciated by interviewees. Positive comments were also made about the good team spirit and collaboration of the members of these working groups.

14. At the level of the Secretariat, the crisis management team was connected to other executive structures through a number of already existing (e.g. DHR focal points and security management focal point networks) or newly created mechanisms (e.g. COVID-19 TF established by CPC), which allowed for a continuous exchange on COVID-related matters across the organization. Several of these mechanisms focused on ensuring the duty of care for staff, others on mandate delivery in light of the new context, or on both.

LESSON II: Maintaining internal communication lines within and across units and departments is one of the key management practices in times of crisis

15. The importance of communication at all levels and on matters related both to mandate implementation and duty of care was repeatedly highlighted by staff members consulted. In fact, survey responses even suggest that maintaining lines of communication with staff and counterparts was *the* key management practice that helped to deal with challenges related to the implementation of the OSCE's work in times of COVID-19.

16. Interviewees especially highlighted the importance of communication and collaboration across units and departments, such as for instance between ICT services and programmatic departments, between human resources and senior management, or between conference services and ICT. Cross-departmental collaboration was often described as effective. In several instances it had even improved as a consequence of the pandemic and created an overall team spirit, as well as a better understanding of the challenges faced by each other.

17. Some critical voices about communication within units were also raised. While for most of the survey respondents, more and regular – often on-line – meetings and information sharing (including through emails, WhatsApp and ZOOM) enabled planning, implementation, co-ordination with colleagues, and discussions with stake-holders and partners, the frequency of communication was often perceived as not having been appropriate. Some respondents felt that communication had been insufficient, irregular, or even absent, and that too little – and even no – guidance and feedback had been provided by managers. In contrast, a smaller number of respondents was of the view that online meetings had been too numerous, managers had been micromanaging, requesting more reporting than usual, and that activities had overall been "over-coordinated." Many staff members commented that email communication had increased dramatically since the start of the pandemic, and that this had created additional challenges.

18. With regards to organization-wide communication, some interviewees expressed the desire for more pandemic-related communication by senior management in the Secretariat to OSCE staff overall, including through Town Hall meetings and more frequent communication on the situation in the various field locations. While being highly decentralized, the OSCE was still *one* organization, and learning about other executive structures would help staff better understand and respond to the situation and challenges faced across the organization.

LESSON III: Realistic risk assessment and continuous risk management are essential to help ensure business continuity in challenging times

19. The importance of risk management and the establishment of crisis management governance structures in the OSCE at an early stage of the pandemic was already highlighted. At the level of project implementation, data collected indicates that, overall, executive structures were able to adapt their work to the new situation, thereby demonstrating resilience in the face of the pandemic and the ability to work differently if so required.

20. An OIO analysis of project budget and expenditure data suggests no tangible effect of the pandemic on the overall number of initiated and cancelled UB projects in the OSCE in 2020. The OSCE-wide UB

project budget utilization rate in 2020 was lower than in the four preceding years[5], but not for all executive structures. Five out of ten increased their budget utilization rates in 2020[6].

21. However, data collected through survey responses and interviews shows a severe impact on *how* projects were implemented, even though this might not necessarily be reflected in the budget utilization rates. Some of the measures taken to adapt to the new situation and to ensure implementation are further described below. A complicating factor for project managers was that the unprecedented effects of a pandemic such as COVID-19 had not been foreseen in any of the risk assessment mechanisms in place in the OSCE. As a result, neither management nor staff were fully prepared for the situation, and had to first amend existing mechanisms or establish new ones to deal with it. This in turn had an impact on business continuity during the early stages of the pandemic.

22. One recurring survey response was that it had been a mistake to postpone project activities on the assumption that the situation would improve soon, rather than to expediently take strategic decisions to amend interventions. The proactive use of risk assessment matrixes was highlighted as a good practice in this context, which allowed project managers to more swiftly shift to online interventions and blended meetings.

23. The importance of proper risk assessments and management was also highlighted with regards to the political meetings in Vienna, which, similar to other OSCE interventions, had to be shifted online or to hybrid formats. While fires and other calamities leading to a full closure of Hofburg had been covered by the existing risk assessment, the potential effects of a pandemic that required very different arrangements, such as hybrid working modalities, had not been foreseen, as was also confirmed by a separate review of business continuity management practices in the OSCE in 2020. Similar to other international organizations, data collected indicates that more attention and analytical work to understand risks and the evolving context are needed in the OSCE to more effectively deal with similar and other crisis situations in the future[7].

IMPLEMENTATION AND PARTNERSHIPS

24. Context: The COVID-19 pandemic created new challenges for the implementation of the OSCE's mandate. Timely and effective mandate delivery is contingent on a system of actors, interactions, procedures and resources, each one of which was impacted by the new context and working

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[5] The overall UB project budget utilization rate in 2020 was 78.5%. Over the period 2016-2020, the annual aggregate project budget utilization rate was 86.8%. Note that these figures refer to programmatic / thematic UB projects only.

[6] These findings do not mean that the pandemic may not have seriously impacted the budget utilization rates of some projects. More information on the statistics related to this figure can be found in Annex V of this report. For more information on project budget and expenditure data, and criteria for inclusion of projects in this review refer to Annex IV of this report.

[7] See COVID-19 Global Evaluation Coalition: *The Covid-19 Pandemic: How are Humanitarian and Development Co-operation Actors Doing so Far? How Could We Do Better? Synthesis of early lessons and emerging evidence on the initial COVID-19 pandemic response and recovery efforts.* June 2021. .

conditions created by the pandemic. The situation led to activities having to be re-designed, resources to be re-allocated, working processes to be adjusted, and partnerships to be newly established or to be re-defined.

LESSON IV: Decentralized decision-making mechanisms and crisis-sensitive rules and procedures are essential for facilitating reprogramming in times of crises.

25. Overall, data collected for this review showed that OSCE staff faced many more implementation challenges during the pandemic than usual. In fact, almost 90% of survey respondents reported to have experienced either slightly more or considerably more implementation challenges than in pre-COVID times[8]. Implementation challenges varied across several aspects related to project implementation. For instance, 38% and 34% of the respondents considered that UB and ExB project implementation, respectively, had experienced *considerably* more challenges in 2020 as compared to previous years. Moreover, 43% of the respondents experienced *considerably* more project delays than usual, while 33% and 25% responded that delivery of activities and outputs, respectively, were c*onsiderably* more challenging in 2020 as compared to previous years.

26. These survey findings were confirmed by the focus group discussions, where a large number of participants reported that they had to adapt the majority of project proposals in 2020. The difficulties first encountered when converting in-person activities to online formats, which partly required renegotiation of MoUs and other agreements with counterparts, were also pointed out. Project proposals for 2021 had to be adapted to the current circumstances as well, many of them containing back up plans for the event that activities could once more not be implemented as planned.

27. An important element mentioned in this context was the difference between UB and ExB funded interventions, with the former lending themselves more easily to amendments at the country level, while the latter sometimes required lengthy discussions with donors. It was also mentioned, however, that donors usually agree to amendments as long as they are well argued. Flexibility with UB projects on the other hand was restricted due to the annual budget cycle, which made it impossible to extend projects to the next year. Several survey participants also pointed out that delays in implementation were occasionally caused by the decision to post-pone rather than to amend interventions, which was particularly an issue during the early phases of the pandemic when many stakeholders still hoped that it would be over again soon.
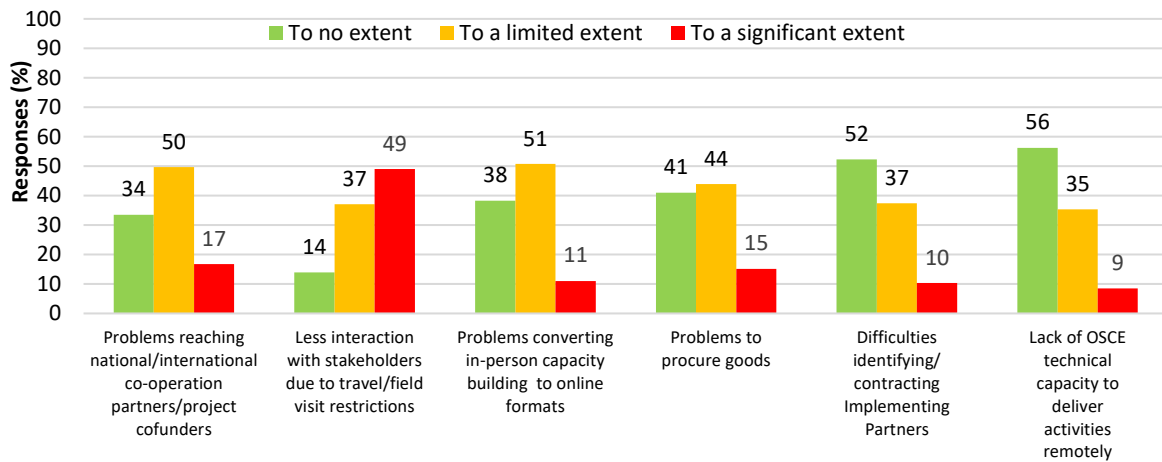
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[8] For detailed information about the survey, including sample size, margin of error and criteria for inclusion, see Annex III to this review. Please note that the population of survey respondents is larger than the number of 2020 ExB and UB projects by a factor of approximately 3,5:1, indicating that on average, projects involved slightly more than 3 OSCE staff members for its implementation. This means that the % rates presented in this section refer to the % of respondents, and not the % of projects.

28. Interviewees frequently also highlighted the need for more flexibility with regards to the administrative elements of project amendments, project approvals, recruitment and procurement. In particular, procedures related to project amendments were often described as inflexible and time-consuming, which was not compatible with the actual situation that required the OSCE to quickly adapt to stakeholders' needs and to rapidly implement COVID-19 related measures in the field. Others highlighted that procurement, implementing partner procedures and recruitment, in particular the new SSA regulations that increased the time required for hiring processes, had been hampered by a lack of administrative flexibility and long approval processes that caused additional project delays. In the view of some, this gave the OSCE a bad reputation with counterparts who expected the organization to be able to react quickly.

29. On the other hand, data collected for this review also showed that many staff did indeed experience flexibility in modifying project activities and trying new approaches or in cancelling activities that were seemingly not possible to implement. Some survey respondents mentioned that internal procedures in some executive structure had been simplified to address the challenges brought by the pandemic, suggesting that space for flexibility does in fact exist within the current regulations. Overall, the varying staff experiences with the application of administrative rules and regulations indicate that the OSCE does not have a shared practice and understanding for how to interpret/implement project related rules and regulations in times of major disruptive events.

30. It also became evident that the COVID-19 pandemic made already existing shortcomings and challenges even more visible, in particular those created by the annual UB budget cycle, late budget approval and all related administrative and project management procedures, which leave little time for implementation, reflection, creativity and learning, and challenge the OSCE's resilience and flexibility in terms of options for adaptation and rapid action during crisis.
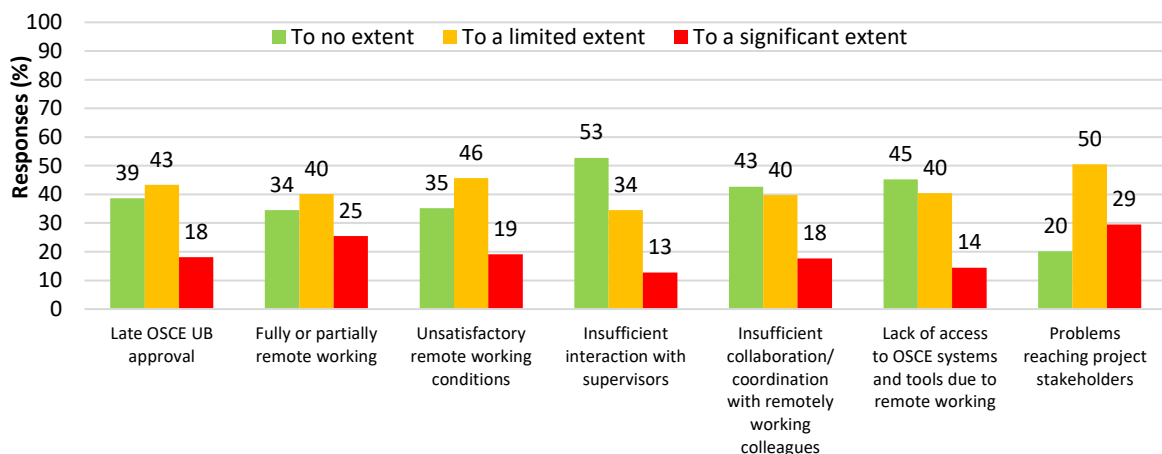
Lesson V: Establishing good relationships with counterparts in normal times creates the foundation for successful mandate implementation in periods of crisis.

31. The survey asked what the main causes were in case the pandemic negatively influenced project implementation. As illustrated by the graph below, they were multifaceted. The most common significant cause was less interaction with stakeholders due to travel restrictions (49%), while the least common significant cause was lack of OSCE technical capacity to deliver activities remotely (9%). Difficulties reaching project stakeholders also created significant challenges (29%).

Graph I: Causes of Project Implementation Challenges Caused by the Pandemic, 2020 and 2021

Legend: ■ To no extent ■ To a limited extent ■ To a significant extent

- Problems reaching national/international co-operation partners/project cofunders: 34, 50, 17
- Less interaction with stakeholders due to travel/field visit restrictions: 14, 37, 49
- Problems converting in-person capacity building to online formats: 38, 51, 11
- Problems to procure goods: 41, 44, 15
- Difficulties identifying/contracting Implementing Partners: 52, 37, 10
- Lack of OSCE technical capacity to deliver activities remotely: 56, 35, 9

Graph II: Causes of Project Implementation Challenges Caused by the Pandemic, 2020 and 2021

Legend: ■ To no extent ■ To a limited extent ■ To a significant extent

- Late OSCE UB approval: 39, 43, 18
- Fully or partially remote working: 34, 40, 25
- Unsatisfactory remote working conditions: 35, 46, 19
- Insufficient interaction with supervisors: 53, 34, 13
- Insufficient collaboration/coordination with remotely working colleagues: 43, 40, 18
- Lack of access to OSCE systems and tools due to remote working: 45, 40, 14
- Problems reaching project stakeholders: 20, 50, 29

32. Interviews confirmed that interactions with counterparts and other stakeholders were heavily affected by the pandemic, which in turn had an impact on business continuity. This was due to the personal distress faced by many of them as a consequence of their own sickness with COVID, and / or the sickness or even death of family members; travel restrictions on both sides; tele-working arrangements coupled with weak connectivity and the inability to meet in-person; competing priorities that counterparts had to deal with to adjust to the pandemic, and the initial reluctance and lack of capacity by some counterparts to engage online. In some cases the relationships with counterparts had to be recreated after several months of non-interaction, or newly established with local interlocutors who had only recently been appointed to their positions.

33. Building trust and creating working relationships with new counterparts were found to be particularly challenging in times when personal meetings were not possible or difficult to arrange given the required safety measures. With regards to already existing partnerships, stakeholders

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stressed that cooperation during difficult times worked best with those with whom good relationships and cooperation modalities, for instance a partnership platform (Tajikistan), had already been established before the pandemic. Leveraging these relationships allowed for a quicker response and more effective mandate implementation during the pandemic.

Lesson VI: The importance of continuously investing in connectivity and the digital literacy of the OSCE's staff cannot be over-estimated.

34. Connectivity and the digital literacy of both staff and counterparts were found to be the most essential prerequisites for mandate implementation during the pandemic. On both sides, this was not fully given when the pandemic started, and there have been continuous efforts ever since to improve the situation.

35. Within the OSCE, this involved the provision of VPN connections and laptops to staff, the introduction to ZOOM in addition to WebEx, and the training of staff on how to use these new tools. Many interviewees pointed out that it was the organization-wide introduction of VPN connections and the move to ZOOM that allowed staff to work effectively remotely. Some went as far as saying that *'ZOOM has saved my life'*. The reasons for the Secretariat's initial reluctance to have ZOOM introduced in the OSCE, do not seem to be well understood. ICT staff interviewed, on the other hand, pointed to ongoing security concerns as a consequence of staff working with their own equipment at home.

36. The establishment of VPN connections and the shift to online (and hybrid) meetings and conferences required extensive back-stopping services and capacity building measures. It created a significant additional workload for ICT services across the organization, whose commitment and dedication were appreciated by all the stakeholders consulted on this matter. ICT support was also provided to facilitate the online meetings and conferences held by participating States in Vienna, and to strengthen the capacities of delegates to engage online. OSCE staff (and delegates), on the other hand, had to adapt to the new online working modalities, which also required commitment and the willingness to learn new skills.

37. Significant efforts were also made to help strengthen the connectivity and digital literacy of counterparts in participating States. Interviewees reported that many counterparts had very weak internet connections, and some had no equipment to work remotely, which resulted in them not being reachable, and many were not used to engaging in capacity building and other interventions online, and lacked the technology and skills to effectively engage. This led several OSCE field operations to purchase computer equipment for counterparts and to provide training on how to use the online platforms.

38. The need for further digitalization and modernization of the OSCE's digital facilities was also expressed. Issues to be improved include the perceived shortage of ZOOM licences in some field operations, which limited ZOOM sessions to 45 minutes, the need for better conference equipment for political negotiations, and more interactive cooperation tools with counterparts. Needless to say, further digitalization requires investments. Lack thereof has been one of the main impediments of digital modernization in the OSCE so far[9].

Lesson VII: Moving capacity building interventions online works well in many contexts and for some purposes, but not for all.

39. Capacity-building is a key OSCE project activity, being an element of an estimated at least 50% of all ExB and UB OSCE projects.[10] Due to the pandemic, in-person capacity building was often not possible. As a result, many interventions were converted into online activities, which created new challenges as well as a several opportunities. One survey question asked whether – in instances where in-person capacity-building activities (training, seminars, workshops, etc.) were challenging due to the pandemic – it was possible to successfully replace in-person formats with online formats. Only 13% responded "no", while 58% responded "to a limited extent" and 26% responded "to a considerable extent".

40. The effectiveness and efficiency of online interventions has been a topic of discussion since the early stages of the pandemic when efforts were first made to convert in-person capacity building and other activities to a digital format[11]. As already discussed above, during that period and for a large part of 2020 (depending on the location), significant effort was invested in enhancing the connectivity and digital literacy of both OSCE staff and counterparts (in some countries) to enable them to participate in online interventions. Staff members report some initial reluctance by participants to engage online, but that seems to have shifted since. In some contexts challenges remain, which still makes it difficult to reach certain types of stakeholders (e.g. older generations). Having OSCE offices in rural areas in some countries has helped the OSCE reach out to these populations.

41. Overall, however, staff report that moving interventions online has contributed to ensuring the inclusivity of the OSCE's work, and even to counteract some of the detrimental effects of the pandemic. For instance, while restrictions related to the pandemic might make it more difficult for

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[9] It is acknowledged that resources from the Capital Investment Fund helped to alleviate the situation to some extent in 2020.
[10] OSCE, Office of Internal Oversight (2017), *Report on the Strategic Assessment of OSCE Training Assistance Delivered by Executive Structures to Counterparts, 2013-2015* (OIO report number 6/2016). OIO identified over 1900 active ExB and UB projects and programmes of OSCE Executive Structures over the period 2013 - 2015. Of these, an estimated 51.5 per cent involved some form of training assistance. Note, however, that this report focused on traditional training assistance only, and that other types of capacity building (peer learning, mentoring, on the job training etc.) were not included.
[11] See for instance the above mentioned TNTD led initiative to identify the pros and cons of and to gather experiences from across executive structures with regards to transitioning capacity building activities from an in-person format to a virtual one, which was conducted during the first half of 2020.

certain types of stakeholders to engage in training activities in-person (e.g. women in some contexts; populations in rural areas), the shift to digital has allowed them to participate remotely. Data collected through the survey also indicated that gender mainstreaming and diversity considerations in the OSCE's activities were seemingly least influenced by the pandemic, in that 90% of respondents were of the view that the pandemic had no or only little influence on their implementation. More data on the subject needs to be collected in the future, though, to draw robust conclusions on how and if the conversion of in-person activities to online interventions has influenced the inclusivity of the OSCE's work.

42. When it comes to the effectiveness of online interventions, given the time needed for making a sustainable change of skills, practices and policies, evidence for the longer-term results of online training conducted during the pandemic was not available when this review was conducted. Meanwhile, staff members' observations and experiences collected since the start of the pandemic indicate that effectiveness of online training hinges on a number of factors.

43. One of them relates to the connectivity and digital literacy of both the training organizers and the participants. As already discussed, both created challenges in the beginning of the pandemic, but increased considerably ever since. Some survey respondents reported low effectiveness of some of the early online activities, which could not be properly attended by government stakeholders working from home due to the shortage of functioning computers and / or their insufficient digital literacy. Several staff commented that there had been a strong push from management to implement activities and to fully use project budgets in order to demonstrate the relevance of the OSCE's work in the given circumstances even though this resulted in some activities of questionable quality and effectiveness[12]. Some said it was a mistake to "try to do all" during the pandemic instead of focusing on fewer project activities of higher organizational priorities.

44. Data collected suggests that whether online capacity building and other interventions are effective also depends on their purpose. For instance, staff members were of the view that online works well for interventions that aim to share information, create knowledge and skills (to some extent), provide technical advice and policy support, and enhance coordination between different actors. Online formats were considered less suitable for activities that aim to build trust between various stakeholders, to strengthen highly technical skills that require practical training, or to solve complex problems, as well as for those that require very interactive training methods (e.g. simulation trainings).

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[12] This state of affairs may provide part of the explanation for the finding earlier in this report of limited impact of the pandemic on the number of projects and project budget utilization rates in 2020.

45. Mixed views were raised regarding the suitability of online interactions at the political level, for instance when negotiating PC or MC decisions. It was mentioned that online political work was more difficult, since it usually required informal in-person interactions on the side to facilitate consensus. The lack of personal interactions made more online preparatory side discussions necessary, which was considerably more time consuming than when delegates could quickly meet informally.

46. Overall, many interviewees appreciated the benefits of online interventions, including the possibility to reach larger audiences, including groups who might often not be in a position to travel (women in some contexts, NGO representatives, youth, minority and other marginalized groups etc.); to engage more across different hierarchical levels of the organization; and to engage international speakers for presentations and support. Nobody mentioned the advantages that international online meetings and conferences - when compared to in-person events - bring for the environment and for reducing the OSCE's carbon footprint. This point is added by the OIO reviewers. Disadvantages included the fact that participants often tended to 'multi-task' while attending online meetings and trainings, which reduced meeting effectiveness, and that the level of interactivity was generally lower than in in-person events. The latter, however, strongly depended on the facilitation skills of the trainer and format of the session.

47. Interestingly, with regards to the efficiency of online interventions, while interviewees appreciated the fact that more people could be reached online, which reduces expenditures per participant, the effectiveness of certain interventions might decrease with the increased number of participants. It was also stressed that moving interventions online during the early stages of the pandemic required significant resources due to the costs involved when purchasing equipment, the human resources required to train staff and counterparts and to reorient programmes, and to engage external technical expertise when required. In the long run, however, these costs would most likely pay off.

48. Overall, given the experiences gained since the onset of the pandemic, most staff stressed the complementarity of online and in-person interventions. The question for a possible post-pandemic future was not whether capacity building and other work should still be conducted online or not, but rather how digital and in-person interventions could be combined for optimal effectiveness and efficiency.

DUTY OF CARE

49. Context: The COVID-19 pandemic has not only affected the implementation of the OSCE's mandate, but also the very workforce of the organization, and the employees of its partner organizations in participating States. The need to ensure the safety and wellbeing of its own staff, as well as those of

counterparts in some situations, together with the OSCE's commitment to ensure mandate implementation at the same time have put an extraordinary pressure on the organization.

LESSON VIII: Involving the CiO during the early stages of a crisis is important as it helps to raise awareness and ensure alignment of crisis management measures.

50. In the OSCE, the duty of care for its staff has been a focus of the organization's response to the pandemic right from the start. It has been a central element of the OSCE overall crisis management, and a continuous source of concern since the time when the pandemic first hit. In the Secretariat and across the organization, instructions were issued to ensure the safety and well-being of staff, and numerous activities were implemented to that end. These included tele-working and social distancing regulations, the provision of masks and disinfectant for those working from the office, special provisions for vehicle use, the introduction of traffic light systems, and many others. In several countries, OSCE operations also provided sanitary equipment to counterparts, and took many other measures to help partners engage safely in OSCE activities, and to ensure business continuity in partner institutions.

51. Overall, the organization's strong commitment to duty of care was acknowledged by people consulted for this review, and the appointment of a Chief Medical Officer, albeit late into the pandemic[13], was found to be crucial. Some staff, however, commented on the fact that instructions at the Secretariat changed quite frequently, which created some confusion among staff and field operations who were trying to follow. A few critical voices were raised by field office staff with regards to vaccination provisions, or rather the initial lack thereof, in particular the Secretariat's first suggestion that national staff in field operations should be covered by the respective national vaccination programmes. Given the absence of proper national vaccination programmes in many countries, this did not seem to be a realistic option. More recent efforts by the Secretariat to provide support on this matter are much appreciated.

52. In Vienna, the fact that the CiO and delegates were partly following different rules than the Secretariat created some concerns on the side of Secretariat staff whose responsibilities involved facilitating and supporting the political meetings in Hofburg in a variety of capacities. For example, there were instances when the CiO held blended meetings, while the Secretariat was closed and almost all staff were working from home; and situations when duty of care related instructions from the CiO were not fully followed by delegates. The need to involve the CiO during the early stages of a crisis was identified as one of the key lessons learned in this context.

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[13] The Chief Medical Officer started his assignment on 1 December 2020.

53. The pandemic has affected staff's capacity to deliver as well as their private lives in many different ways. Many employees were faced with challenges related to the implementation of their work, created by the necessity to convert in-person activities to online interventions, to help counterparts engage digitally, to provide ICT support to staff, delegates and partners, to follow up on interventions remotely, and overall to review and adapt workplans to the new situation. This alone created a significant additional work-load for a large number of staff members across the organization.

54. The situation was compounded by the fact that for a large number of employees most of these additional challenges had to be tackled while working from home. Tele-commuting, especially during the early stages of the pandemic, has been challenging for many due to insufficient levels of connectivity (weak internet, lack of VPN connection, lack of personal laptop etc.). Some of these problems were resolved at a later stage. Others, while tele-working, had to share the kitchen table with other household members while at the same time having to supervise their children's home-schooling. Others, on the other hand, enjoyed the opportunity to work from home and appreciated the additional flexibility that this created, the opportunity to spend more time with family, and the time saved by not having to do the daily commute to the office.

55. There are staff and managers who report to have been working significantly longer hours while in home office due to the fact that emails were pouring in at all hours of the day and night, the work-load was significant, and it was more difficult to disconnect in the evenings. There are others who did not or only very rarely worked from home as their responsibilities did not allow them to do so (security, some ICT staff, executive team members etc.). For most of them the work-load was also heavy, and work-life balance deteriorated during the pandemic. More flexible working hours were generally appreciated as they helped staff take care of family issues and overall increased work-life balance.

56. Importantly, the pandemic also significantly affected people's mental and even physical health. A considerable number of staff members fell sick with COVID-19, had to care for sick family members, or even deal with the loss of loved ones, while still trying to get their work done. Some staff members suffered from not being able to meet family members for significant periods of time due to travel restrictions, while others were seriously affected by the isolation and lack of social interaction during times of tele-commuting and lockdowns. This situation was also highlighted by an OIO agile audit survey in October 2020, which raised alarm about the high percentage of staff indicating they were

facing mental health issues[14]. The following graph from the survey presentation illustrates the situation:
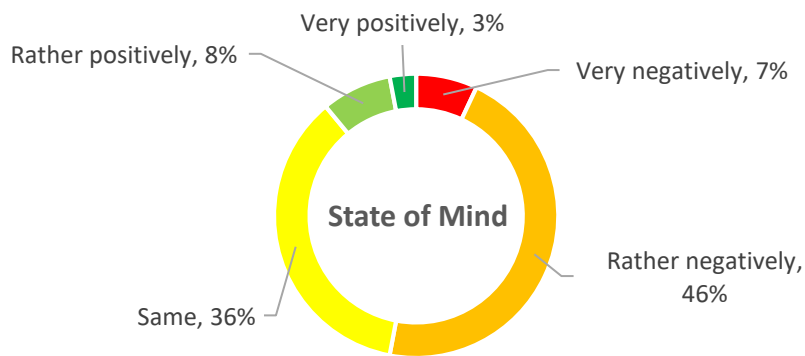
57. Interesting to note that when broken down by gender, female staff members were affected differently than male staff members. While 7% of women reported that their state of mind / mental wellbeing had been *very negatively* affected by the pandemic, and 52% reported that it had been *rather negatively* affected, the corresponding figures for male staff members were 6% and 41%, respectively.

58. Several interviewees were of the view that, in conjunction with the diversity of living conditions in the OSCE area, the situation seems to have increased already existing inequities among staff. A case in point was the issue of tele-commuting from outside the duty station, which, although appreciated by those who benefitted from it, was seen more critical by others who, inter alia, stressed that not every staff member had the opportunity to work from outside the duty station because not everybody was able to leave. Some also said that international staff members leaving during the pandemic sent wrong signals to national staff who had nowhere else to go and did not feel supported during times of crisis.

59. Another issue raised related to female staff members having been affected differently than men. Many women were faced with additional duties at home, such as taking care of sick family members and of children who could not attend schools during lockdowns, cooking meals for the entire family etc., which consumed a significant amount of their time and resulted in some of their professional work duties having to be done in the evenings or at night. In addition, important professional networking and in-person learning opportunities (coaching / mentoring) that might exist in the office were not available any more, and professional development became more difficult. The situation was also challenging for new staff members who joined the organization during the pandemic.

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[14] See OIO's 2nd organization-wide survey on Navigating the COVID-19 Pandemic, which was conducted from 22-30 October 2020.

Managers also reported that they found it more difficult to integrate new staff in times of remote working conditions.

60. Managers also spoke to other management challenges, including the need to balance duty of care responsibilities with mandate implementation. For example, there were instances in some duty stations where government institutions whose staff members were not tele-commuting expected in-person meetings with OSCE officials and progress in activity implementation, while the OSCE offices were closed and staff were working from home and asked only to connect online. Several managers would have liked to receive more guidance on this matter from the Secretariat[15].

61. The importance of cross-organizational exchange and lesson learning among management during times of crisis was also mentioned. An appropriate informal instrument that facilitates such discussions among peers, including between Heads of Missions, seems to be missing at the moment. Staff Committees were considered good mechanisms to bring staff concerns to the attention of management.

62. Other issues mentioned by managers included the difficulty to reach tele-commuting staff members by phone and / or the hesitancy of managers to try reach them at home, the impossibility to call ad hoc meetings if necessary if staff are working from outside the duty station, the lack of incentives for international staff to remain in the duty station while tele-commuting, problems related to the accumulation and transfer of unused leave days that lead to staff being absent during extended periods in the following year, difficulties related to team building without in-person interaction, and problems created by the fact that the OSCE had no instrument that would help prevent the posting of vulnerable staff members in difficult environments (and the potential subsequent need for their evacuation in times of crisis). A case in point was the SMM, where several older staff members had to be evacuated from eastern parts of the country to western Ukraine to ensure their wellbeing in times of the pandemic.

63. Overall, what this shows is that OSCE officials, while all affected by the pandemic to some extent, their private and professional lives were implicated in many different ways. They faced – and are still facing - different challenges and they had different needs that had to be met. Staff members might still be suffering from various mental health problems as a consequence of the loss of family members, stress, or loneliness. There was a strong call by many interviewees to bear this in mind

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[15] This links to OIO's audit on the fulfilment of duty of care obligations in ODIHR conducted in 2021, which highlights weaknesses of the OSCE's framework for the definition and discharge of the Organization's duty of care obligations, in particular with regards to its patchiness and incompleteness, and stresses the fact that all key managerial decisions involving staff management under the pandemic have a duty of care component.

and not to go back to business as usual too quickly, as the effects of the pandemic are here to stay for a while.

64. The need for corporate guidance on remote working, flexible working hours, and standard operating procedures for times of crisis and emergency situations were also mentioned repeatedly. As this crisis has taught, these procedures ought to be adaptable to the specific circumstances, and take both the organization's and staff members' needs into account. Flexible working hours combined with core working periods, tele-commuting possibilities combined with agreed times and spaces for in-person attendance and interaction to facilitate team building and social cohesion, management by results not by 'presenteeism', risk assessment and emergency training for management and staff, peer learning mechanisms for staff and management, were mentioned as key features that such guidance should take into account. Further, the existing work-life balance policy of the organization should be updated to reflect a more agile workforce and some of the effective practices developed during the pandemic.

INNOVATIONS

65. Context: Crisis often create an opportunity or necessity to work differently. This may include new ways of collaborating within the organization and with partners; new types of leaderships; new ways of managing, designing, implementing and evaluating projects; as well as totally new ways of balancing ones professional and private lives. Technical innovations are often important when dealing with a new situation. In case of the COVID-19 pandemic, they certainly were essential. Risk taking plays a fundamental role in innovation, too.

LESSON X: While a crisis might provide a fertile ground for innovations, these also require risk taking, time, and resources.

66. Data collected shows that OSCE staff has been quite innovative when dealing with the challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic. This view is not necessarily shared by all the staff members consulted, who tend to be more modest with regards to their own capacity to innovate. Partly, this has to do with the commonly shared connotation of the word 'innovation', which is often understood to be about something totally new and innovative that has never happened before anywhere else. The reviewers take a slightly different approach to innovation, and understand it to include ways of working, interacting, and doing business that have been improved or are new in a given context. Following this working definition, several such examples were identified.

67. Important elements in this context were the importance of taking calculated risks when trying out new approaches, the need to spend time enrolling partners in new possibilities and ways of working – for instance, to engage online in trainings and negotiations -, and the resources required for

innovation. Several stakeholders interviewed said that they were so busy managing the crisis that they did not have time to innovate. A complicating factor in this regard was the inflexibility of some of the OSCE's administrative rules as described above, and the need to deal with bureaucracy overall, which limited the extent of innovations.

68. On the other hand, the pandemic has led to a totally new level of digitization and digital literacy in the OSCE and in many partner institutions, which facilitated implementation overall, and created possibilities for new developments. Interviewees, for instance, mentioned the initiation of electronic signatures and paperless approval processes, which eased bureaucratic burden to some extent, as well as the introduction of more flexible working arrangements as key new ways of doing business. Some executive structures also developed new ways of responding to the uncertainty created by the pandemic. For instance, the Mission to Serbia reported to have started to foresee two alternative implementation modalities for projects, one with the possibility of in-person delivery, one without.

69. New practices have also been identified at the project level, and there are certainly many more across the OSCE. Examples include capacity building of teachers to help them better handle stressful situations encountered when conducting online training (Mission in Kosovo); and activities to reach out in new ways to old target groups, and in old ways to new target groups. For instance, the Mission to Serbia mobilized young people by working with influencers on YouTube. Another project involved the recording of online training modules in various local languages to reach out to minority groups. The Mission in Kosovo engaged with youth on the topic of COVID through a photography and Tik-Tok video competition. The Programme Office in Bishkek conducted online training for prison inmates, and introduced a new e-learning platform for civic education related to elections. The Office of the Special Representative / Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings demonstrated innovative action during the early stages of the pandemic by offering recommendations to governments for how to address the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for human trafficking victims and survivors[16]. New ways of monitoring project implementation progress were also introduced in some missions. The Programme Office in Bishkek, for instance, is working on developing a method using online pre-post training tests to identify learning outcomes, and the Secretariat's Gender Section has introduced regional online meetings of Gender Focal Points to make up for reduced in-person meetings opportunities caused by the pandemic.

70. These and many other practices could inspire work in other executive structures of the OSCE, and information about them should be further distributed across the organization.

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[16] See OSCE Special Representative for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings offers recommendations on short-term responses to COVID-19 | OSCE

3. Action Points for the Way Forward

71. What this review indicates is that the OSCE has demonstrated resilience, flexibility and ability to learn when dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. While implementation challenges have been 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. This is thanks to the commitment of OSCE management and staff, and the successful collaboration with the organization's partners. Many lessons can be learned from working during the pandemic, and while some of them were captured by this review, many others were certainly not. Future evaluations and other lessons learned exercises might reveal them.

72. The need for flexibility, persistence, empathy and ongoing personal and organizational learning stand out, both to ensure mandate implementation and the wellbeing of the OSCE's staff members. As this review has also shown, staff face very different personal and professional circumstances, and these need to be acknowledged and taken into account.

73. The lessons identified by this review constitute inputs for future planning, programming, implementation and staff management. In addition, and based on the data collected through this exercise, a number of concrete action points are offered for the way going forward:

    I. *Improve risk-assessment and risk management across the organization, and build management capacities in this area.*

    II. *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.*

    III. *Evaluate the effectiveness of online capacity development activities and other interventions, and develop guidance and good practices.*

    IV. *Provide peer learning mechanisms to facilitate the exchange of lessons learning across the OSCE during times of crisis.*

    V. *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.*

    VI. *Invest in further modernization of the OSCE's digital facilities.*

Annex I: Review Concept Note

A) BACKGROUND

1. The COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed its destabilizing effects unexpectedly and rapidly, forcing countries around the globe to deal with its consequences. In addition to its evolving impact on public health, and national economies, there are implications for security and human life overall that are still to be fully recognized. For instance, data suggests that as a consequence of the pandemic progress on gender equality has been stalling around the globe.[17]

2. Many countries in the OSCE region have been particularly hard hit by the epidemic and are still in the midst of its second or third wave. The OSCE was called to respond to these challenges, and to adapt to changing working environments and shifting priorities. Ways of working and collaborating had to be amended to meet the demands of the current situation.

3. Given the potential lasting nature of this crisis, it is expected that many of these changes and new working modalities are not only here to stay, but that they will have to be continuously adapted to evolving circumstances. It is also likely that in light of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global economy, OSCE participating States (pS) will intensify their calls for greater cost efficiency in the delivery of the organization's mandate in the coming years.

4. In this scenario, the organization needs to learn lessons about whether/how it has been successful in adapting its programmatic activities and processes to the volatility and uncertainty generated by COVID-19, and in responding to the evolving needs of participating States. One year into the pandemic, conducting a lessons-learned exercise hence appears to be timely.

B) PURPOSE AND SCOPE

5. The ultimate *objective* of this exercise is to enhance organizational adaptability and resilience in times of crisis. Its immediate *purpose* is twofold:

   a. To understand the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on the programmatic work of the organization; and

   b. To learn what worked well in terms of how the OSCE responded and adapted to the situation, and what did not, so that the organization can draw lessons from it.

6. This review will have a *cross-organizational scope* and cover the period January – December 2020, in line with the onset and duration of the COVID-19 pandemic through-out the year. It will focus on a selection of programmatic activities and processes in the three Dimensions of the OSCE's work for comprehensive security that have been particularly affected by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and complement this assessment with a more general perspective of the organization's response overall. Potential areas to be looked at in more detail are: UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security; water security and resource

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[17] See COVID-19 Global Evaluation Coalition. *Lessons from Evaluation. Gender Equality*. (2020)

management; and freedom of the media. The selection will be confirmed following consultations with management.

7. Operational impacts and lessons learned will be included as they are relevant to programmatic delivery but do not constitute a major focus of this exercise. As for the processes, this review will, inter alia, look at project amendments, needs assessments, consultations with counterparts and local stakeholders, and the delivery of capacity building.[18] Both Unified Budget (UB) and Extra-Budgetary (ExB) funded activities and processes will be included.

8. The following criteria were taken into consideration when formulating the key strategic questions below that this lessons-learned exercise aims to respond to: *adaptability* and *inclusiveness. Adaptability* is generally defined as an organization's ability to adjust its structure and business processes and successfully achieve its goals, in accordance with the peculiar characteristics of dynamic environments[19], while in the framework of this exercise *inclusiveness* is understood as the ability of the OSCE to ensure that diverse groups (incl. their needs and voices) are not only represented but also actively included in its programmatic activities and processes.[20] In addition, the OECD DAC Evaluation Criteria *efficiency* and *coherence* will be considered.

9. The following key *strategic questions* are to be answered by this assignment:

   a. **Whether/how the OSCE has been able to adapt its programmatic activities and processes rapidly and successfully to the volatility and uncertainty created by the COVID-19 pandemic?** This includes assessing whether/how the organization has been able to ensure the overall efficiency and coherence of its assistance while re-prioritizing and/or re-designing its programmatic activities and processes. How did the actors adapt and innovate in the face of the limitations imposed by the pandemic? What were the limitations to such adaptation and innovation?

   b. **Whether/how the OSCE has been gender responsive and inclusive of diversity in its programmatic work during the COVID-19 pandemic?** This includes assessing whether/how the organization's efforts to deal with the changing context of its work has had any consequences, both negative and positive, for gender mainstreaming and the inclusion of the needs and voices of diverse groups (e.g. young people, old people, minorities). In this respect, particular attention will be paid to the transition from in-person to virtual delivery.

   c. **What are the lessons to be drawn from delivering on the OSCE's mandate during the COVID-19 pandemic for the future?** This will involve identifying good practices

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[18] This provisional list of programmatic areas and processes may be modified and/or expanded, as new data will emerge from structured conversations with key informants.

[19] This working definition of 'organizational adaptability' is inspired by a number of sources including: https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/HumanCapital/adaptable-organization.pdf and https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/ready-set-go-reinventing-the-organization-for-speed-in-the-post-covid-19-era#

[20] This working definition of 'organizational inclusiveness' is inspired by a number of sources including: http://www.nonprofitinclusiveness.org/definitions-inclusiveness-and-inclusive-organizations and https://hbr.org/2017/02/diversity-doesnt-stick-without-inclusion

from around the organization that could inspire activities elsewhere in the OSCE and beyond.

10. This lessons-learned exercise will build on reviews already undertaken on related topics across the organization[21]. It is expected that it will benefit OSCE senior management as well as programme/project managers in all OSCE executive structures.

C) APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

11. This lessons-learned exercise will combine several of the following methods:

   - *desk review (*of project documentation, the OSCE's official website, social media accounts);
   - *structured group discussions with key informants* (up to 6 members per group, incl. programme/project managers from different OSCE executive structures/main programmes);
   - *open story telling sessions* with a few selected staff members from different executives structures to gather impressions of how they dealt with the implications of the pandemic in their programmatic work, and what they learned from it; and an
   - *online survey*, which will be administered to a wider audience across the organization to collect additional information on e.g. project cycle management processes, collaboration between different executive structures, inclusion of diverse stakeholders.

12. Due to the *temporal proximity* between the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 and this lessons-learned exercise, the focus will be on how activities and programmes adapted, innovated and changed between March and December 2020. The Office of Internal Oversight (OIO) will consider repeating this lessons-learned exercise with an expanded scope in the future (incl. interviews with external stakeholders and beneficiaries), and at this point seek more insights on outcomes and impact.[22]

13. This lessons-learned exercise will be carried out by *OIO's Evaluation Unit* following prior consultation about the focus of the exercise with senior management in the Secretariat and executive structures.

D) DELIVERABLES AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

14. The key findings and conclusions of this lessons-learned exercise will be summarized in a short paper, and disseminated through a targeted edition of OIO's evaluation newsletter, *EvalNews.* Furthermore, *infographics* will be prepared and potentially included in additional knowledge products as well as in a *PowerPoint presentation* to be delivered at a series of online events (e.g. Directors' meeting, Coffee Briefing, meetings of the Evaluation Network, briefing for pS). OIO might consider developing a more articulated communication strategy

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[21] During the first half of 2020 TNTD led an initiative to identify the pros and cons of and to gather experiences from across executive structures with regards to transitioning capacity building activities from an in-person format to a virtual one, while OIO conducted a survey during the last quarter of the year to measure the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on OSCE staff. Other OSCE entities also gathered information on and drew lessons from delivering on the OSCE's mandate during the COVID-19 pandemic, and a paper on the *OSCE Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic* along with a more detailed annex on the security implications of the pandemic was submitted by the Secretariat and Institutions to the CiO in April 2020.

[22] It is worth mentioning here that every independent evaluation planned by the OIO's Evaluation Unit for 2021 will include reflections and recommendations related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

at a later stage, should it identify the need to share (in whole or in part) key findings and recommendations of this exercise with external audiences.

E) TIMELINE

15. This lessons-learned exercise has an expected duration of *two months*. It will be conducted during the first quarter of 2021.

Annex II: Focus Group Discussion Participants

OSCE Centre in Ashgabat

Ambassador John S. MacGregor, Head of the OSCE Centre in Ashgabat

OSCE Programme Office in Bishkek

Ms. Rasmiya Kazimova, Deputy Head of Mission

Mr. Nicholas Mazik, Acting Head of the Human Dimension Department, Rule of Law Officer

Mr. Edoardo Da Ros, Regional Development Officer

OSCE Programme Office in Dushanbe

Ms. Victoria Buchok, Head, Fund Administration Unit

Ambassador Valeriu Chiveri, Head of the OSCE Programme Office in Dushanbe

Mr. Ilgar Ibrahimli, Media Officer, Human Dimension Activities

Mr. Aleksandar Maskovic, Good Governance Officer, Anti-Corruption

OSCE Mission in Kosovo

Mr. Paul Fraser, Head, Administration and Finance

Mr. Maid Konjhodzic, Director of Regional Centre Peje / Pec

Mr. Childerik Schaapveld, Director, Democratization Department

Ms. Tatiana Turcan, Head of Office of Central Co-ordination

Mr. Sebastijan Visoka, Chief of Financial Management (Staff Committee)

OSCE Secretariat

Mr. Arne Bell, Head, Conferences Services

Ms. Vera Strobachova Budway, Senior Co-ordination Adviser

Mr. Micheal Conneely, Deputy Director, Human Resources

Mr. Carmelo Gagliardi, Senior Policy Support Officer (Staff Committee)

Ms. Alena Kupchyna, Co-ordinator of Activities to Address Transnational Threats

Mr. Roman Langthaler, Senior Building Maintenance Assistance, Facilities Management (Staff Committee)

Ms. Tetiana Rudenko, Senior Coordination Advisor, Office of Special Rep/Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings

Ms. Gelfiya Shchienko, Director for Management and Finance

Ms. Michele Schmiedl, Protocol Assistant, Direction and Management (Staff Committee)

Ms. Mariya Yakymakha, Senior Contracts Assistant, Procurement and Contracting (Staff Committee)

Mr. Nizar Zaher, Staff Representative and Chairperson of the Secretary Staff Committee

Mr. Vuk Zugic, Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities

OSCE Mission to Serbia

Ms. Branka Bakic, National Programme Officer

Ms. Jasmina Ilic, National Legal Officer (Staff Committee)

Ms. Irina Krapivina, Chief, Fund Administration Unit

Mr. Umberto Severini, Head of Security Co-operation Department

Ms. Radmila Todosijevic, National Programme Co-ordination Officer

OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine

Ms. Karin Roelke, Senior Project Officer, Office of Head of Mission

OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Uzbekistan

Ambassador Pierre von Arx, Project Co-ordinator in Uzbekistan

Mr. Hans-Ullrich Ihm, Senior Project Officer

Annex III. On-Line Survey Information

Population size, sample size, and sample margin of error

1. The survey focuses on OSCE staff who directly work with the implementation of ExB and UB projects in the 1st, 2nd and 3rd and cross-dimension that involve assistance to external stakeholders. As of 2021-03-16, the OSCE's staff list contained 3.608 names. Staff who directly work with the implementation of projects were identified through the staff list's job titles.

2. All staff with job titles including "project" and "program", such as "project officer", "project assistant", "programme officer" and "program manager" are included in the survey. In addition, the survey includes all staff who worked in a programmatic unit within the 1st, 2nd, 3rd or cross-Dimension in a field operation (excluding Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine and the OSCE Observer Mission at the Russian Checkpoints Gukovo and Donetsk), HCNM, ODIHR or the Secretariat and had the following terms in their job titles: "adviser", "officer", "chief", "head", "deputy head" or "director", "legal assistant", "media monitoring assistant", "monitoring assistant", "police training assistant", "rule of law monitoring assistant", "senior governance training assistant", "senior legal assistant", "senior training assistant", "training assistant", and "senior translator/interpreter assistant." Finally, the members of the OSCE Evaluation Network were included.

3. The inclusion criteria generated an over-inclusive survey population of 999 names, of which a small number are not involved in planning and/or implementing projects intended to benefit external stakeholders. For instance, the OSCE Evaluation Network includes some individuals who do not directly work with project implementation. To assure that the survey population is not over-inclusive, the survey was initiated by the screening question "During 2020 and 2021, have you been involved in planning and/or implementing projects intended to benefit external stakeholders (e.g., government counterparts or civil society organizations?"

4. This question was answered in the affirmative by 454 individuals, and in the negative by 41 (8,28%) individuals (out of the 495 who initiated the survey – see below). If it is assumed that the 495 individuals constitute roughly a random sample from the initial estimated survey population of 999 names, then it may be concluded that the original survey population to roughly 10% includes individuals who have not directly worked with the implementation of projects. The actual relevant survey population is in that case around 900 individuals.

5. The survey was active over the period 2021-04-26 – 2021-05-12. 39 email addresses bounced, thus reducing the population from the estimated 900 to 861, of which in turn 495 initiated the survey and

373 completed it up until the last compulsory question (18).[23] Given an actual survey population size of 861, the sample margin of error is around ±3% by question 3, and around ±4% by the last compulsory survey question (18), for a 95% confidence level.

6. The analysis in the report is based on aggregate response data since disaggregation of the data across gender or Executive Structure would have resulted in sample margins of error likely too large to draw firm conclusions. Moreover, the % figures in any graphs of the review reflect the exclusion of responses "Do not know / prefer not to say" as they are de facto non-responses. For instance, for question 7, the % of the 47 responses "Needs assessments were considerably less extensive than before the pandemic", were calculated not against the total number of respondents (380), but against the number of respondents (339) remaining after deducting the 41 responses "Do not know / prefer not to say / not applicable (needs assessments are normally not carried out)."

On-line survey questionnaire (Number of responses in parenthesis)

1. During 2020 and 2021, have you been involved in planning and/or implementing projects intended to benefit external stakeholders (e.g., government counterparts or civil society organizations)? (495)

- Yes (454)
- No   (41)

2. What is your gender? (448)

- Female   (238)
- Male   (198)
- Prefer not to say / Other   (12)

3. Which of the following staff categories do you belong to? (448)

- International (Contracted or Seconded)   (133)
- National (General Service or National Professional)   (306
- Other   (1)
- Prefer not to say   (8)

4. In which OSCE Dimension do you work?   (448)

- 1st Dimension   (117)
- 2nd Dimension   (44)
- 3rd Dimension   (156)
- Crossdimension   (48)
- Not Applicable (e.g., general services and central services)   (25)
- Prefer not to say   (58)

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[23] Of the initial respondents, 53,1% were women, 44,2% men, while 2,7% of the respondents answered "prefer not to say / Other."

5. In what entity do you work? (448)

- Secretariat   (39)
- ODIHR   (8)
- High Commissioner on National Minorities   (16)
- Representative on Freedom of the Media   (3)
- Mission in Kosovo   (70)
- Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina   (96)
- Mission to Serbia   (33)
- Presence in Albania   (26)
- Mission to Skopje   (50)
- Mission to Montenegro   (5)
- Mission to Moldova   (6)
- Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine   (16)
- Programme Office in Nur-Sultan   (5)
- Centre in Ashgabat   (7)
- Programme Office in Bishkek   (15)
- Project Co-ordinator in Uzbekistan   (8)
- Programme Office in Dushanbe   (33)
- Prefer not to say   (12)

6. For the projects you were involved in, to what extent did the pandemic influence the overall planning of these projects in 2020 and 2021 as compared to earlier years? (380)

- I experienced considerably fewer planning challenges   (17)
- I experienced slightly fewer planning challenges   (23)
- I experienced no tangible difference compared to earlier years   (16)
- I experienced slightly more planning challenges   (100)
- I experienced considerably more planning challenges   (220)
- Do not know / prefer not to say (4)

7. To what extent did the pandemic influence the conduct of needs assessments?? (380)

- Needs assessments were considerably less extensive than before the pandemic   (47)
- Needs assessments were slightly less extensive than before the pandemic   (58)
- The pandemic had no tangible impact on the conduct of needs assessments   (66)
- Needs assessments were slightly more extensive than before the pandemic   (83)
- Needs assessments were considerably more extensive than before the pandemic   (85)
- Do not know / prefer not to say / not applicable (needs assessments are normally not carried out)   (41)

8. For the projects you were involved in, to what extent did the pandemic influence consultations with stakeholders or beneficiaries in advance of formulating project proposals? (380)

- Considerably fewer consultations were carried out   (59
- Slightly fewer consultations were carried out   (94)
- The pandemic had no tangible impact on consultations   (71)

- Slightly more consultations were carried out   (69)
- Considerably more consultations were carried out   (75)
- Do not know / prefer not to say / not applicable (stakeholder consultations are normally not carried out)   (12)

9. For the projects you were involved in, to what extent did the pandemic influence consultations with potential co-operation partners such as NGOs and international organizations (e.g., EU, UNDP, UNODC, GIZ, etc.) in advance of formulating project proposals? (380)

- Considerably fewer consultations were carried out   (46)
- Slightly fewer consultations were carried out   (83)
- The pandemic had no tangible impact on consultations   (100)
- Slightly more consultations were carried out   (67)
- Considerably more consultations were carried out   (41)
- Do not know / prefer not to say / not applicable (consultations with potential co-operation partners are normally not carried out)   (43)

10. For the projects you were involved in, to what extent did the pandemic influence the number and/or nature of the deliverables (activities and/or outputs) foreseen in project proposals? (380)

- Considerably fewer or different deliverables were included in project proposals   (56)
- Slightly fewer or different deliverables were included in project proposals   (134)
- The pandemic had no tangible impact on the inclusion of deliverables   (47)
- Slightly more or different deliverables were included in project proposals   (76)
- Considerably more or different deliverables were included in project proposals   (53)
- Do not know / prefer not to say   (14)

11. For the projects you were involved in, to what extent did the pandemic influence how intended outcomes / objectives were formulated in project proposals? (380)

- Considerably fewer / less ambitious outcomes / objectives were included in project proposals (39)
- Slightly fewer / less ambitious outcomes / objectives were included in project proposals (136)
- The pandemic had no tangible impact on the inclusion of outcomes / objectives   (115)
- Slightly more / more ambitious outcomes / objectives were included in project proposals (45)
- Considerably more / more ambitious outcomes / objectives were included in project proposals   (16)
- Do not know / prefer not to say   (29)

12. Coherence refers to the compatibility of a project with other projects or interventions in a country, sector or institution. Internal coherence concerns the synergies and interlinkages between a project and other projects / interventions carried out by the OSCE. For the projects you were involved in, to what extent did the pandemic influence their alignment – and non-interference – with other OSCE projects in the country or region you are working in? (380)

- Internal coherence was considerably reduced   (28)

- Internal coherence was slightly reduced   (90)
- The pandemic had no tangible impact on internal coherence   (164)
- Internal coherence was slightly improved   (40)
- Internal coherence was considerably improved   (10)
- Do not know / prefer not to say   (48)

13. For the projects you were involved in, to what extent did the pandemic influence how gender was mainstreamed in project proposals? (380)

- Gender was considerably less mainstreamed in project proposals   (9)
- Gender was slightly less mainstreamed in project proposals   (41)
- The pandemic had no tangible impact on gender mainstreaming   (237)
- Gender was slightly more mainstreamed in project proposals   (46)
- Gender was considerably more mainstreamed in project proposals   (30)
- Do not know / prefer not to say / not applicable (project gender mainstreaming is normally not carried out)   (17)

14. For the projects you were involved in, to what extent did the pandemic influence the integration of other diversity considerations (age, minority, disability, etc.) in project proposals? (380)

- Other diversity considerations were considerably less integrated in project proposals   (11)
- Other diversity considerations were slightly less integrated in project proposals   (46)
- The pandemic had no tangible impact on the integration of other diversity considerations in project proposals   (234)
- Other diversity considerations were slightly more integrated in project proposals   (44)
- Other diversity considerations were considerably more integrated in project proposals   (15)
- Do not know / prefer not to say / not applicable (project integration of other diversity considerations is normally not considered)   (30)

15. For the projects you were involved in, to what extent did you experience implementation challenges in 2020 and 2021 as compared to earlier years? (373)

- I experienced considerably fewer implementation challenges   (13)
- I experienced slightly fewer implementation challenges   (25)
- I experienced no tangible difference in implementation challenges   (10)
- I experienced slightly more implementation challenges   (110)
- I experienced considerably more implementation challenges   (208)
- Do not know / prefer not to say   (7)

16. What were the main effects of the pandemic on the implementation of projects you were involved in?

	Considerably less / fewer	Slightly less / Fewer	No influence	Slightly more	Considerably more	Do not know / prefer not to say / not applicable	Total
UB project implementation in general	20	69	18	87	118	46	358
ExB project implementation in general	13	44	22	53	69	143	344
Delivery of activities in general	27	96	31	88	117	9	368
Delivery of different types of activities	32	68	25	94	137	15	371
Delivery of capacity-building activities (training, seminars, workshops, etc.)	54	71	28	76	134	8	371
Delivery of awareness raising / advocacy activities (information campaigns, etc.)	37	71	54	90	85	34	371
Delivery of outputs in general	22	88	56	102	87	16	371
Delivery of a variety of types of outputs	27	80	43	117	80	20	367
Outcomes in terms of enhanced stakeholder skills and knowledge	24	90	50	103	74	26	367

as generated by project activities							
Outcomes in terms of changed Stakeholder practices as generated by project activities	27	76	51	98	79	36	367
Gender mainstreaming	8	35	190	74	26	33	366
Integration of other diversity Considerations (age, minority, disability, etc.)	12	35	183	75	21	40	366
Project budget expenditure	40	87	56	53	108	20	364
Monitoring and evaluation of project activities, outputs and outcomes	23	70	109	87	56	22	367
Implementation delays	22	37	28	114	151	11	363
Project cancellations	9	40	80	95	88	51	363

17. For those projects where implementation of in-person capacity building activities (training, seminars, workshops, etc.) was challenging due to the pandemic, was it possible to successfully replace in-person activities with online capacity-building activities? (373)

- Yes, to a considerable extent   (95)
- Yes, to a limited extent   (212)
- No   (48)
- Not applicable (I am not working in projects delivering capacity-building) (8)
- Do not know / prefer not to say   (10)

18. In case the pandemic negatively influenced implementation of projects you were involved in, what were the main reasons?

	To no extent	To some extent	To a considerable extent	Do not know / prefer not to say / not applicable	Total
Late approval of the OSCE Unified Budget	115	129	54	68	366
Lack of regular office access due to project staff working fully or partially remotely	122	142	90	16	370
Unsatisfactory working conditions (e.g., unsatisfactory home Internet connection or home working space) due to project staff working fully or partially remotely	125	162	68	14	369
Project staff having insufficient interaction with supervisors	182	119	44	22	367
Insufficient collaboration / coordination with colleagues due to project staff working fully or partially remotely	150	140	62	18	370
Lack of access to OSCE systems and tools due to project staff working fully or partially remotely	160	143	51	16	370
Project staff having problems reaching project stakeholders	71	178	104	17	370
Project staff having problems reaching other national or international co-operation partners and/or project co-funders	114	169	57	29	369
Project staff interacting less with stakeholders due to travel and field visit restrictions	49	131	173	19	372
Project staff lacking capacities (knowledge and experience) to convert in-person capacity	132	175	38	24	369

building interventions to online interventions					
Project staff having fewer opportunities to procure various goods required to implement the project	138	148	51	30	367
Project staff having difficulties identifying / contracting Implementing Partners	162	116	32	57	367
Project staff being unable to implement activities because the OSCE did not have the technical capacity / platform / infrastructure to deliver activities remotely	191	120	29	29	369

19. For those UB and/or ExB projects where planning and/or implementation were challenging due to the pandemic, what management practices were helpful in enabling planning and/or implementation? (free-text answer)

20. For those UB and/or ExB projects where planning and/or implementation were challenging due to the pandemic, what management practices were not helpful in enabling planning and/or implementation? (free-text answer)

21. Thinking back on UB and ExB project planning and implementation during the pandemic, what would have facilitated planning and/or implementation during such a disruptive event? This may include changes to OSCE rules and practices, project extensions, project adjustments, a reduction in the scope of projects, etc. (free-text answer)

Annex IV: Analysis of Project Budget and Expenditure Data

1. In terms of the number of initiated and cancelled projects, it is not possible to discern any tangible effect of the pandemic on the OSCE. First, across the OSCE, 218 UB projects were initiated in 2020 (see red bar in Graph III below), as compared to 217 in 2019, and 211 in 2018, for a total of 1.168 projects over the period 2016-2020.[24] Second, it was found that the number of projects that were created and later cancelled is not higher in 2020 than for the two previous years. Third, Graph IV disaggregates the data at the level of Executive Structures (ES) and shows that in five ES the number of projects increased in 2020 as compared to 2019, in five ES the number remained unchanged, and in another five ES the number decreased. This is only slightly different than for 2019, when the corresponding figures are nine, two and four.

Graph III: Number of UB Projects 2016-2020

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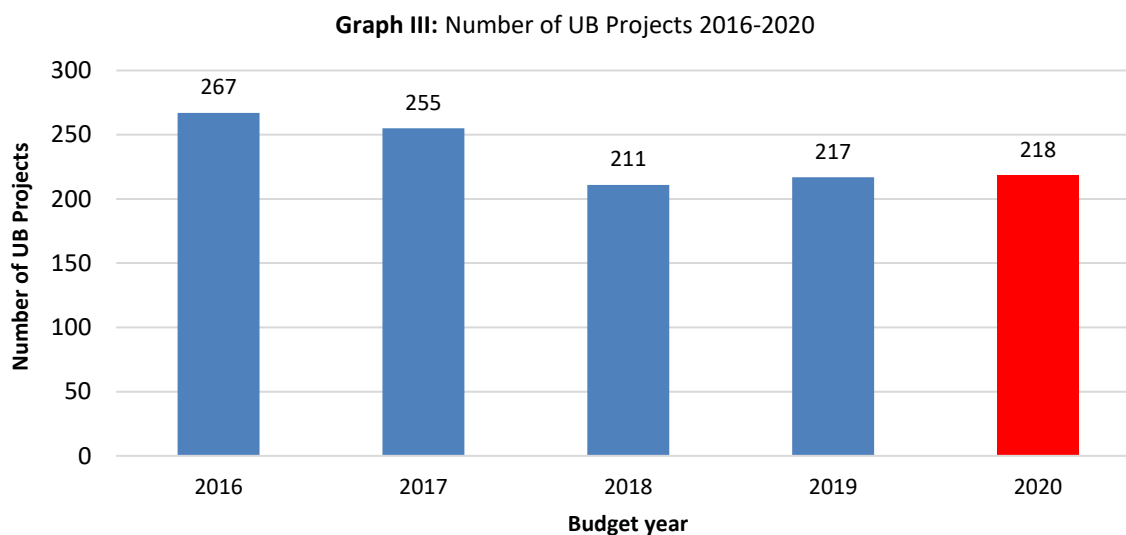
[24] The review focuses on client-facing assistance projects, i.e. projects residing in the OSCE's 1st, 2nd, 3rd or cross-dimension programs that are intended for external stakeholders (pS). This is not a review of OSCE UB expenditures in general and it does not include election observation mission projects. Project financial data is from OSCE IRMA and covers all field operations, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the High Commissioner for National Minorities (HCNM), but excludes the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM) and the OSCE Observer Mission at the Russian Checkpoints Gukovo and Donetsk, since the latter do not provide UB funded assistance projects to external stakeholders (pS). Note that a large number of OSCE UB projects do not provide assistance to external stakeholders (pS), but cover OSCE-internal expenditures, such as field operations' finance and administration units, expenditures of the OSCE Chair-Person in Office, or even expenditures related to the OSCE's annual Sylvester Ball, and they are therefore not covered by this review of project-related programmatic activities of the OSCE. Furthermore, ExB projects are for several reasons not covered by the financial analysis, although they are included in review sections that analyse findings from the staff survey. This is because ExB projects are not annual, and expenditures are not planned to be identical in every year of implementation. ExB project budget utilization is therefore an imperfect indicator of ExB project implementation challenges. Furthermore, ExB project budgets commonly reflect budgets rather than donor pledges. Thus, an ExB project budget of €250.000 with expenditures of €125.000 may appear to show budget under-utilization and thus implementation challenges, while in reality this may reflect that donor funding amounted to €125.000, and that budget utilization was thus 100%.

**Graph IV**. Number of UB Projects 2016-2020, by Year and ES
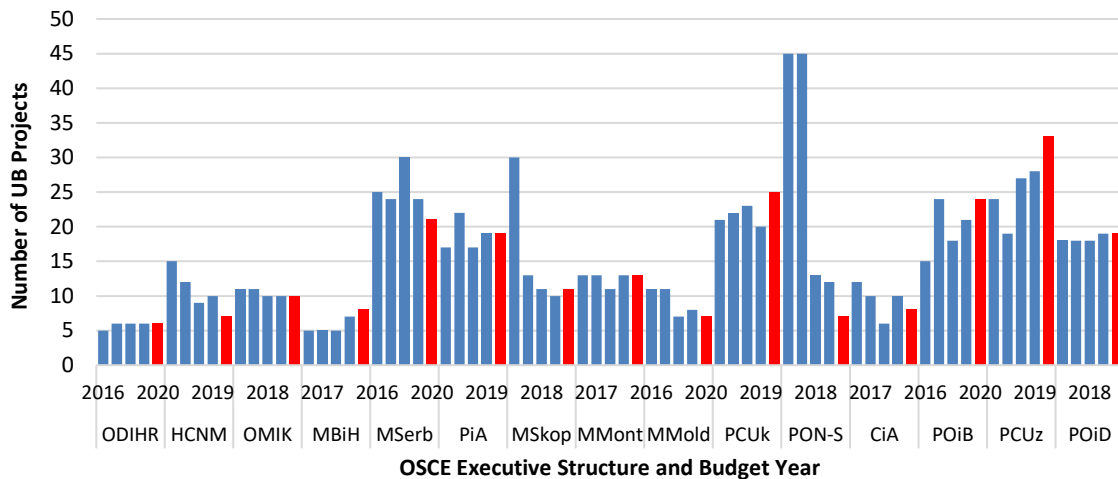
2. Another indicator of the pandemic's impact on the OSCE programmatic work is the UB project budget utilization rate: if the project utilization rates for the budget year 2020 are lower than for previous years, then there is reason to believe that the pandemic impacted the OSCE's programmatic work.

3. Admittedly, not only does the implementation of activities influence the utilization rate, but also opportunities to reduce costs by finding cheaper suppliers, inflation, etc. However, these confounding factors are assumed to be randomly distributed across projects not only during 2020 but also previous years. There are no compelling reasons to believe that projects implemented during 2020 have been systematically more - or less - exposed to such factors to an extent that it may confound the analysis in this review in any tangible way in a single direction.

4. Over the period 2016-2020, the annual aggregate project budget utilization rate was 86.8% (Graph V). The data appears to suggest a substantial effect of the pandemic on project implementation as the overall project budget utilization during 2020 was 78.5%, or substantially lower than any of the four preceding years. However, and in contrast, Graph VI which disaggregates the data by budget year and ES, does not show any clear pattern. For instance, for ten ES the utilization rate decreased in 2020, and increased for five ES. This is not significantly different from 2019, when the utilization rate increased in seven ES, or 2018 when six ES experienced an increased utilization rate.

Graph V: UB Project Budget Utilization (%) 2016-2020
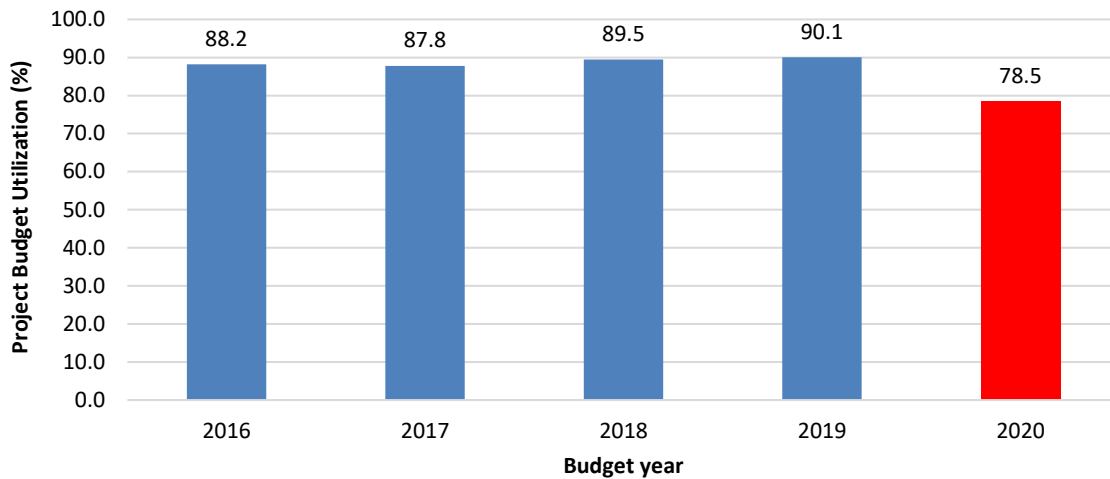
Graph VI. UB Project Budget Utilization (%) 2016-2020, by Year and ES
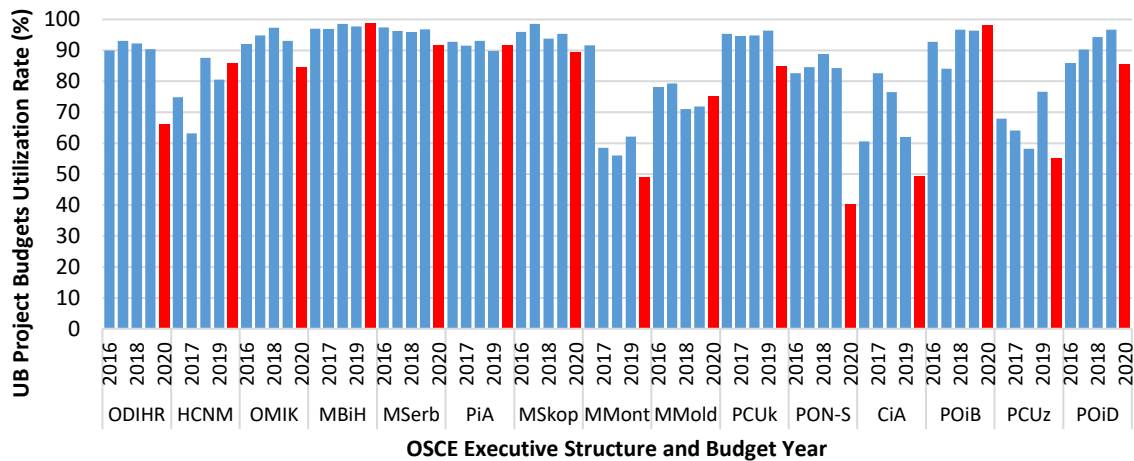
5. A more fine grained assessment was carried out through a statistical analysis of the budget utilization rate for each of the 1.168 projects (that is, 1.168 observations) instead of each ES year (that is, only 75 observations).[25] This disaggregated analysis shows that in the pandemic year of 2020 UB project budget utilization was indeed on average around 8% lower than the baseline utilization rate of 83.9%, and this difference is strongly statistically significant. However, while statistically significant, the relationship is substantially insignificant: the pandemic is virtually absent, as it can account for at most only around 2% of the variation in budget utilization across these 1.168 projects. This means

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[25] Multiple and bivariate OLS regression analysis of 1.168 projects (i.e., observations) with UB project budget utilization rate as dependent variable, the COVID-19 pandemic and project budget size as explanatory variables. Detailed statistical findings are provided in Annex V of this report.

that explanations for the remaining 98% of the variation in project level budget utilization need to be sought elsewhere, beyond the pandemic.

6. **It can thus be concluded that there is no credible financial statistical evidence that the pandemic had a tangible overall effect on the budget utilization rates of individual projects.** Nevertheless, the findings do not mean that the pandemic may not have had a severe impact on some projects. It only means that [1] those projects are in that case so few that they have hardly left any trace in the overall financial statistics, and thus that [2] the pandemic is not a useful *general tool* for explaining or understanding the OSCE's project budget utilization rates. To the extent that the pandemic is a generally influential factor on project budget utilization rates, the link is apparently more complex.

Annex V. Statistical Findings

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Notes:
      1. Unicode is supported; see help unicode_advice.

. use "D:\COVIDanalys.dta"

. regress BudgetUtilization BudgetSize Covid_19, cluster(ExecutiveStructure)
```

Linear regression

Number of obs	=	1,168
F(2, 14)	=	5.97
Prob > F	=	0.0133
R-squared	=	0.0424
Root MSE	=	19.929

(Std. Err. adjusted for 15 clusters in ExecutiveStructure)

BudgetUtil~n	Coef.	Robust Std. Err.	t	P>|t|	[95% Conf. Interval]	
BudgetSize	.0000329	.0000128	2.58	0.022	5.52e-06	.0000603
Covid_19	-8.186004	2.853935	-2.87	0.012	-14.30709	-2.064922
_cons	82.78973	3.570379	23.19	0.000	75.13203	90.44743

```
. regress BudgetUtilization Covid_19, cluster(ExecutiveStructure)
```

Linear regression

Number of obs	=	1,168
F(1, 14)	=	8.29
Prob > F	=	0.0121
R-squared	=	0.0230
Root MSE	=	20.122

(Std. Err. adjusted for 15 clusters in ExecutiveStructure)

BudgetUtil~n	Coef.	Robust Std. Err.	t	P>|t|	[95% Conf. Interval]	
Covid_19	-7.913126	2.748491	-2.88	0.012	-13.80805	-2.018199
_cons	85.4127	2.999724	28.47	0.000	78.97893	91.84647