Comunitatea Mea Trust Research
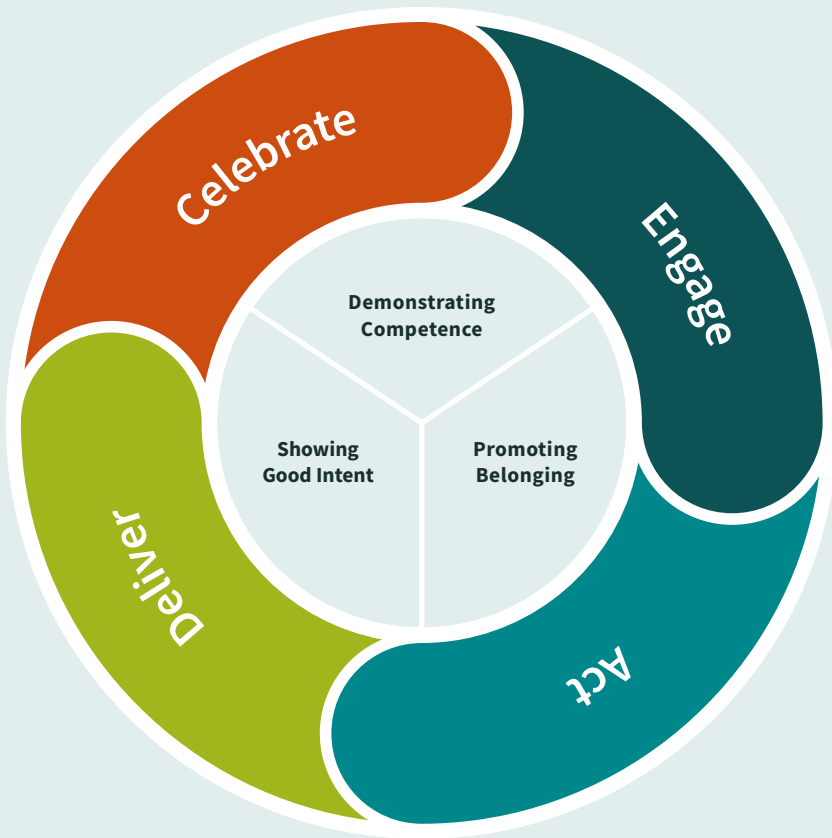
NARRATIVE REPORT

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I. Executive Summary

IREX's Center for Applied Learning and Impact (CALI), in partnership with the IREX Comunitatea Mea (CM) program, a USAID-funded program to strengthen local government in Moldova, set out to examine trust-building dynamics between local governments and citizens in Moldova in six communities where CM works. This research is the first phase of a study that seeks to establish a foundational understanding of trust and how it can strengthen governance and community development. We also aim to develop a systematized approach to evaluating trust in IREX programs.

We learned that in the Moldovan communities where CM works, trust-building can be understood as a virtuous cycle in which the local government (called the Local Public Authority, or LPA) and the community are continually engaged. The cycle is initiated when leaders engage citizens to participate in decision making, by providing opportunities for community members to articulate their thoughts and needs. In the next stage, the LPA acts and implements the decisions that were made. Next, the LPA produces concrete results such as newly paved roads, new lighting, wastewater treatment, parks and tree plantings, and kindergarten construction—all of which create a more livable community. Last, the community and the LPA celebrate the results and honor the individuals who helped to achieve them. Trust is built throughout the cycle, and the completion of a cycle feeds stronger trust and thus more cycles.

This virtuous cycle, we learned, is cultivated by three interlocking strategies:

Celebrate

Engage

Deliver

Act

Demonstrating Competence

Showing Good Intent

Promoting Belonging

1 **Demonstrating Competence:** leaders and institutions show their capacity to reliably respond to and proactivity anticipate the needs of their constituents.

2 **Promoting Belonging:** leaders and institutions foster a shared sense of identity to encourage unity, engage in bridge-building, and establish relationships that encourage trust.

3 **Showing Good Intent:** leaders and institutions demonstrate what motivates their actions and communicate those intentions.

This report also highlights potential threats to trust building, including leadership succession challenges and broader political dynamics, residual apathy in the population, and staggering emigration levels.

We end by offering four recommendations to build on what we learned to strengthen approaches to building public trust:

Adopt standard measures to evaluate trust levels between communities and their governments within and across governance programming.

Continually validate public trust-building strategies with evidence so that stakeholders share an understanding of trust levels and trends over time.

Expand research to include a wide diversity of contexts to expand our understanding of trust-building strategies, and identify which strategies are culture-specific and which are more universal.

Create a trust-building tool with indicators (the key strategies) that can support the trust-building efforts of IREX and beyond.

II. Introduction

In August 2023, IREX's Center for Applied Learning and Impact (CALI) partnered with IREX program Comunitatea Mea (CM), an eight-year, USAID funded program to strengthen local government in Moldova to become more effective, transparent, and accountable to citizens. Together, CALI and CM launched a study to understand how trust has been built between government and citizens in CM partner communities. This study is part of IREX's Trust Initiative, which aims to understand how programs cultivate social and public trust and seeks to improve trust building measurements and approaches within IREX's programs, so that IREX can catalyze public and social trust in public and civic institutions, within communities, and between and among people.

This report is meant to provide an expanded understanding of trust-building for IREX, CM, USAID local governance programming, and the broader global development field.
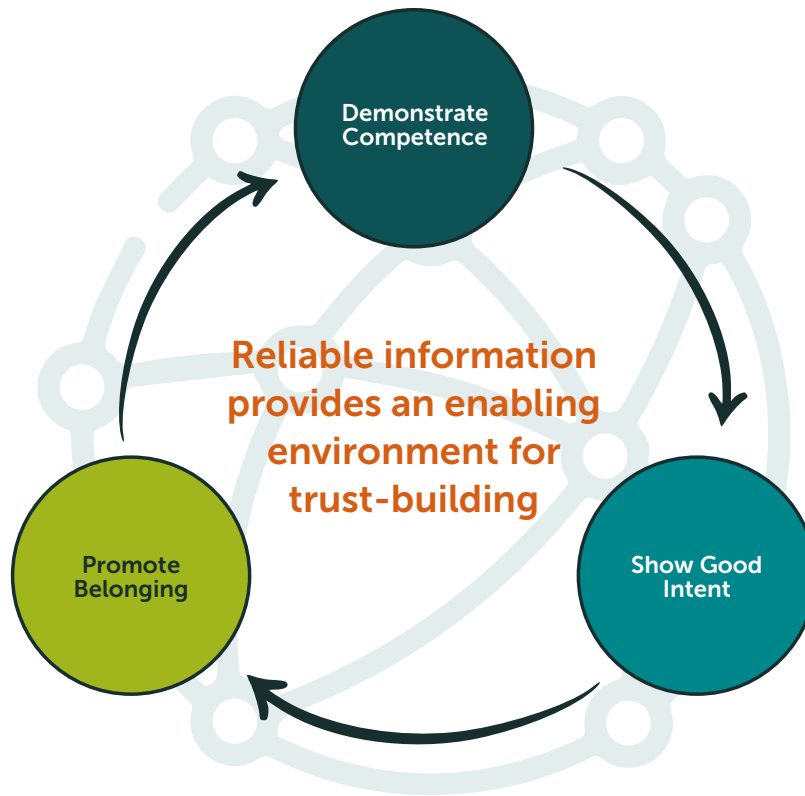
III. Background: Defining Trust

Figure 1. IREX's trust framework

Trust is considered a vital component in programming that strengthens the impact of all other work, rather than a goal in and of itself. IREX's working definition of trust is *the belief in the honesty, integrity, and reliability of others*.

IREX created a framework to structure our thinking about trust based on an extensive literature review and interviews with staff from 13 IREX programs around the globe.[1] This framework focuses on trust building for leaders and institutions and includes three core building blocks: **demonstrating competence, showing good intent**, and **promoting belonging**. Taken together, these building blocks can contribute

to trust-building when they are operationalized within an enabling environment of reliable information. These building blocks are mutually reinforcing and necessary for trust-building to be effective. When leaders and institutions demonstrate competence, they show their capacity to reliably respond to and proactively anticipate the needs of their constituents. When leaders and institutions show good intent, they demonstrate what motivates their actions and communicate those intentions. When leaders and institutions promote belonging, they foster a shared sense of identity to encourage unity, engage in bridge building, and establish relationships that encourage trust. This framework guided this qualitative study.

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1. See *Cultivating Community: A Framework for Building Trust in Leaders and Institutions* on the IREX website: https://www.irex.org/resource/cultivating-community-framework-building-trust-leaders-and-institutions.

IV. Research Methods

The goal of this qualitative research was to identify actions that Local Public Authorities (LPAs)[2] in Moldova take to improve public trust by demonstrating competence, showing good intent, and promoting belonging within their communities. We wanted to understand what these abstract concepts look like on the ground, in action, as processes of building trust. We also aimed to identify the outcomes of such trust building. It is important to note that while this framework guided our research design, our approach to the research was open to potentially discovering other insights outside of this framework. The research is based on 31 interviews and three focus groups across six communities in Moldova where CM works. More details on the participants, data collection, and analysis can be found in Annex 1.

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2.   The Local Public Authority (LPA) is the unit of local government in Moldovan towns and villages. We interviewed mayors and other LPA staff (especially secretaries) for this research.

V. Research Findings
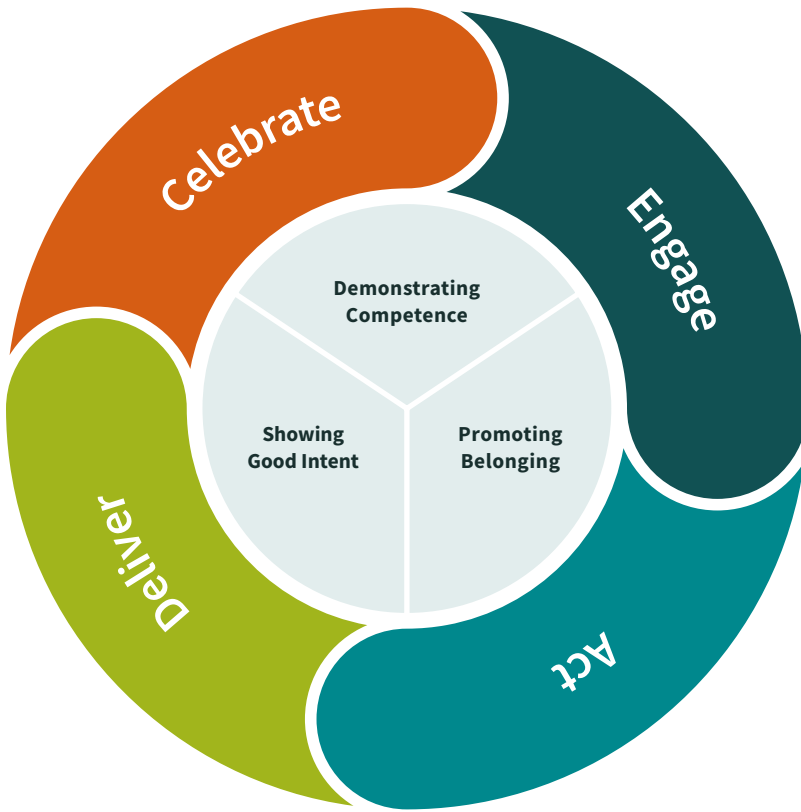
1. A Virtuous Cycle of Trust Building

Figure 2. The Virtuous Cycle of Public Trust Building

IREX's analysis of the qualitative data identified a four-phase cycle of the process and outcomes of trust building in the communities where CM works, as well as actions associated with each of the three building blocks (competence, good intent, belonging) that are employed throughout the cycle. This graphic illustrates a snapshot of this cyclical process. Both the LPA and the community are engaged throughout this cycle. Trust emerges as a result of these interactions and depends on

ongoing dynamic engagement, rather than as a result of what any one actor does. The cycle is initiated when leaders engage citizens to participate in decision-making, **showing good intent and promoting belonging** by providing opportunities for community members to articulate thoughts and needs through a variety of modes and activities. In the next stage, the leaders act—and implement the decision, **demonstrating competence and good intent**.

Next, the local government produces concrete results. The clearest way that LPAs **demonstrate competence** to residents is to yield good-quality concrete results of a project aligned with the community's input. In all communities, interviewees mentioned newly paved roads, new lighting, wastewater treatment facilities, parks and tree plantings, and kindergarten construction, among other results that create a more livable and viable community. These not only **demonstrate the competence** of the LPA but also show how collaborative efforts, often involving residents, can work to improve the community. The physical and observable changes spur residents to have pride in their village and a **sense of belonging**. They have communally overcome a challenge together and accomplished something meaningful.

The community and the LPA respond by celebrating the results as well as the individuals who helped achieve those results. Trust is built throughout, but the celebration is a high point—it creates pride in the accomplishment, and a **sense of unity and belonging**.

Having gone through the cycle where they are engaged, listened to, able to experience concrete outcomes that improve the community, and are (at times) recognized for their effort, community members become more open to getting engaged in community activities and decision-making processes again.

Thinking about local government work in terms of this virtuous cycle offers a different perspective on a central component of local governance: "service delivery." Service delivery is important (critical government services keep communities alive and flourishing), but as a concept, it is transactional and limited.

This cycle results in trusting relationships that power the engine of positive community change and generate more trust. The process itself gets stronger with every cycle, the way that exercise strengthens a muscle. Individuals are more likely to feel trust and to expect trust with each successive cycle. The process yields incremental change and each time it happens, it strengthens the trust "muscle."

2.   Three Mutually Reinforcing Building Blocks to Build Trust

We identified actions that local government and leaders in Moldova are taking to build trust throughout the cycle that are aligned with each of the building blocks(a) demonstrating competence, (b) showing good intent, and (c) promoting belonging. The following sections cover each building block, followed by a case study that describes what we observed in a specific community.

A. Demonstrating Competence

Achieving concrete results that citizens value is the clearest way that LPAs can demonstrate competence according to interviewees. This includes the everyday improvements in roads, bridges, schools, and the strategic achievements like planning and allocating and sustaining funding. In all communities, interviewees mentioned newly paved roads, new lighting, wastewater treatment, parks and tree plantings, and kindergarten construction, among other results that create a more livable and viable community. These examples demonstrate how residents experienced the competence of the LPA to deliver tangible results. Further, it shows how involving residents in delivering practical solutions can work to improve the community. The physical and observable changes give a reason for residents to have pride in their village. They have communally overcome a challenge together and accomplished something meaningful.

Interviewees explained how the results mattered because the community had come together around a shared challenge and community members were involved in the process. For example, attending budget hearings, town halls, and participating -n committees, residents contributed to the result that the whole community could see, touch, or experience. This also incentivized government

"Now we are addressing infrastructure needs ... that must be first. Our ultimate goals will include healthcare. People's needs should be addressed in a systematic way once the basic needs are met."

RESIDENT, STRASENI

"A lot has changed. when you go for a walk through the village in the evening, you feel like you are in a small town—people come home from work in the evening and are not afraid of dogs [that had been loose on the street before a street lighting installation project, co-funded by the LPA and the CM project and implemented in partnership with the community]—it's the same in the morning—the streets are lighted, it's very good."

RESIDENT OF BILICENII VECHI

leaders to clearly communicate how they were delivering results. As one resident mentioned in his interview, "Sometimes you must go out to people in the street and explain in simpler words why the project is important because not everyone knows the political terms, they are kind of speaking different languages. Ultimately, to gain the confidence of a town, you must go to everyone's door and explain what has been done."

"We did not elect the mayor to sit in the town hall, we elected the mayor to be a public servant, the face of the village and to serve us."

COUNCIL MEMBER, URSOAIA

Case Study 1: Ursoaia

The mayor of this village is a highly visible public servant who values community satisfaction and visible accountability. As a member of the LPA explained, "She holds many meetings in the village, goes out in the field, and if a problem arises, she solves the problem together with the community."

One example of this approach was how the mayor, supported by CM, engaged the community in a recent public project. Historically, Ursoaia has experienced chronic flooding. The LPA authorized funds to build a footbridge across a stream that often overflowed during storms. When the project was completed, the mayor invited residents to look at the work, and then asked them to give her permission to sign the acceptance certificate for the work performed by the contractor. Afterwards, some residents from the neighborhood set up a table and asked the mayor to stay for a celebratory meal, and each person came offering two or three dishes to share. An LPA staff member recounted, "We were [pleasantly] shocked because we came as the commission to check and accept the work—and that was their way to say thank you."

MOLDOVA

Chisinau

Ursoaia

B. Showing Good Intent

The communities we spoke with in Moldova described how leaders can show good intent—be empathetic, listen, and use authority for the good of the community. Leaders' actions, according to residents, can demonstrate that they are authentically invested in benefiting the community rather than doing it only for recognition, social prestige, or material wealth. Collaboration is a key modality for how leaders that show good intent operate. They have a community-first vision, are accessible, and communicate transparently, allowing people to observe that they are primarily motivated to help the community flourish. For example, they are transparent in their communication—regularly walking around the community and talking with their constituents, they have an "open-door policy," and they create multiple opportunities to listen to the community (see Section 2C, "Promoting Belonging").

explained how she began to streamline and ensure the fairness of public procurement processes and to engage the community in participatory budgeting. The mayor was showing good intent through this ongoing collaborative work so that residents could see how official decisions were influenced by her motives to benefit the community. Interview respondents' descriptions of the LPA-community relationships emphasized that showing good intent is an active and intentional process.

"We have a good mayor with a big heart who discusses all issues personally with each community member and enjoys respect of the entire community; she does not put on airs; she is very down-to-earth."

OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE MEMBER, URSOAIA

In one community, as part of the work of CM, a group of local government representatives made house-to-house visits to talk with residents about issues that needed to be addressed. They then went to the town hall and told the community about the problems that were ranked high on the list. With the support of CM, the mayor of a different community

"[We reach out to residents] through various communication methods; for example, every day after working hours we have a meeting in the street … every day."

LPA STAFF, STRASENI

"I have learned to listen to people, to explain, to be more loyal to them. Interaction with people makes you more disciplined, mobilizes you."

LPA SECRETARY, STRASENI

Case Study 2: Slobozia Dusca

The village leadership of Slobozia Dusca shows good intent by organizing public consultations to select the issues for the agenda of local council meetings. People can ask any questions at public consultations, not only on topics directly connected with the agenda of the meeting. The LPA ensures that all its issues and actions have high visibility on social media, and all decisions made by the LPA are posted on the village website.

The LPA's close partnership with the secondary school is another example of how it shows good intent. One resident, a teacher who is also a city council member, organized a public café at the secondary school to engage students and representatives of the mayor's office in dialogue. Before the meeting, the students conducted a survey and identified community problems to raise in the face-to-face discussion with the mayor. The students identified roads that were not walkable, and the mayor assured them that he would raise the issue of repairing them with the local council—and those roads were repaired. Ensuring the roads were repaired also supports demonstrating competence.

MOLDOVA

Slobozia Dusca

Chisinau

C. Promoting Belonging

Activities mentioned in the interviews illustrate how leaders engage with the community to promote a sense of belonging. They include in-person consultations, live-streaming town council meetings, Facebook and other social media postings, Viber chats, voice memos, surveys of the residents on a range of topics, roundtables, acknowledging volunteers and participants with incentives and thank-you certificates, walking around town, and visiting construction sites. They also participate in community events such as flower plantings and cultural events. Mayors often walk around town and interact with residents, which the research team witnessed firsthand. In several interviews with mayors, they arrived at town hall for the meeting and then returned to engaging with the community after the interview concluded. Most of the activities that interviewees highlighted as evidence of leaders promoting belonging appear to be innovations that CM introduced, including the door-to-door visits conducted by mayors, open budget hearings, and "Meet the Mayor" sessions held in libraries within partner communities. The number and diversity of these modes of communication and personal, human interaction reveal an authentic and robust effort to include as many community members from as broad a background as possible.

This communication and engagement promotes a sense of belonging and builds trust between local government and its citizens, according to interview respondents. This type of communication and engagement increases the reach and accessibility of community development information, ensures that decisions that impact the community are made collaboratively, and builds deep connections between the LPA and members of the community. Our analysis suggests that this is a major driver of citizen participation, and it increases residents' feeling of being welcomed and purposefully included, as well as a sense that their voices are encouraged and heard.

"Every citizen is the boss."

MAYOR

"You should not distinguish between the town hall and the community. The entire community is the town hall, we work for the people. We take opinions of the community into account. Not only me and the mayor make decisions, we also consult with the people."

LPA MEMBER, SLOBOZIA DUSCA

"I live on the outskirts of the village; my house is about 800 meters away from the town hall, and when I go to work, people say hello to me and ask me how I am and how things are at my home—and I am charged with good energy on the way from and to home. I mean that people feel they matter, because the LPA takes their needs into account, and we put the village, the community, and the people in the foreground—we provide services as well as psychological, physical, and financial assistance."

LPA SECRETARY, STRASENI

Case Study 3: Bilicenii Vechi

In Bilicenii Vechi, residents reported strong personal relationships with LPA staff that foster a sense of connection and shared identity. These relationships fortify residents' sense of belonging in their community. Residents who participated in the research said that they felt as though they were "an equal partner" with the LPA. The village places a lot of emphasis on participation and community engagement. Residents described feeling invested and accountable for improving their community's infrastructure. They are willing to put their own time and money into improving it. The data conveys a sense that the community and the LPA work as a team. In other words, because community members have built strong relationships with one another and with the LPA that create a sense of belonging, they are more willing and able to work together to solve community problems.

Bilicenii Vechi

MOLDOVA

Chisinau
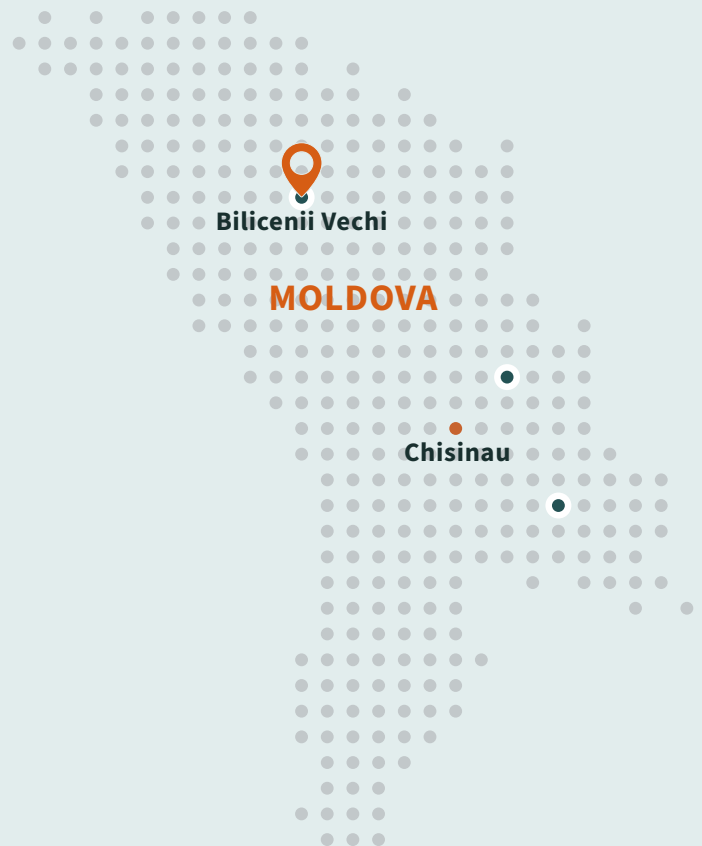
In recent public projects, residents raised funds in conjunction with contributions from the LPA. Many of the residents volunteered their labor. The residents organized to raise money for street lighting—a project co-funded and supported through CM—and then to have a water line built. The same thing occurred with a gas line project. Before construction, residents had to haul gas on their own. After the gas line was connected, the roads were in very bad condition so the community organized to contribute funds for road repair. The community also lacked a playground, and in partnership with the LPA, one was built. As one community member stated, "They listen to us in the decision-making process—we gather in the town hall and issues are put to our vote—practically everyone votes for what people need—and they ask everyone if we agree—everything is put to our vote."

Belonging is further strengthened by celebration events organized by the mayor and LPA; in one example, the LPA held a concert, and honorary certificates and gifts were given out to all community members. As one resident explained, "The people really enjoy it, because even though it is a very small sign of appreciation, people feel that they are important for the village. Even though it is a small sign of attention, people still feel good." While celebrations don't occur for every project, when they do, they are powerful occasions. Celebrating and expressing public appreciation of residents' participation strengthens residents' relationships with the LPA and a sense of belonging, and motivates residents to continue to engage; thus, the cycle keeps moving and developing.

3.   Threats to Trust Building

The research demonstrated a snapshot of a process and some actions that can build and maintain trust; nonetheless, there are threats to trust building worth noting.

Uncertainty of Future Trustworthy Leaders

While LPA leadership in this study provides a model for best practices that includes all three building blocks the data suggest that there is a risk that the next generation of leadership could slip back into previous styles of leadership, which often included rampant corruption and nepotism, and a a reduced sense of trust between community members and their government. In a few interviews, residents raised this as an issue or worried about the lack of a leadership pipeline. While this was not the majority opinion, it is worth considering.

Larger Political Issues

In some cases, the political situation beyond a particular village may create unfair advantages for some villages and stymie progress for others. Among those interviewed, they described a lack of visibility into national-level decision-making processes, which can create an atmosphere of mistrust. For example, a mayor developed a project proposal together with her community and was awarded funds (from the government of Moldova) to aid in the construction of a community center. The LPA was to receive a certificate confirming the project award, but at the last minute the village was removed from the tender, and the project was given to a neighboring village because of its political affiliation. This had a chilling effect on the mayor's team, and one staff member mentioned that she would no longer work on a proposal because of the lack of transparency of decision-making and politically influenced development decisions.

Lack of Participation

Not all community members will participate in community development.[4] Engaged residents in this study mentioned that it was hard to get some other residents to participate in civic activities. The pessimistic attitudes they described may be inherited from the legacy of Soviet state paternalism, wherein people expected governments to take care of them, witnessed state leaders typically acting in self-interest and were endowed with little decision-making power or voice in the process. These experiences may have generated suspicion and lack of trust in institutions and provided little incentive for residents to act in the community's interests. Changing this mindset to a new paradigm may take More time.

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4.   One data source on volunteering, for example, found that that 15% of a community does 50% of the volunteer work. James McBryan, *Guess What Percent of Volunteers do most of the Volunteering* (2001), Track It Forward, https://www.trackitforward.com/content/guess-what-percent-volunteers-do-most-volunteering.

Insufficient Sustainable Employment Opportunities and Emigration

The need for sustainable employment drives young residents to emigrate to other cities and, indeed, other parts of the world. Emigration numbers for Moldova are staggering; the most recent numbers from the UN Population statistics were 462,866 in 2022, which the World Bank calculates to be 48% of the working-age population.[5] Most residents we spoke with, unsurprisingly, want a better, more prosperous, and more developed country. Despite engaging with the virtuous cycle and trust-building strategies, trust can still be eroded by demographic trends if many community members leave. Having a strong vision for the future and creating projects that enhance the quality of life might help to keep young people from emigrating, residents argued. For example, parks, good lighting, good roads, and a cultural center all create a more livable environment. These civic construction projects also have the potential to generate jobs and drive economic growth, for example, through tourism. Youth, especially, need employment to remain in their home villages. While this a challenging problem that Moldova has been wrangling with for some time and is unlikely to have a single solution, community development projects could provide one part of a broader systemic solution.

5.   See *Net Migration—Moldova* (2022), World Bank, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SM.POP.NETM?locations=MD.

4.   Recommendations for Further Understanding

Our research suggests several activities that may provide a more complete understanding of trust building.

Adopt standard measures to evaluate trust levels between communities and their governments within and across governance programming. Our research suggests that trust-building is a key ingredient for successful governance programming at the local level, and yet few global development funding agencies fund or require programs to collect and analyze data regarding trust building.

Validate trust-building building blocks and associated actions using mixed-methods approaches that employ both quantitative and qualitative methods. Specifically, quantitative measures of trust levels should be consistently used in programing with public administrations so that policymakers, leaders, and community members have a shared understanding of trust levels and trends over time.

Expand research to include locations with very different histories, cultures, and norms to validate the extent to which the strategies identified are relevant across contexts and to expand the menu of trust-building strategies.

Create a tool or barometer of trust building with indicators and provide training and/or disseminate to a larger audience.

Acknowledgments

About IREX

IREX works with partners in more than 100 countries in four areas essential to progress: empowering youth, cultivating leaders, strengthening institutions, and extending access to quality education and information. Our work includes reducing corruption, stopping disinformation, and building social trust. IREX's Center for Applied Learning and Impact (CALI), leads the Trust Initiative. CALI's mission is to apply research and learning to unlock solutions that impact people's lives and advance development outcomes.

About Comunitatea Mea

Comunitatea Mea (CM) is an USAID-funded program based in Moldova that aims to strengthen local government to become more effective, transparent, and accountable to citizens. This program aims to build local government capacity to meet citizens' needs. CM works to increase the capacity of local authorities, including their ability to work inclusively with citizens and civil society, and to strengthen checks and balances between the central and local governments and to improve the lives of the communities in which they work. CM accomplishes these goals by meaningfully engaging citizens in local governance; advancing decentralization policy reforms; and increasing locally owned revenues and improving financial management practices.

**Comunitatea Mea Trust
Research**
Narrative Report

IREX