



Citizens Request Transparent Local Government

The community of Vârșag in Romania faced a persistent problem - local governments had no coherent or consistent approach to involving citizens in the decision-making process, regardless of the number of existing regulations requiring them to share information. This reality, combined with an overall lack of transparency of public administration activity, weakened citizens' trust in local government spending. The importance of consulting citizens to support spending on street rehabilitation prompted local authorities to organize a public campaign.

USAID brought counties together to identify community-wide problems and goals. With USAID help, the Vârșag local governments developed a transparent budgeting process and implemented a presentation that encouraged citizen involvement in the decision-making process. Local authorities organized a public hearing which was the first time city hall representatives met with citizens to inform them about the budget.

Approximately 117 citizens living in the village of Vârșag attended the meeting to participate in a dialogue with the local government on public services, social assistance, budget revenues, expenditures, and potential budget cuts. After the budget was approved, Mayor Tamas Ernő informed the citizens of Vârșag about its final provisions, including the infrastructure-related proposals made by the citizens who participated in the previous public hearing.



Photo: GRASP

Citizens in the village of Vârșag continue debating the local budget after the public meeting ended.

USAID is strengthening local public administration and democratic governance in Romania through a program designed to strengthen local government's technical and financial capacity, spur local economic development, and promote public-private partnerships to improve the efficiency and quality of public services. Having learned the transparency lesson, the local authorities organized a second round of public discussions resulting in six meetings organized in every village of Vârșag, with 100-200 citizens attending each meeting.

The success of the budget transparency campaign among citizens was resounding. Consequently, the Mayor committed to ensuring the budget meeting would be an annual event. Additionally, the citizens of Vârșag were so impressed with the commitment of the local government that they discussed the event during daily interaction with citizens from surrounding villages. This put pressure on representatives from the surrounding villages to learn about public hearings - ultimately securing promises that such campaigns would be organized in their communities - and that the elected officials would be more transparent in their daily activities.

“Citizens went to their city halls and asked their elected officials - Why isn't our local government as transparent? Why doesn't our city hall organize these kind of events, informing and involving us in the decision making process?”

-Mayor Tamas Ernő

As a result of the local governments in Vârșag expressing interest in holding public hearings on budget-related issues, Mayor Ernő decided to replicate the transparent budget concept, and apply lessons learned at a future meeting of the Association of the Eleven Communities. By providing citizens with the opportunity to help determine how their money should be spent on public projects, a more democratic and participatory process was possible. Ultimately, the efforts made by the local governments will yield an increase in the percent of program budgets spent on services identified by citizens.

Success Story

