

**Study on results and impact of implementation of Local Economic Development Plans in Belarus in 2019-2020**

September 2020

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**Introduction**

The overall objective of the Mayors for Economic Growth (M4EG) EU Initiative is to support local authorities (LAs) in becoming active facilitators for economic growth and job creation. The main objectives of the Initiative are to encourage and support local authorities of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries in design and implementation of Local Economic Development Plans (LEDPs) and to develop technical skills and capacity of local authorities in LEDPs implementation in line with good governance principles.

By the decision of the Secretariat of the M4EG Initiative, which is being implemented in the EaP countries, interviews were conducted with Local Economic Development Officers (LEDOs) appointed by the Executive Committees of the signatory districts in Belarus for interaction with the Initiative. The representatives of the districts which joined the Initiative at the first and second stages and developed and started implementing the LEDPs of their municipalities, were interviewed.

The study in Belarus was aimed at getting general aggregated information from the M4EG signatories allowing to gain a deeper understanding of the results and the impact of the LEDPs implementation on facilitation of local economic growth and job creation.

The survey was conducted by the independent M4EG expert through live phone conversations with the LEDOs of each municipality / district participating in the Initiative. The survey was conducted in Russian based on the following documents:

* Local Economic Development Plans of the districts, including action plans and tables of monitoring indicators;
* individual LEDP implementation reports as of July 2020.

The answers to the questions that were offered to respondents reflected the views of Local Economic Development Officers in two main areas:

a) outcomes and results of participation in the M4EG Initiative;

b) general outcomes and specific results of the LEDP implementation process. The list of questions of the survey is provided in Annex 1.

The study was conducted in the period between July 22, 2020 and August 09, 2020. The list of the interviewed representatives of local authorities is provided in Annex 2.

The respondents were the representatives of Executive Committees of the signatory districts. Among them, 55% were heads (deputy heads) of economic departments, 36% – deputies (first deputies) of the Chairmen of the District Executive Committees, 5% – Chairmen of the Councils of Deputies, and 5% – chief specialists of economic departments. There were 22 respondents interviewed in total.

In general, the LAs representatives were positive about communication and answered the questions in detail. The average survey duration was about 50 minutes.

A short report (1-2 pages long) was prepared for each district and did not correlate with the individual reports on the LEDPs implementation provided by the Initiative members. It complemented them and reflected the personal opinion of respondents on the participation in the M4EG Initiative and on the LEDPs implementation.

Main challenges that were noted during the survey were as follows:

* personnel changes that took place during the period of participation in the Project which sometimes caused difficulties in the LEDPs implementation in terms of individual activities (for example, in Slavgorod district, three Chairmen of the District Executive Committee changed during the Project implementation);
* workload of some respondents at their main place of work, which required conducting a survey in several stages;
* restrictions on offline activities due to COVID-19 travel restrictions.

Thanks to the survey, the signatories (survey respondents) were able to determine:

a) what results have been achieved;

b) what are the main benefits of developing and implementing LEDPs;

c) what are the biggest challenges (problems) in implementing LEDPs;

d) what are the takeaways from the experience at this stage of implementation of LEDPs and what further directions can be determined for the development of districts and their participation in the Initiative in future.

# 1. General outcomes and results of participation in the M4EG Initiative

The part of the survey "General outcomes and results of participation in the M4EG Initiative" summarized information about participation in the Initiative and identified the most effective tools used by LEDOs in the development and implementation of LEDPs. There are a number of areas in which the survey was conducted:

* changing the perception of the level of influence of LAs and self-government on stimulating the economic growth of the territory through the dialogue with the business community and civil society;
* use of the foreign experience and the experience of implementing similar activities by LAs of the EU and the M4EG member states through implementing the most effective planning tools;
* establishing partnerships with both the Initiative members and foreign colleagues, experts, and trainers in order to improve the quality of the LEDPs development and implementation to stimulate the economic growth of the territories.

The part "General outcomes and results of participation in the M4EG Initiative" of the survey revealed the following.

1.1. Has being an M4EG member changed your perception of what and how local authorities can do in order to stimulate local economic growth?

The vast majority of respondents indicated that participation in the Initiative has changed their perception of the role that local authorities should play in promoting economic growth. Only one respondent indicated that the perception has not changed much (Korma district – 5%), two districts (Zelva and Krasnopolye districts – 9%) indicated that the perception has changed slightly, all other 19 districts (86.3% of the total number of respondents) noted a significant change in perception due to participation in the Initiative. The majority of respondents believe that LAs can have a significant impact on economic growth with the help of the spatial planning tools.

Olga Sudilovskaya, LEDO, Mstislavl district said: *"Yes, the perception has changed. People began to show initiative, which is very important, and they became more interested in starting and doing business. We have to go through all the stages of registration together with them. The local authorities are also focused on a constructive dialogue and consideration of various situations from the perspective of business and its interests."*

1.2. Has the participation in the M4EG Initiative influenced the state of the public-private dialogue and interaction with civil society in your municipality? How? Have you built any new local partnerships?

The local authorities play the role of a catalyst for economic growth by establishing the dialogue between the business community and civil society aimed at stimulating local development, identifying competitive advantages of the territory, creating new productions and jobs, and improving the level and quality of life of the local population.

In 64% (14) of the surveyed districts, the dialogue with the business structures and civil society is being intensified. The private business representatives actively participated in the LEDPs development. As of late, government bodies have not opposed business, the dialogue has been established, and there is an understanding that the opinion of the business community also plays a key role in the development of strategic documents for the development of the district. Many LAs and self-government representatives are trying to change the public consciousness by attracting citizens to participation in various initiatives and projects, development of various documents and strategies for sustainable development of their districts until 2035. The purpose of their attraction is to jointly identify problem areas and potential directions for the development of territories taking into account the need to support private business. 32% of respondents (7 districts) considered the dialogue to be well-established. It is considered to contribute to the development of the Initiative in Belarus, which was confirmed by the constructive participation of the business community in the LEDPs implementation. There is no activity on the part of the business community in Zelva district, but there is an active dialogue with civil society. In vast majority of districts, partnership at the local level is successfully developing – various Public councils (for entrepreneurship, tourism, etc.) are in place and actively working for local economic development. There are business support centers, business incubators (for example, in Bereza district), and a number of other organizations that contribute to the establishment of the public-private dialogue. As a rule, cooperation is expressed in the development and implementation of joint projects, mainly in infrastructure and social spheres. In some districts, the problem of passive position and formalism in work of local Councils of Deputies was noted.

Alesia Karnachova, LEDO, Polotsk district noted: *"We have the Council for Entrepreneurship Development which is an active organization really participating in the dialogue with the authorities. It includes about 25 representatives. Interaction is also carried out through the Center of support of Entrepreneurship and small business incubator. Many thanks to the Mayors for Economic Growth Initiative which greatly helped in facilitating the public-private dialogue. The LEDP development team involved the representatives of the business community, banking sector and proactive citizens."*

Alexey Malashenko, LEDO, Bykhov district noted: *"Civil society has joined the implementation of the Plan. At the end of the last year, the Council for Entrepreneurship Development started operating. Before that, the Public Council had been in place. There is an active dialogue in place: we discuss all the issues and take into account the opinion of the main district development stakeholders. We have a well-developed plan and an established dialogue thanks to participation in the Initiative."*

There are examples of successful partnerships between LAs, the business community and civil society established for the implementation of M4EG pioneer projects: in Bragin district, the agribusiness-incubator is an example of interaction between LAs, civil society represented by the Fund of support of entrepreneurship and rural development "Eco-Innovation", and the agricultural businesses; in Glubokoye district, the Center for Support and Promotion of Entrepreneurship and Innovation is an example of partnership between the Vitebsk State University named after P.M. Masherov, the Glubokoye District Executive Committee, the Glubokoye District Council of Deputies, and the Local Foundation "Center for promoting social and economic development of the Latvian-Lithuanian-Belarusian territories the Lake Region"; in Slavgorod district, the project "BRIDGE as the Pilot Eco-Business Model for Local and Regional Economic Growth" is an example of partnership between the Slavgorod District Executive Committee and the International Foundation for Rural Development (IFRD).

The search for new areas of interaction between the LAs in Grodno Oblast (Zelva, Shchuchin and Slonim districts) is actively underway. Currently, the partnership of 5 districts of Mogilev Oblast (Bykhov, Klichev, Krasnopolye, Cherikov, and Slavgorod districts) is successfully functioning. They have developed the regional cooperation plan in order to combine the potential and efforts of partner districts in the development and implementation of joint projects (initiatives) aimed at improving sustainability of their territories. Today, the partnership is actively involved in submitting applications for calls for interest and grant funding. Networking on the eco-entrepreneurship development in the Sporovsky nature reserve between Bereza, Drogichin, and Ivanovo districts of Brest Oblast is also being established.

1.3. Has the participation in the M4EG Initiative influenced the capacity of the municipal staff to analyze local economic development issues and plan respective activities? How?

According to all respondents, Participation in the Initiative had a positive impact on the competence of the LAs officials in analyzing the economic development of the territories and identifying their weaknesses and growth points, determining the prospects and vision of their future, and clearly setting objectives based on building a hierarchy of objectives and corresponding activities. The main burden of the LEDPs implementation is borne by the LEDOs appointed by the Chairmen of the District Executive Committees as part of the participation in the Initiative. Their functions include developing the LEDP, collecting information, supporting its implementation and interacting with stakeholders, analyzing and monitoring the implementation of the Plan, etc.

All respondents noted a high workload within their direct duties and considered participation in the implementation of the LEDPs an additional burden. In some cases, there was no initiative on the part of the LAs staff in the LEDPs implementation without putting their functions on paper. This indicates a lack of readiness of local civil servants to take the initiative and learn new approaches and tools of territorial administration.

At the moment, as the survey reveals, most districts are not interested in additional analysis and adjustment of the LEDPs. Thus, 55% of respondents (12 districts) said that they are ready to perform work on the LEDPs only within their working hours. However, the remaining 45% of respondents (10 districts) stated that they are interested in continuing work on the LEDPs despite the additional workload.

However, in a number of districts there was a gradual increase in the involvement and interest of civil servants in the LEDPs implementation (Slavgorod and Vetka districts). Positive examples include the experience of Bykhov district, where due to the interaction of the Department for Labor, Employment and Social Protection and the sports and tourism sector, new jobs (smallholders) were created and tourism potential was developed by supervising the activities of 37 agricultural farmsteads.

Respondents also noted the active work of local initiative groups. For example, in Chausy district, such a group was created together with the Center of support of Entrepreneurship and local activists. The LAs conduct surveys of all local development stakeholders and extensively use the results in their work (Vileyka district).

Aliaksandr Amshei, LEDO, Shchuchin district noted: *"Nowadays, the department of public administration which is responsible for economic development, suffers from an emphasis on reports, constant monitoring of state programs, vertical reporting, division of departmental subordination, and limiting resources for business development. At the moment, the plans for social and economic development of districts that are required to be developed by the Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Belarus are almost identical and do not reflect the current situation. Thanks to the M4EG Initiative, we have realized that there is a need in a development plan for each district with respect to its specific competitive features. There is also a need in the revision of the management functions towards strategic planning. The understanding of the formality of dividing the existing management structures at the local level and the existing management crisis has grown. It is now clear that we must take up our problems ourselves."*

1.4. Has being an M4EG member helped you learn about successful tools and approaches of stimulating LED in other municipalities of your country, or in other countries?

## The majority of districts, namely 17 districts (77%) supported the fact that, thanks to the Initiative, they acquired new knowledge and skills that would stimulate local economic development, and only 5 districts (23%) noted that they had already had the corresponding knowledge and experience.

## Thanks to the participation in the Initiative, the majority of respondents noted the expansion of the range of tools and approaches used for planning local economic development in their municipalities. The signatories in particular noted the trainings in Georgia arranged by the Secretariat of the Initiative aimed at teaching the local planning tools (SWOT-analysis, survey, objectives setting, vision, strategic district development plan, benchmarking, and monitoring).

Tatyana Khanyak, LEDO, Ushachi district said: *"The experience of participating in the Initiative was very exciting. It allowed learning new tools which we didn't know before."*

## A number of respondents expressed their wariness at the beginning of participation in the Initiative due to the unclear position of the Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Belarus on the Initiative. Thanks to the work of the coordinator and later the project expert, the skeptical attitude was transformed into a positive and constructive one. This was due to the targeted work of experts with the signatories and wide awareness of the Initiative members about the best practices and experience in implementing the Initiative in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The acquisition of new knowledge was facilitated by the participation of Belarus representatives in study tours (the Netherlands, Latvia, and Lithuania) and in various international scientific and practical conferences (Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and Moldova).

Olga Sudilovskaya, LEDO, Mstislavl district noted: *"The experience of Latvia was very interesting. We visited the business incubator, discovered the stages of creating jobs occupying minimal space: various jobs were created in a small building (seamstress, programmer, and laser engraver) with a minimum rent, which is very important for start-up entrepreneurs with limited funds. Mstislavl district interacts with Klichev and Bragin districts (in agriculture, handicrafts, and blueberry production development). For Mstislavl which is focused on the active development of historical tourism, the experience of organizing and holding local festivals in other municipalities participating in the Initiative is important and useful."*

## Various approaches were actively used in the training process aimed at consolidating the knowledge of the participants, team interacting, identifying and developing joint objectives. After the outbreak of COVID-19, remote Internet platforms (the Initiative's website, Zoom, Facebook, the online library with a number of posts from all the EaP countries on modern methodological approaches and best practices in managing and planning local economic development, etc.) were widely used.

## Slavgorod district noted that thanks to the Initiative, the LAs discovered interesting approaches to the organization of local tourism, agroecotourism, and cluster approach to rural tourism for employment and self-employment in Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova. Glubokoye district had the opportunity to study innovative practices of local development management and approaches to supporting entrepreneurship in the Netherlands (the study tour involved districts whose Plans were considered the best by the World Bank experts: Polotsk, Glubokoye, Korma, and Vileyka districts). Moreover, during the study tour to Latvia which involved the representatives of Krasnopolye, Mstislavl, and Bragin districts, the features and the main territorial strategic planning stages were studied in detail. The experience of business planning, creation and operation of territorial business incubators as tools for stimulating entrepreneurial initiative of the population, registration of businesses, and job creation was also extensively studied.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the signatories participated in study tours at the inter-district and inter-regional levels, in regular zoom meetings, and communication in messengers, which contributed to the establishment of useful professional contacts and exchange of experience between the participants.

## Signatories noted the following successful tools and approaches to stimulating local economic development used in other districts of Belarus: farming development in Bragin district, methodical support to grants and projects of international technical assistance in collaboration with the University and local NGO in Glubokoye district, development of catering network and urban mobility through the creation of infrastructure for cycling and playgrounds in Polotsk district, cooperation of the LAs and the Local Development Fund of Bykhov District, and inter-district interaction and work of the School of Cooperator in Slavgorod district.

For example, within the partnership framework, the Fund of support of entrepreneurship and rural development "Eco-Innovation" organized a study tour for 7 people from Bragin district to Krasnopolye district of Mogilev Oblast in order to share experience in organic farming and promote the development of small rural businesses.

1.5. Have you built any friendships or partnerships with other M4EG members (experts, trainers, etc.), which you have used in your work afterwards?

Among the surveyed districts, 18% of districts (4) have established contacts with foreign colleagues, but also with other districts of the Republic of Belarus, 82% of districts (18) communicated mostly with the districts within the same Oblast and the Republic of Belarus as a whole. The districts have developed partnerships, participated in joint projects at the national level (several districts of Grodno and Mogilev Oblasts submitted applications for a number of grants). The signatories consulted each other on various issues of LEDPs implementation (according to polls the leader consultant is Polotsk district). Communication is carried out mostly online now with the use of messengers (Viber or Telegram) and social media (Facebook).

Olga Sudilovskaya, LEDO, Mstislavl district noted: *"Everyone communicates very closely in the group of the second wave signatories. Special thanks to the national experts Natalia Efremenko and Olga Sovetnikova for their help and support."*

Tatyana Khanyak, LEDO, Ushachi district said: *"Thanks to the implementation of the Initiative, we have started communication with colleagues in Oblast. We still communicate with many of them and very actively. The representatives of Moldova who developed quite interesting LEDPs inspired us with their optimism and energy very much."*

Tatiana Mechal, LEDO, Sharkovshchina district mentioned: *"Thanks to participation in the Initiative, the social communication has largely expanded. We communicated with the colleagues from Oblast, and from Georgia. A constructive dialogue became possible due to the fact that all participants were the LAs officials responsible for economic development."*

The signatories gratefully acknowledged the professionalism of Alek Karaev as a trainer of the four-stage training on local economic development planning organized by the M4EG Secretariat in Georgia at the beginning of the project. Expert support for the LEDPs development and implementation provided by the project coordinator in Belarus Natalia Efremenko and expert Olga Sovetnikova was highly appreciated. The respondents expressed special gratitude to the Project Leader Peter Korsby for managing and coordinating the Project activities that reflected the needs and expectations of the signatory districts.

The Initiative members noted the professional relations and cooperation with local administrations from Moldova. Initially, the representatives of the ATU Gagauzia (Moldova) visited Belarus to study best practices in providing business support services. They discovered the organization and functioning of the hard infrastructure for business support, in particular, free economic zones, technoparks, business incubators, as well as the institutional (soft) infrastructure providing services to SMEs by regional and local authorities in Belarus. The delegation held field meetings in three of the six districts of Belarus: Gomel, Slavgorod and Polotsk, thus receiving comprehensive information on Belarusian best practices in supporting SMEs and startups, including activities on attracting investment and promoting job creation at the regional and local levels. The delegation took part in the Cherry festival in Glubokoye district and in the regional conference dedicated to tourism development. As a result of networking, Gaidar and Comrat municipalities established official relations with the administrations of Slavgorod and Glubokoye districts respectively by signing cooperation agreements in business support and tourism development. Subsequently, a return visit to Moldova was organized that was no less useful for Belarusian municipalities. The teams of three M4EG pioneer projects in Bragin, Slavgorod and Glubokoye districts (Belarus) used the study tour to Moldova as an opportunity to share experience on project management, discuss approaches to developing business support services in municipalities, and study mechanisms for ensuring the sustainability of local initiatives.

The Bereza district LEDO participated in the Conference on the development of business support structures in Armenia, which made it possible to study the country's experience in creating the system for stimulating and supporting business, applying innovative technologies in various areas of the economy while establishing partnerships between LAs, the business community and civil society.

Representatives of municipalities from Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Armenia, and Georgia had the opportunity to participate in the conference "Expanding the Role of Rural Entrepreneurship in Rural Development in the Republic of Belarus" in Naroch (Minsk Oblast, Belarus) to learn about the role of local authorities in supporting entrepreneurship, the use of entrepreneurship support tools by local authorities in the EaP countries, the presentation of effective practices of local agricultural policy in the EaP countries, and the search for opportunities for cooperation and integration aimed at the development of local value chains.

The first regional Forum “Strengthening Inter-sectoral Interactions for Localizing the SDGs and Rural Development” took place in Klichev, Mogilev Oblast (Belarus), which was attended by representatives of the government, international and national organizations and institutions, experts from the EU and EaP countries. During the event, participants presented and discussed the development priorities of their municipalities in the light of the SDGs implementation at the local level and the prospects for cooperation between municipalities as an important tool for promoting economic development. During the Forum, the agreement on cooperation between Klichev district (Belarus), Dusheti (Georgia), and Martuni (Armenia) was also signed.

Thus, having studied and considered the issues related to the overall results of participation in the M4EG Initiative, a number of conclusions can be made (the ranking of districts as for the first part of the survey is presented in Annex 3):

1. In modern conditions, the key growth factor is the competence of local authorities in solving issues connected with economic growth of the territory. The M4EG Initiative has become a driver for the LAs, helped to learn the most effective tools used by LEDOs in the LEDPs development and implementation, increased the LAs awareness of their importance in local development as they are one of the defining bodies that form the competitive environment by applying the strategic planning tools based on the principles of inclusive and sustainable economic growth, creating jobs, supporting the development of business initiatives, and improving the level and quality of life of the local population.
2. The success of local economic development is based on the public-private partnership. Local authorities, the business community, and proactive citizens are the main participants in local economic development. A central role in local development is played by the dialogue between the government, business and local community, who are equally interested in creating competitive economy, developing their territory and improving the standard of living. Three quarters of all jobs in the world are created in the private sector. The growth of the private sector is a prerequisite for broad economic and social development and increased employment. Participation in the Initiative has led to the establishment of the constructive dialogue between the government, the business community and civil society in Belarus. Within the Initiative, there are successful examples of partnership, collaboration and implementation of LEDPs aimed at stimulating economic growth which have already resulted in high achievements, job creation, elaboration of strategic documents on development of territories, and attraction of investment to the districts.

Initially, most civil servants were wary of developing the Plans, but they turned into successful tools for stimulating local economic growth in most cases later. The LAs constructively and positively assess their experience in implementing LEDPs, show interest in their implementation, and strive for additional analysis of topical issues of local economic development using a number of new tools studied and mastered during the study tours in the country and abroad.

1. Through participation in the Initiative, the signatory districts’ representatives studied a number of local economic development tools used in the EaP countries, reviewed the experience of their use in the Republic of Belarus and effectively introduced them in their districts. Among the main tools actively used in the Republic of Belarus by the Initiative members are the following: SWOT analysis in general and identification of weaknesses and strengths for setting development priorities, surveys, various elements of strategic analysis and planning related to objective setting, development of activities with clear identification of results at different levels, some methods of financial planning and monitoring, information support, online training, participation in thematic conferences and meetings to share experience, and implementation of pilot projects as the main platforms for the use of innovative tools to promote local economic growth.
2. All the districts that participated in the Initiative established close contacts with each other within their oblasts and with other oblasts. Some districts established contacts with foreign partners and became members of the professional network of the international M4EG Club. This type of interaction will provide access to international experts on local economic development as consultants in solving problems of territorial development, help to disseminate information about the results achieved in order to attract investment and win grants, assist in preparing project proposals, establish relations with international financial organizations and potential investors, encourage professional interaction with foreign colleagues and partners, and promote cooperation between the LAs of the EaP countries.

2. Specific outcomes and results of the LEDP implementation process

The survey's part "Specific outcomes and results of the LEDP implementation process" was aimed at providing summarized information about the implementation of the Local Economic Development Plans in the Republic of Belarus by the first two waves of signatories. There are a number of areas in which the survey was conducted, including:

* identifying the biggest achievements according to the Local Economic Development Plans;
* identifying constraints that slow down the implementation of the main activities of the Local Economic Development Plans;
* identifying effective tools that contribute to the implementation of the Local Economic Development Plans' objectives;
* identifying the percentage of implementation of the Plan itself as well as areas that could be further added to the Plan or excluded from it in order to implement it more effectively.

The results of the survey of respondents participating in the M4EG Initiative in the Republic of Belarus under the "Specific outcomes and results of the LEDP implementation process" part revealed the following.

2.1. Name your biggest achievements so far in implementing your LEDP (name activities or objectives). Support this claim with measurable numbers. Explain why they are important for your municipality.

Among the biggest achievements of the signatories are the following:

* in Mstislavl district, as part of the implementation of the LEDP's strategic objective "Promoting entrepreneurship development", there was an increase in the number of small businesses to 54 (by 1.5 %) and individual entrepreneurs to 250 (by 6.8%);
* in Slavgorod district, under the strategic objective "Creating conditions for the development of small and medium-sized businesses" a cluster of cheese-makers is being created thanks to the networking between three districts of Mogilev Oblast. The joint project "At the crossroads of tastes!" was developed and received financial support. This project is aimed at developing networking and increasing sustainable development of the homemade cheese production (organic products) in smallholders operating in three or more districts, using the competitive advantages of the territories, in particular the registration of the trademark "Gaspadarchy syr";
* in Bereza district, a number of planned activities were implemented to modernize the existing enterprises and production facilities: 22 new organizations were registered, 222 jobs were created, and 9 export markets were entered. As part of the planned activities to strengthen investment attractiveness and improve the investment environment, 4 investment proposals were developed and submitted, 2 meetings with investors were held, and a business incubator hosting 20 SMEs was established;
* in Bykhov district, within the activity "Attracting investments into expansion and modernization of the poultry farm (production of day-old chicks)" of the strategic objective "Facilitating the effective contribution of the private sector in agricultural development", the investment project "Construction of production site No.8 of the SZAO Agrolink" was successfully implemented, and more than 18 jobs were created;
* in Vileyka district, within the framework of the strategic objectives "Supporting business and creating conditions for business development" and "Increasing the tourist attractiveness of the district and developing tourism", 61 people were registered as individual entrepreneurs, 2 agricultural enterprises and 3 new eco-hotels were established. The share of tax revenues to the budget from the business sector has increased and exceeds 31%;
* in Korma District, within the strategic objective "Promotion of the development and diversification of private agricultural production", 1 farm was registered and obtained 3 land plots for farming with a total area of 13.6 hectares;
* in Zelvа district, within the strategic objective "Improving the economic efficiency of the water resources management through attracting investment", the beach infrastructure of Zelva urban settlement was improved. This contributes to the bringing into life the vision of Zelva district as a territory of successful and inclusive green entrepreneurship in agriculture and tourism, attractive place to visit, and comfortable place for living and recreation;
* in Glubokoye district, as part of the implementation of the strategic objective "Increasing the investment attractiveness of the district", specialists of the Economic Department of the Glubokoye District Executive Committee held 8 meetings with entrepreneurs and stakeholders to search for investment requests and proposals; 127 jobs were created, a pellet production facility was put into operation, and 9 organizations were registered;
* in Novogrudok district, under the strategic objective "Attraction of investments and donor assistance for the development of the green economy of the district" the SMART control systems for street lighting is being introduced. For the first half of 2020 this entailed the savings in the amount of 15.6 tons of oil equivalent and 3354 USD. Within this objective the Plan for green urban development was elaborated, and the investment catalog on the basis of the strategy "Roadmap for an environmentally friendly territory" was developed. These documents were posted on the interactive portal "Investor's Roadmap" (https://map.investinbelarus.by/).

Moreover, among the biggest achievements in the implementation of the LEDPs are the following:

* the basis for the forest and agriculture cluster of Klichev district and adjacent territories was created. There are plans for the further extension of the cluster to Mogilev Oblast and creation of a woodworking cluster with the association of loggers and woodworkers for their subsequent training in new technologies and types of wood use within the implementation of the strategic objective "Support and development of entrepreneurship" of the LEDP;
* in Korma district, within the strategic objective "Strengthening the capacity of tourism and services", the festival "L'nyanaya karusel" (Flax carousel) was held to promote the potential brand of the district. The festival was attended by delegations from near and far abroad: Russia, Ukraine, Belgium, and Austria. Applications for the event were submitted by more than 70 artisans and craftsmen and 15 creative teams. This festival promotes the district as a tourist destination, facilitates the creation of its brand, and contributes not only to increasing the tourist attractiveness of the district in general, but also to searching for potential partners and investors;
* in Miory district, within the LEDP’s strategic objective "Support for the diversification of the private sector of the district", the investment site for the construction of a recyclables processing facility with adequate infrastructure (road and railways, electricity, water supply, and sewerage) was created;
* in Mosty district, within the strategic objective "Preserving the labor potential of the district based on the development of business initiatives and support for entrepreneurship", a business support center was established; 2 grants were issued for starting a business; 3 seminars and 2 training seminars were held for 66 participants;
* in Mstislavl district, within the strategic objective "Supporting the realization of the cultural and historical potential for tourism development", the festival of medieval culture "Knight Fest" as the basis for the development of the historical reconstruction of the district as a unique marketing offer was held; the tourist product "Spiritual Mstislavl Land" was developed: 23 knight clubs took part in its development; 15,000 visitors; 1 religious procession in the Holy Dormition Desert Monastery – the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral (165 pilgrims) was held; 1 fair-sale of church utensils was held; the pilgrimage to the relics of the Saints was organized. Thus, cultural, historical and spiritual tourism becomes one of the main competitive advantages of Mstislavl district;
* within the strategic objective of Novogrudok district's LEDP "Promotion of the development of the tourist industry and its infrastructure", the infrastructure in the recreational area of the Svityazyansky Reserve is being developed. On the territory of the Reserve, the international Bicycle route "EuroVelo 2" was mapped, route pointers and 1 information board were installed, the infrastructure of the existing tent camps was updated, an initiative of the Youth Parliament under the Novogrudok District Council of Deputies to install plaques with historical street names in the town was implemented;
* in Sharkovshchina district, within the activity "Promotion of the youth entrepreneurship through the creation of a school business incubator", the project "Promotion of the youth entrepreneurship" is being implemented. It is aimed at sustainable development of rural areas and promotion of the youth entrepreneurship as a driver of sustainable economic development through the example of the school business incubator for growing sugar blueberry on the basis of Stanislaviv primary school. Within the project, the following activities were held: trainings on producing ideas, marketing and business plans development, the competition of business ideas "from A to Z" at the Meeting of school teams on entrepreneurship which was attended by 8 schools of the district and education institutions of Miory and Postavy districts where teams presented business ideas developed at the trainings;
* in Polotsk district, within the strategic objective "Support and stimulation of small businesses in public catering and tourism" the following activities took place: a network of public catering was created (funding amount – 160 thousand euro), the contest "Culinary heritage" was held and 3 prize winners were identified (funding amount – 1.9 million euro), and the catalog of recipes of the authentic Polotsk district cuisine’s dishes was created (funding amount – 2000 euro).

2.2. What were the biggest challenges/failures in implementing your LEDP (apart from the delays and disruptions caused by COVID-19 pandemic)? Try to identify reasons why things didn’t work.

Among the biggest challenges which the majority of respondents emphasized, were the following:

* insufficient financial resources (7 districts or 22% of respondents), changes in the management structure and optimization of government bodies (5 districts or 23% of respondents) which caused difficulties in the implementation of certain activities within the strategic objectives of the Local Economic Development Plans, and difficulties in organizing tender procedures and participating in them (Slavgorod district). Three districts or 14% of respondents didn't experience any difficulties with the LEDPs implementation;
* difficulties in registering projects with the Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Belarus (Novogrudok district) which explained the lack of co-financing for some planned activities; lack of experience in participating in international projects and in some specific areas, for example, limited knowledge of foreign languages by representatives of public catering and tourist infrastructure (Polotsk district), and a number of other constraints;
* the problem of access to finance which is one of the main problems at the district level, hinders the implementation of Local Economic Development Plans. Unfortunately, all the signatory districts of the first and second waves are subsidized. None of the districts introduced performance based budgeting system; there is no financial independence of local authorities. Reallocation of resources to districts is carried out by centralized reallocation of tax revenues from the upper-level budget in accordance with the budget bill of the Republic of Belarus;
* the constant optimization of the structure of governing institutions, and rotation of specialists of various levels and areas in districts’ Executive Committees are constraining factors and undermine the implementation of LEDPs (this is explained by the need for time to adapt and understand the main objectives of the Plans, and to search for tools and mechanisms that contribute to economic growth and well-being of citizens);
* personnel changes that occurred during the participation in the Project in some districts. This caused difficulties in implementing the LEDPs in terms of individual activities (for example, in Slavgorod district, three Chairmen of the District Executive Committee were replaced during the Project implementation and in a number of districts those responsible for implementing the LEDPs changed);
* concern about the lack of opportunities to participate in sharing experience, face-to-face meetings, festivals, and forums, and to organize such off-line activities in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Tatiana Mechal, LEDO, Sharkovshchina district noted: *"I believe that the LEDP of Sharkovshchina district is being implemented in order to develop the SME sector, encourage actions in the interest of equitable economic growth, increase employment, ensure greater participation of citizens in economic, social and cultural processes, and improve their well-being and quality of life. It has been developed and is being implemented based on the interaction of all sectors of the community of the district, but the current conditions for implementing the Plan's activities are largely complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic."*

2.3. What is the probability of achieving the major objectives of your LEDP within the remaining implementation period of your LEDPs?

The average value indicated by the respondents in terms of the probability of achieving the major objectives of the Local Economic Development Plan was 85%.

Such districts as Braslau, Bykhov, Glubokoye, Zelva, Polotsk, Slavgorod, Slonim, Chausy, and Shchuchin indicated the achievement of strategic objectives in the range of 90-100%, i.e. we can talk about almost complete implementation of the Plan. A number of districts have difficulties in achieving the objectives, e.g. in Vetka and Sharkovshchina districts the range is 60-65%. In Vetka district, the percentage of achieving the objectives is associated with the lack of financial resources for the implementation of the certain Plan activities and the inability to conclude a number of previously planned investment contracts because of the current situation with COVID-19. The representative of Sharkovshchina district, along with the problem of attracting funds for the implementation of the objectives set in the Plan, noted the difficulties arising due to the lack of experience of the district in participation in the EaP's initiatives.

Sviatlana Viarbitskaya, LEDO, Vileyka district, said: *"Thanks to the Initiative and the Local Economic Development Plan, the entrepreneurship in the district begins to develop rapidly (production of cheese, onions, vegetables, and women's entrepreneurship), which is very encouraging and gives hope for the development of the district's economy and the implementation of the majority of objectives."*

2.4. What are the main positive things you have learnt while planning and implementing measures for stimulating local economic growth?

According to the survey, planning is recognized by the signatories as one of the most important tools for stimulating economic growth. Among the tools that will be used in future planning, SWOT analysis (5 districts or 23% of respondents) and planning based on the "bottom-up" initiative involving the local and business community in the LEDP development (4 districts or 18% of respondents) were noted. Some respondents (Ushachy and Slonim districts) indicated the process of developing the Plan as one of the most effective tools for the public-private dialogue and local development in general.

During studying abroad, sharing experience and the online meetings at the national level, the districts also noted the importance of a number of new territorial marketing tools (positioning, developing the brand of the territory, identifying the competitive marketing advantages of districts, etc.) and the significantly important role of online platforms for sharing experience in connection with today's impossibility of participation in meetings and activities in person. The implementation of the pilot projects as one of the possible tools to stimulate the local development, support business initiatives and create infrastructure conditions for economic development within the M4EG Initiative will contribute to the development of business support services in the districts as well as ensure the sustainability of local initiatives.

Olga Sudilovskaya, LEDO, Mstislavl district said: *"The development of the Plan allowed for a comprehensive approach to identifying and solving problematic issues in the development of business initiative and entrepreneurship, to determining priorities and practical steps necessary to ensure the economic growth of the territory for the next two years. The Plan is most focused on developing entrepreneurship in rural areas, increasing the role of the private sector in local economic development, and increasing its participation in the public-private dialogue and partnership*.*"*

2.5. What would you have done differently next time? Try to formulate lessons learnt from this experience.

15 districts, or 68% of respondents, said that they would not change anything in the existing Plan, but would only add some new objectives and appropriate activities. This indicates correctly developed Plans and activities defined in them to achieve the appropriate objectives. Vetka district would partially change the Plan and develop new objectives and activities.

Raisa Lakotko, LEDO, Miory district said: *"It is not advisable to develop a LEDP for a year, it is more correct to develop a mid-term Plan (2-5 years), while annually analyzing it, considering alternative options for future developments, and adjusting it in accordance with economic changes in the country*.*"*

The districts noted that it would be reasonable to add activities on stimulating the development of organic agriculture, green urban development, and further development of tourist attractiveness of the territories to the LEDPs.

Thus, in general, we can draw a number of conclusions based on the results of the LEDPs implementation by the signatories of the first and second waves:

* the Plans were developed at a high quality level, the average expected rate of achieving the Plans is 85%;
* most of the activities defined as tools for implementing LEDPs objectives have been implemented;
* the planned funds raised by most districts have been successfully disbursed. Thanks to well-developed LEDPs, most of them are funds of private investors. As part of the LEDPs implementation, some districts were able to adapt in time, change some of the declared activities, and attract additional funding for local economic growth objectives;

Thanks to the Initiative, according to LEDOs reports for the period of participation in the M4EG Initiative and the LEDPs implementation, the signatory districts of the first and second waves created 564 jobs, which is one of the most effective instruments for increasing the level and quality of life in the districts of Belarus contributing to the local economic growth (the most important indicators of achieving LEDPs objectives are reflected in Annex 4).

The LEDPs stimulated the development of business initiatives in the signatory districts of the first and second waves which is an important achievement of the M4EG Initiative in the Republic of Belarus.

3. Overall conclusions

Currently, there is a trend of shifting the emphasis in public administration to the local level. Setting and implementing long-term objectives and mechanisms of social and economic development of the Republic of Belarus at the district level is the basis for identifying strategic directions of economic development of the country as a whole. Representing the economy of a district as interrelated elements allows designing a new management system and performing a system analysis of a district depending on the scale of management, production capacity, population size, and existing market infrastructure.

The basis for planning at the local level is setting reasonable objectives and criteria for the economic development of the district, seeking the resources for effective functioning of the economy based on the existing resources and identifying potential reserves, and solving practical tasks of strategic development through joint efforts of state and local authorities, the business community, academic circles, and the population. The main role is played by local authorities as the implementers of the vision and objectives of the local economic development. Recently, the issue of decentralizing the public administration system and increasing the role of local authorities in making management decisions at the territorial unit level has become acute due to the large amount of information about the competitive advantages and main directions of development of the territory.

As the analysis shows, an important factor hindering the implementation of the LEDPs is the lack of financial independence of LAs and self-government (officially, there are only 3 local taxes in the country: the dog ownership tax, resort fee, and procurement fee; the rest taxes and fees are distributed and returned to the territory centrally).

The problem that is acute at the moment and slows down the development of the districts’ economy is the shortage of qualified personnel in local administrations: low wages are unattractive for specialists of the district Executive Committees, who for this reason prefer to seek jobs in other areas. There is an outflow of personnel to major cities and the capital due to the underdeveloped infrastructure on the ground, and this process is also affected by insufficient technical equipment of local administrations (low Internet speed, poor availability of multimedia equipment of the latest generation, and lack of communication facilities for video conferences).

A problematic aspect is the managerial personnel turnover which was noted by the Initiative members as one of the difficulties in implementing the LEDPs. Personnel rotation took place in a number of districts during the implementation of the Initiative (Chairmen of District Executive Committees and LEDOs).

In Belarus, there are practically no tools for public participation at the local level, and a subsidiary approach to public administration is not applied. Administrative management of territories (the "top-down" approach) remains pronounced, which contradicts the principles of sustainable development.

The implementation of the LEDPs is an important tool for establishing a dialogue between LAs, the business community and civil society at the local level. Due to the interaction of the above-mentioned stakeholders, the competitive advantages of the districts were determined and reflected in the LEDPs which had a positive impact on stimulating the economic growth.

The feasibility of studying the planning system at the district level and the need to change it are determined by a number of factors, including the following:

* creation of institutional conditions in the districts to ensure the competitiveness of business entities located there. Development of market relations makes it necessary to strengthen the role of territorial administrations and introduce modern indicative planning mechanisms taking into account the districts interests;
* the LEDPs should ensure the interests of present and future generations of local communities, take into account the individual characteristics and resources of the territories, and be legislatively enshrined in the planning system of the Republic of Belarus;
* strategic planning at the district level will help to accumulate resources and attract investors in accordance with the development priorities of the territories, which will improve the level and quality of life of the population.

We can offer the following recommendations and promising directions for further development:

* updating the law “On Local Government and Self-government in the Republic of Belarus” in accordance with the European Charter of Local Self-Government, which will officially strengthen the role of local government in the system of territorial planning and implementation of the main development objectives, establish a dialogue and partnership between the business community on the implementation and development of planning documents at the basic level, and ensure the civil participation of all institutional stakeholders;
* ensuring the autonomy for local budgets which will make it possible to separately determine the possibility of obtaining resources for the implementation of the projects significant for local development and economic growth, encourage entrepreneurial activity, and establish a differentiated system of tax collection in order to stimulate entrepreneurial activity of the population;
* further encouraging the establishment of partnerships and organizations for cooperation of local governments and development of local government associations by changing the legislation and simplifying the registration and operation of such organizations.

As the experience of implementing LEDPs has shown, it is advisable to develop short-term plans at the local level while actively involving representatives of private business, civil society and all stakeholders in this process in order to ensure the implementation of the strategic objectives of the district development taking into account the views of its direct participants.

Annex 1

**List of questions posed to the Local Economic Development Officers within the interview**

*Part I. General outcomes and results of participation in the M4EG Initiative*

1. Has being an M4EG member changed your perception of what and how local authorities can do in order to stimulate local economic growth? Explain your answer.
2. Has the participation in the M4EG Initiative influenced the state of the public-private dialogue and interaction with civil society in your municipality? How? Have you built any new local partnerships? Give examples.
3. Has the participation in the M4EG Initiative influenced the capacity of the municipal staff to analyze local economic development issues and plan respective activities? How? Give examples.
4. Has being an M4EG member helped you learn about successful tools and approaches of stimulating LED in other municipalities of your country, or in other countries? Give examples.
5. Have you built any friendships or partnerships with other M4EG members (experts, trainers, etc.), which you have used in your work afterwards? Give examples.

*Part II. Specific outcomes and results of the LEDP implementation process.*

1. Name your biggest achievements so far in implementing your LEDP (name activities or objectives). Support this claim with measurable numbers. Explain why they are important for your municipality.
2. What were the biggest challenges/failures in implementing your LEDP (apart from the delays and disruptions caused by COVID-19 pandemic)? Try to identify reasons why things didn’t work.
3. What is the probability of achieving the major objectives of your LEDP within the remaining implementation period of your LEDPs?
4. What are the main positive things you have learnt while planning and implementing measures for stimulating local economic growth?
5. What would you have done differently next time? Try to formulate lessons learnt from this experience.

Annex 2

**List of the Local Economic Development Officers interviewed**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **No.** | **Name of the organization** | **Full name** | **Position of the LEDO** |
| 1 | Bereza District Executive Committee | Olga Jezhora | Head of the Economic Department |
| 2 | Bragin District Executive Committee | Ludmila Shakhnitskaya | Head of the Economic Department |
| 3 | Braslau District Executive Committee | Irina Luksha | Head of the Economic Department |
| 4 | Bykhov District Executive Committee | Alexey Malashenko | Head of the Economic Department |
| 5 | Vetka District Executive Committee | Tatsiana Hramyka | Head of the Economic Department |
| 6 | Vileyka District Executive Committee | Sviatlana Viarbitskaya | Deputy Head of the Economic Department |
| 7 | Glubokoye District Executive Committee | Tatsiana Tarasevich | Deputy Chairman |
| 8 | Zelva District Executive Committee | Elena Kazyro | Chief Officer of the Economic Department |
| 9 | Klichev District Executive Committee | Alexey Polovikov | Deputy Chairman |
| 10 | Korma District Executive Committee | Anastasia Melnikova | Deputy Head of the Economic Department |
| 11 | Krasnopolye District Executive Committee | Halina Yemelyanava | Deputy Chairman |
| 12 | Miory District Executive Committee | Raisa Lakotko | Head of the Economic Department |
| 13 | Mosty District Executive Committee | Sviatlana Velichko | Deputy Chairman |
| 14 | Mstislavl District Executive Committee | Olga Sudilovskaya | Deputy Chairman |
| 15 | Novogrudok District Executive Committee | Elena Selevich | First Deputy Chairman |
| 16 | Polotsk District Executive Committee | Alesia Karnachova | Head of the Economic Department |
| 17 | Slavgorod District Executive Committee | Sviatlana Yazerskaya | Chairman of the Slavgorod District Council of Deputies |
| 18 | Slonim District Executive Committee | Anna Samuleikina | Head of the Economic Department |
| 19 | Ushachi District Executive Committee | Tatyana Khanyak | Head of the Economic Department |
| 20 | Chausy District Executive Committee | Andrei Verkhavodkin | Deputy Chairman |
| 21 | Sharkovshchina District Executive Committee | Tatiana Mechal | Head of the Economic Department of the District Executive Committee |
| 22 | Shchuchin District Executive Committee | Aliaksandr Amshei | Head of the Department of Tourism and Investment Activities of the Economic Department of the Shchuchin District Executive Committee |

Annex 3

**Color map (ranking of districts) within the implementation of the part "General outcomes and results of participation in the M4EG Initiative"**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **No.** | **The name of the district / The number of the question** | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |
| 1 | Bereza district |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2 | Bragin district |  |  |  |  |  |
| 3 | Braslau district |  |  |  |  |  |
| 4 | Bykhov district |  |  |  |  |  |
| 5 | Vetka district |  |  |  |  |  |
| 6 | Vileyka district |  |  |  |  |  |
| 7 | Glubokoye district |  |  |  |  |  |
| 8 | Zelva district |  |  |  |  |  |
| 9 | Klichev district |  |  |  |  |  |
| 10 | Korma district |  |  |  |  |  |
| 11 | Krasnopolye district |  |  |  |  |  |
| 12 | Miory district |  |  |  |  |  |
| 13 | Mosty district |  |  |  |  |  |
| 14 | Mstislavl district |  |  |  |  |  |
| 15 | Novogrudok district |  |  |  |  |  |
| 16 | Polotsk district |  |  |  |  |  |
| 17 | Slavgorod district |  |  |  |  |  |
| 18 | Slonim district |  |  |  |  |  |
| 19 | Ushachi district |  |  |  |  |  |
| 20 | Chausy district |  |  |  |  |  |
| 21 | Sharkovshchina district |  |  |  |  |  |
| 22 | Shchuchin district |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| ***%*** | *Good* | *86* | *64* | *45* | *77* | *18* |
| *Neutral* | *9* | *32* | *55* | *23* | *82* |
| *Poor* | *5* | *5* | *0* | *0* | *0* |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| ***units*** | *Good* | *19* | *14* | *10* | *17* | *4* |
| *Neutral* | *2* | *7* | *12* | *5* | *18* |
| *Poor* | *1* | *1* | *0* | *0* | *0* |

***"Good"*** *means full satisfaction of the respondent when answering the question and the implementation of the assigned tasks;*

***"Neutral"*** *means partial satisfaction of the respondent when answering the question and the implementation of almost all the assigned tasks;*

***"Poor"*** *means that the respondent is not fully satisfied when answering the question and some tasks have not been implemented.*

Annex 4

**The most significant indicators of achieving objectives during the Local Economic Development Plan implementation**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **No.** | **Name of the district** | **Number of jobs created** | **Number of new organizations, individual entrepreneurs** | **Number of activities held** | **Number of people participating in the activities** |
| 1 | Bereza district | 222 | 22 |  |  |
| 2 | Bragin district | 2 | 2 | 10 | 300 |
| 3 | Braslau district | 20 | 8 SMEs,  83 individual entrepreneurs,  23 farmsteads |  |  |
| 4 | Bykhov district | 18 | 1 agricultural enterprise | 3 | 30 |
| 5 | Vetka district | - | - | - | - |
| 6 | Vileyka district | 70 | 61 individual entrepreneurs,  3 new eco-hotels, 12 new private enterprises,  2 agricultural enterprises | online survey of residents about business | 1520 |
| 7 | Glubokoye district | 9 | 2 |  |  |
| 8 | Zelva district | 15 | 3 farmsteads,  2 organizations | 4, 1 forum | 47 / in the forum – 70 people |
| 9 | Klichev district | 12 | 3 | 4 | 32 |
| 10 | Korma district | 19 | 2 private companies,  7 individual entrepreneurs,  1 agricultural enterprise, 2 retail facilities | 1 | 12 |
| 11 | Krasnopolye district | 18 | 1 | 15 | 92 |
| 12 | Miory district | 14 | 1 factory, 10 farmsteads,  2 agricultural enterprises |  |  |
| 13 | Mosty district | - | - | 5 | 66 |
| 14 | Mstislavl district | 25 | 17 individual entrepreneurs,  7 legal entities | 2 | 62 |
| 15 | Novogrudok district | 22 | 1 cafe, 1 hotel,  1 individual entrepreneur | 3 fairs, 22 sales exhibitions | 1000 |
| 16 | Polotsk district | 20 | 1 restaurant,  3 cafes | 4 | 120 |
| 17 | Slavgorod district | - | - | 6 | 200 |
| 18 | Slonim district | 2 | 1 | 1 | 25 |
| 19 | Ushachi district | 1 | 1 individual entrepreneur | 1 | 10 |
| 20 | Chausy district | 32 | 18 individual entrepreneurs,  7 organizations | 12 | 195 |
| 21 | Sharkovshchina district | 40 | 2 | 4 | 212 |
| 22 | Shchuchin district | 3 | 1 | 25 | 500 |
|  | **Total** | **564** |  |  |  |

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