



Final Learning Exercise Summary Report

Banská Bystrica, Slovakia - Action Plan 2021- 2022

Banská Bystrica is the first Slovak local self-government that took part in the OGP local initiative and fulfills its requirements. It also successfully managed to fulfill the commitments stated in its own first action plan. The evaluation of them was carried out in January 2023.

The first open government action plan of Banská Bystrica for the years 2021–2022 started to be developed in 2020 by an active implementation group consisting of a city representative and two non-profit organization representatives (Dialogue Centre, n. o. and Interaktívna škola urbanizmu a územného plánovania, n. o.). The implementation team worked closely with an advisory group consisting of civic and academic representatives as well as town councilors, and employees of the Municipal office in Banská Bystrica. The individual steps of creation and implementation of open government were discussed with the general public in the form of the so-called 'Klub otvoreného vládnutia' (Club of open government). What could improve in this sphere is the participation of the business sector and the stipulation of certain rules regarding work group meetings (multistakeholder platform): obligations, dates of meetings, their duration, and course, etc.

There was significant progress in the period between the years 2020 and 2022 concerning the exercise of open government principles in administering Banská Bystrica. It has to be said that the period when the action plan was being created and the initial period of implementation was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which limited the possibilities of meetings in person and public discussions in face-to-face form. On the other hand, it was this situation that forced the coordinators in charge to look for innovative possibilities concerning their realization. Virtual meetings, public debates, and meetings of municipal commissions have gradually become part of common practice, not only within the framework of the action plan but also in the implementation of local self-government activities. This contributed to greater transparency and openness of the local self-government.



Open government principles and steps were applied in numerous project activities in the years 2021–2022. These activities dealt with selected sections of local politics (city park revitalization, the development of residential areas with a lot of verdure, the creation of car parks with large green vegetation, integrated territorial strategy, and strategy for the development of culture) in cooperation with the general public. The town organized and carried out more than 30 gatherings with citizens while executing the action plan. This created opportunities for participation and deciding on the above-mentioned projects as well as obtaining feedback. People could also express their opinion. In some cases (the case of the revitalization of the city park), the appropriate and effective application of the principles of open government by the coordinators (S. Kariková, E. Mazanec) helped to overcome long-standing problem spheres of cooperation and actively contribute to their progress, especially by facilitating and managing the participatory process of public involvement. Although the goal was obvious when it comes to other cases (such as the discussion regarding the local self-government budget draft), it was difficult to achieve considering the participants' insufficient knowledge of the issue. This pointed to the need of educating people about public matters.

The involvement of local self-government staff in the implementation of activities and the gradual acceptance and identification with the principles of open government can be considered a success. However, the change in the way of thinking in the office is relatively slow, but gradual progress is obvious. It is connected with a natural rejection of changes and reforms that change the routine way of working.

Open government strategy for years 2023–2030 also contributes to the shift in this sphere. It was created by an expert group consisting of professionals from the Municipal Office, academia, and independent professionals. The strategy was discussed with the public. It was subsequently turned into an open government map, which, although it does not define a specific timetable and specification of activities, determines the local self-government authority spheres, in which the individual open government principles will be gradually implemented. It would be best to specify an innovative format of open government strategy for the period of 2 years, just like the action plan is created. This applies to priorities of implementation. A possibility of continuous addition to the agenda should be created considering the current development in the local self-government.

The lack of employees who would take care of provisions regarding the agenda of participation and implementation of other open government principles has proven to be a certain limitation in every activity that was done. When the action plan commitments were being carried out, only one person was in charge of the agenda. This employee was supposed to ensure the activity coordination and the implementation of open government principles into the agenda of the town, which is impossible. For this reason, expert external assistance was also ensured to help implement some of the commitments from the action plan. It was the right approach in this situation, however, if the city truly wants to implement the open government principles to its agenda and not only to selected projects, it should



systemically ensure sufficient staff. This problem also causes a lack of systemic support for communication with the public, which plays a very important role in working with the citizens.

Further advancement of open government in Banská Bystrica should focus on initiating the necessary changes within the local self-government authority. An emphasis should be put on systemic measures connected with the simplification of processes, information sharing, and creation of capacities leading to the integration of open government principles into the institution as such.

At the same time, with its active approach, the local self-government looks for inspiration from several effectuated projects and acquires knowledge about open government from abroad (cooperation with the OECD, EC, and the World Bank), which creates further opportunities for the development of democratic open government in Banská Bystrica.

Recommendations:

No	Recommendations
1.	Ensure a diversified composition of the multistakeholder platform with a balanced involvement of the public, private, and non-profit sectors and the involvement of local self-government staff and experts as well as the establishment of rules for the organization of its activities.
2.	Prescribe the OGP Local action plan priorities and activities for years 2023–2024. It should be connected with the open government strategy.
3.	Strengthen the activities aimed at educating the public about public matters/local politics.
4.	Enlarge the number of employees in charge of the implementation of OGP Local principles as well as staff in charge of communication with the public.
6.	Strengthen activities-building capacities with an emphasis on educating local self-government staff about open government and actively involving employees in the implementation of its principles in practice.
7.	Creation and implementation of systemic measures that will guarantee compliance with open government principles in action of the local self-government.