

T. Dichter

Learning Agenda Mini Case #7

Moldova

NGO Aereopagus, Floresti

In the mid 1990s Ala Stirscu's mother, the director of a local school, worked with Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) who taught her how to write project proposals. This led to small grants to do awareness training seminars on gender and human rights. Ala, who was studying in Romania, came back to Floresti in 2003 and saw what her mother had been able to do. She and her husband heard about Soros offering grants for community learning centers. To apply they needed to be an NGO and so they set one up. In Sept. 2004 they got a \$10,000 grant -- "a lot of money in Moldova" -- which bought equipment to set up an adult education center in computer skills training. The local Mayor contributed space and soon they had an internet café going which provided free services to those who could not pay. Those who could began to provide an income for Ala and her husband. After 2 years they began to provide IT services (providing everything from printer cartridges to training) to the city, the mayor's office and local businesses.

PCVs continued to be assigned to the area in a rotation that always connected them with Ala's NGO. In time they set up various clubs, a film club, an English club, a jewelry making club. Project writing continued as did small grants, beginning with a \$1600 grant from the Peace Corps small project assistances (SPrA) program (money that comes from USAID). Knowledge about grant writing grew. Then came another Soros grant of \$3000, followed by others.

Sarah Capanis, a Peace Corps English teacher, and her husband Travis (who was assigned under the business development program) both came to Floresti two years ago. Sarah developed *giardia* soon after arriving. She doesn't say so but perhaps her need to be near functioning toilets in her school led her to realize that 5 local primary schools did not have toilet facilities or clean water. She began surfing the net and learning about water and sanitation projects and the technology associated with them. She spent a good 6 months learning.

About the DGP grant they received Sarah says:

"The whole thing is a fairly tale. We knew that Ala had everything going for her. She and her husband work long hours, they know everyone and everyone knows them, they have connections with the mayor and other local government people. People trust them, but for all these years they were going on with tiny grants to do this and that. We said, let's take this organization to the next level. Let's get serious. After 3 more months of searching for an appropriate grant giver to undertake the school toilet project, we were close to giving up. We couldn't find what we wanted. Then in April 2011 we saw the DGP RFA from USAID. I

called Ala and explained it. 15 minutes later we were in the Mayor's office and asked him if he'd support the effort. He signed on immediately. “

Sarah: “The RFA was daunting. I had to translate their [USAID's] English into English I could understand. We took two weeks to write the concept paper and submitted it. To our surprise we got an email notification that we'd been selected to submit a proposal. The deadline was July 15th and we made it. We had questions and we communicated with someone named Jeff McDaniels for 2 weeks. Then he dropped off the planet. The RFA said we'd hear by August 15th. Nothing. We waited till the beginning of September and then I wrote to Jeff and got back an auto reply saying he was no longer at USAID/Moldova. Finally in mid September we contacted one of the other names on the cc list and got an answer from Diana Cazacu who told us that we had been selected to undergo a Pre-Award Survey.”

“It's funny that at no time did anyone say you've won, or congratulations, just that there was another step for us. “

Travis: “Four people came for what amounted to a pre pre-award survey. It wasn't immediately clear what was happening, but they told us we'd need to develop various policies and then later they gave us a set of templates for them [it's important to note that in fact these templates came from the fhi360 project which Diana Cazacu had contacted since USAID apparently did not know how to help.] templates for accounting, HR, but the procurement policy was really hard. We asked for more help on that and they sent one for us to look at but it was for a \$50 million dollar project – inappropriate for us. We got frustrated and confused. It felt like they were asking us for what they needed but didn't explain what they wanted. But they'd say, call us if you have questions and when we did they'd say well, go talk to Pro Business Nord (PBN), another NGO that had earlier received a USAID grant. They never introduced us. But we went to see them and saw how much they know and how much they could teach us, but also saw how busy they were. We got some help, but part of the problem for all of us is that this is a construction project and Diana and others at USAID didn't really know much about such projects. For example, they could not understand our budget since it talked about technical things etc.”

Travis: “Then in March 2012, four months later, the PAS people finally came – 5 people including two from Kiev. They spent about 5 hours here and told us we'd hear from them in a week. Another month went by before we heard (it was then the end of April) and then we were told we'd have one month to comply with the requirements that came out of the survey. Then we'd turn in something and hear nothing, and assume we were ok, and then out of the blue we'd be told it wasn't right. Each time we thought our heads were above water we'd sink down again. In some cases, we'd be told we had 6 hours to reply. Then we'd reply and hear nothing. And then sometimes they'd tell us, 'oh by the way you need this and this,' which we had not known about before. We got so we were afraid to open our inbox each morning. They admitted they were learning too. I have one word to describe USAID - “unprepared.” ‘

Sarah: “Meanwhile we began recruiting people which was in itself a nightmare. In Moldova people expect to get a job because they are a relative or because simply they need one. But we managed to overcome this and the people we found were willing to put in time without pay, because of course we could not pay anyone until the contract was signed.”

“And we had a construction engineer who prepared plans for the construction of the toilet areas and the water filtration operation. This took a lot of time. One day, we heard from the Mayor that one of the 5 schools simply did not have the space for the toilets and was in such bad shape that they might close it and shift the students to another school that was underused. Wanting to be up front with USAID, we called Diana. She was upset and accused us of lying. Then we called Jason in Kiev and he said no problem, just change the budget – best that you do that before cause you can’t change it later. So that worked out OK.”

“The original start date was January 2012 because we wanted to get everything done before the Sept 1 school start. But now it’s May, 2012 and people are beginning to ask what’s happening. The community began to think we were not serious. “

“Finally we were told we were moving towards a contract signing. Then out of the blue we are told that we need a branding policy and were given 6 hours to provide one. And 2 weeks before the contract date, they tell us that we have not conformed our construction plan to the US regulations for disabled people. And we will not be able to have the signing until the plans are re-drawn. And meanwhile of course the budget cannot be changed. We have moved items around in the budget and now our money for Capacity Development is \$1500 out of \$174,388.”

At this point, Ala adds ” What they want from us is the work of experts but we are not experts in all these areas.“ Travis points out that the first capacity development need is for the USAID people themselves. “And they need to learn to work with orgs like us. They are not interested in developing organizations. They are “bureaucracy officers.” They do nothing to help us grow and develop.”

[It is worth noting that after 2 years Sarah and Travis use the word “we” when they talk about Aereopagus. They are clearly highly invested in this effort and feel a real sense of identification and ownership of the organization and the new DGP grant. In fact on the USAID matrix chart for the DGP III Grantees all over the world, the contact person column lists Sarah Capanis and no one else.]

After 8 to 10 postponements of the signing dates, which led Travis and Sarah to ask for a 4 week extension to their PC service, the contract was signed in Kiev on 7/27/12. But soon before this happened, they learned that the papers they had submitted to USAID that would allow them tax exempt status on the procurement of materials had not been forwarded to the Moldovan government, even though USAID had had these for several months. Travis believes USAID simply forgot. And even though the final signing is to take place on Tuesday July 30th, Travis is concerned that without the Moldovan govt.

sign-off on these papers, which takes some time, the actual construction start will have to be further delayed.

Towards the final signing date, Sarah was talking with one of the USAID people, who said to her “Sarah, when you and Travis leave, are they going to steal the money?” She told this to Ala and Ala says “I was embarrassed to hear this. “

Travis: “When we read the DGP RFA it seemed to us that the heart of this grant would be our own capacity development as an organization. But now we see that we’re on our own. When we went to Pro Business Nord we heard about the workshop they had attended in 2009. We were jealous and then they showed us the yellow manual for NGOs working with USAID. And they gave us a copy. But why didn’t USAID give us this? Why didn’t they tell us about the existence of this manual? There just is no partnership.

At one point we began to suspect that we were being told about rules that didn’t exist. Once we were told there could not be more than a 5% discrepancy between the budget in the concept paper and that submitted in the proposal. But then someone told us this wasn’t so. We were also told that originally there was talk of our contract being a Fixed Obligation Grant (FOG) but then switched to a Cooperative Agreement (CA) because, we were told, our budget was over the threshold. We don’t know who to believe.

No one gave us any guidance on the kind of money available for CD .

Sarah had learned a lot about sanitation projects. She is particularly well versed in the technical aspects and the newest technologies of filtration. But she seems to understand pitfalls and the need for sustainability which to her and Travis means training and awareness so the project is designed to reach not just the kids, many of whom have no experience using a toilet, but teachers and janitors. They get that reporting damage is a key, that there has to be quality of materials, and so on. The mayor’s office will sign a maintenance agreement, and the project includes money for 3 years of maintenance of the water filtration units.

Did USAID have anything to say about the project itself – its concept, and especially the key issue: sustainability? No.

Ala speaking about her future, says that after this she and her husband will not want to do a large infrastructure project again. “We want to go back to running our center and we are more interested in focusing on small projects again, working with children. We originally thought we want to do bigger projects but now we want to take smaller steps. We’re happy with what we are and what we do, thankful for what we have. “