



## ASSESSING THE DONOR PROGRAMMES' IMPACT – LOCATING EFFICIENT INSTRUMENTS IN THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

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### Abstract

*With limited literature review and relevant comprehensive assessment on the research methodologies about the donor programs, this study was a serious challenge for the authors. This challenge was the main driving force for contribution to the science society and developing the methodology for assessing the donor programmes' impact. The focus in this paper is locating the efficient instruments in the Republic of Macedonia, through the usage of the developed methodology. The assessment of the real success of the donor programmes very often is a prevented or misinterpreted due to the problem with subjectivity of the formal administrative procedures. This paper delivers a methodology for objective assessment of international bilateral and multilateral donor programmes aimed to support the development and growth of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). The proposed approach, is applied for assessment of the donor programmes financed by international donors in Macedonia and development of appropriate instruments supported with public funds, which is crucial factor for the efficiency of the interventions.*

**Key words:** *grants, international donors, SME growth support, SMEs development instruments, start-up support*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of the donor programmes for the development of the recipient countries, especially in the developing regions is widely acknowledged. There are numerous examples of this type of programmes aiming to stimulate local economic activities or to assist local governments in preparing strategic policy documents and plans for the economic development. Previous studies on intergovernmental transfers indicate that an important objective of a donor is to ensure that the recipient provides certain minimal level of public services, with which the donor can be easily identified [1,2,3].

The grants for projects always require specific set of indicators for measuring and describing the project impact on the stakeholders and the level of success in

achieving the proposed goals. However, the indicators are set prior to the project implementation, which might leave a chance for mismatching the project outcomes. In addition, the formal procedures are not followed strictly and objectively because the parties conducting these procedures are actually the project stakeholders (implementers and donors), which might cause the reported results to be subjective and biased. In addition to this, the project sustainability and its long-term effects are of a great interest and are assessed by the stakeholders themselves. Therefore, the evaluation of the real donor programmes' success and the effects on the end beneficiaries is very important to be conducted by an independent party and taken into consideration while planning the further donor programmes in order to maximize their effectiveness.

Many researchers and policymakers acknowledge the great significance and contribution of SMEs to the national economic growth [4,5]. Most economic structures are mainly consisted of SMEs and despite the presence of large corporations, the greatest part of the employment is concentrated in this group. Policies designed for promotion and facilitation of the SME sector are of particular interest and there has been substantial expansion of these efforts, which is also reflected in many donor programmes and initiatives.

Macedonia as an EU candidate country follows the pre-accession strategies and introduces strategic plans for development of the SME sector, agendas for enhancing the competitiveness of the industries and implements reforms to the business legislatives. The main recognition for the success of these reforms is the fact that in 2013, Republic of Macedonia ranked among the top 10 Doing Business reformers worldwide [6]. As a result, there is rising interest of the international donors to assist in the local and regional development of the country through project grants. In these circumstances, a need for a methodology for objective assessment of donor programmes emerges, and its application while planning the new programmes significantly increases the chances for their effectiveness. In this paper, we will propose a methodology for donor programmes assessment and will apply it to the international donor programmes in Macedonia, in order to prepare a recommendation set that will be base for the development of future donor programmes.

The paper is consisted of the following parts: firstly, the methodology that was developed for assessment of the donor programmes and its application to the case of internationally financed programmes in the Republic of Macedonia will be described; then in the second part the results from the investigation and main findings will be presented; and finally, the most important concluding lines will be summarized in the last part.

## 2. METHODOLOGY FOR ASSESSING THE DONOR PROGRAMMES SUCCESS AND ITS APPLICATION TO THE CASE OF MACEDONIA

The research is based on a framework analysis approach as an analytical process with set of tools which are used as part of an iterative process to aid structured and systematic data analysis [7]. Data management through framework analysis approach offers aim to order data to facilitate interpretation. For interpretation, this approach involves thematic analysis, typologies and explanatory analysis. The methodology framework that was developed is presented on Figure 1. The chart represents the overall process, which is consisted of eight levels of activities (presented with the blue squares).

The data management and collection process can be divided on: primary analysis for reordering and making the data accessible and secondary analysis for reducing the data volume based on prioritizes questions. Theme based and case based approaches as “cutting-up” data tools are used in data management process.

The mass of qualitative data in the research should be summarized by the qualitative data analysis. The methodology contains qualitative and quantitative elements for assessing the effects through data analysis in the research. The literature on the qualitative evaluation of private sector development programmes suggests that various evaluation techniques [8][9][10] can be used.

Primary and secondary data sources have been analysed. The analysis in this research is based on an examination of the following data: (1) primary sources of data: questionnaires for the project donors, questionnaires for the project implementers, and interviews of key projects’ donors, implementers, and beneficiaries; and (2) secondary sources of data such as: publicly available donor assistances, policies, including websites, databases, strategy papers, policy documents, donor commitments and other multilateral forms.

The data collection is organized in the following eight stages (Figure 1):

- Stage 1 – Determining project selection criteria
- Stage 2 – Selecting the relevant projects
- Stage 3 – Analysing the Economic Development Project (EDP) database
- Stage 4 – Surveying the donors and implementers
- Stage 5 – Interviewing the selected donors and implementers
- Stage 6 – Selecting the beneficiaries’ best practices
- Stage 7 – Interviewing the selected beneficiaries
- Stage 8 – Analysing the outputs from the fifth and seventh stage

The first three stages analyse the project database and gradually reduce the amount of data, so at the end of the third stage two tables for the most active donors in the analysed area and adequate project implementers are extracted. These outputs are inputs for the following two stages: applying qualitative and quantitative research methods to the donors and implementers. After conducting the interviews with the selected donors and implementers, the beneficiaries’ good practices are determined, which is actually the sixth stage of the overall process. In the next stage, the selected beneficiaries are interviewed, and the produced outcomes, together with the outcomes from the fifth stage are the subject for analysing in the final stage. The deliverables from this research are: instruments, donor and implementer recommendations and lessons learned. In the following part of the paper, each of the stages will be explained in more details, and the application of this methodology to the case of Macedonia for assessing the international projects will be presented.

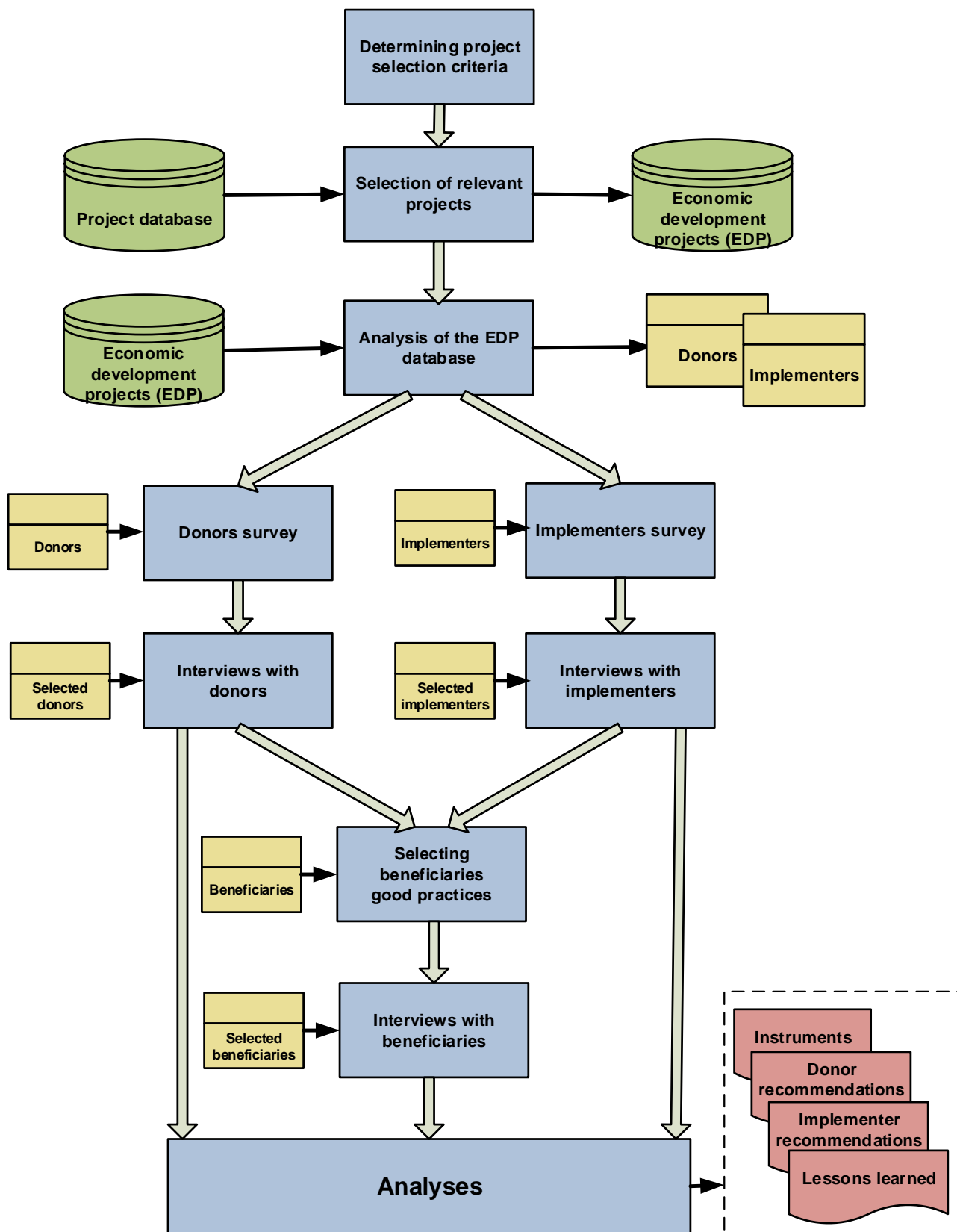


Figure 1. – Methodology framework

At the beginning of the process, the researchers have to define the research goals and to set the criteria for selecting the projects. So, the purpose of the first stage of the data collection is to have clear definition of the dataset that should be analysed as a part of the research. The comprehensiveness may be assured through analysis of central project database, such as the Central Donor Assistance Database (CDAD), which includes extended set of information for each project. It should be determined which project area is of interest, and what is the period that should be observed. In addition, the database offers opportunities for filtering the projects by location, donors, implementers, polices, sectors, etc.

The determined criteria for the project selection that were applied to the case of Macedonia were set according to the research interests. The main aim is assessment of the projects assisting in the economic development of the country. Therefore, the projects that belong to the policy: "Economic Development and Social Cohesion" were brought to focus. Also, investigating the most recent impacts on the country's economy was another research objective, so the ongoing projects and the projects that have finished in the period of the last five years were taken into account.

The second stage covers the process of application of the determined selection criteria to the full project database. This process results in new database with reduced number of projects that will be subject to further processing in the following stages.

While applying of the selected criteria for the Macedonian case, the full project database was drastically reduced and the resultant project database was named Economic Development Project (EDP) database. One project was selected and included in the EDP database if the two following criteria were fulfilled: the project is categorized in the relevant policy, and the project is implemented (at least partially) in the targeted period. In order to avoid the influence of possible mistakes in the classification of the projects, the listed projects were additionally checked based on the project description, if the sector or the type of assistance is influencing the targeted areas: entrepreneurship, competitiveness, innovation, export promotion, and general SME support in Macedonia. The final EDP database was an input to the third stage of the overall process.

The next stage of the data collection process serves to transform the reduced project database to separate donors and implementers tables. In this step, the critical evaluation of the researchers is crucial for determining of the key set of donors which are the most active in the analysed region, achieving significant economic impact. After extracting the key donors, it should be investigated which institutions are the implementers of their projects. The resultant table of this process is the implementers table.

The EDP database with the international and bilateral donor projects in Macedonia was analysed by the researchers and the key donors were determined. The projects donated by these donors were further analysed and their implementing institutions were selected. After qualitative filtering by the researchers, the final implementers table was delivered. The donors and implementers tables were further reduced, processed and analysed in the next project stages.

The quantitative research methodologies should be applied in the fourth stage of the methodology. The researchers prepare separate questionnaires for surveying the donors and implementers, relating to all identified factors from the desk research.

The questionnaires that were prepared for surveying the determined donors and implementers from the Macedonian projects contain four main areas: general questions, financial questions, section for gaining an objectivity data and sustainability questions. In addition, the implementers were questioned about the lessons learned from the project implementation and specific areas where beneficiaries require the most assistance.

After conducting the surveys, a subset of donors and implementers should be selected for the interviews. The purpose of the interviews is more in-depth discussion on the same issues covered in the questionnaires, as well as determining the end beneficiaries that should be a base for case studies development. The donors should be questioned about their current experiences with the implementers, their views on the implementing process and their future plans on providing further instruments for supporting the economic growth. The implementers should be interviewed more on the implementation process itself, their collaboration with donors end beneficiaries, short and long term effects, as well as sustainability of the projects.

There were identified 24 relevant donors in the Republic of Macedonia, some of which in the time of the analysis were no longer active. The feedback was received from the nine donors including the most influential, and the interviews were conducted with 4 selected donors. The questionnaires were filled and collected by the main donors that support activities related to the identified factors from the desk research. It was noticed different approach in the level of particularity between bilateral and multilateral donors. Most of the bilateral donors have reserved funds and projected areas of possible interventions, letting the implementers to propose more specific details. Unlike them, multilateral donors usually have precise strategy and action plans, resulting with foreseen goals, target groups, indicators and instruments. From the identified 132 implementers, which mostly are NGOs and governmental institutions, but there are also higher education institutions, international organisations and private companies, the feedback was received from nine and the interviews were conducted with five implementers. The main implementers of the focused

projects are in the following categories: public institutions, non-profit domestic institutions, foreign and international institutions and private sector.

The interviews with donors and especially with implementers should provide detailed information on the wide variety on project beneficiaries, indicating on the most successful cases. This input should assist the researchers in selecting the list of beneficiaries for conducting interviews. The key beneficiaries should be questioned about their experience and satisfaction from the involvement in the projects, projects' effects and impacts on their institutions / companies.

The implementation of these two stages resulted with a list of beneficiary institutions, including: enterprises, governmental institutions, business development service providers, financial institutions and the national workforce. After conducting the interviews with the selected beneficiaries, an array of beneficiary instruments were determined: financial grants or subsidies, training, consulting, incubators for entrepreneurship supporting etc.

The last stage of the delivered model is related to final analysis of the collected data from all sources and preparation of conclusions related to projects' relevance, impact, efficacy, efficiency, and providing the lessons learned, as well as presentation of the research findings. The main deliverables are: identified types of instruments, recommendations for donors, recommendations for implementers and lessons learned.

In order to be applied this methodological step to the Macedonian case, the outcomes from the fifth and seventh stages were reconsidered and taken for further analysis. This means that the main analyses were performed on the cases prepared with an assistance of the interviews conducted with the donors, implementers and beneficiaries.

### 3. RESULTS

The study is based on: 1) cutting edge thinking and experience/lessons learned from donors and implementers, 2) a review of key documents related to the introduction of foreign assistance in Macedonia, and 3) in-country interviews with the donors, implementers and beneficiaries in Macedonia.

The study gives the lessons learned for:

- Describing the experience from the usage of foreign assistances and impacts at economic growth analysed at strategic level and projects implementation,
- Identifying the success factors and challenges of the process, highlighting the unique features and lessons learned,
- Making key decisions and highlighting the driving forces behind economic growth and development.

### 3.1 Stakeholders

The conducted study has provided lessons learned structured into the following categories:

Donors – The study presents the differences between donor types, providing recommendations for the level of determination of the projects' scope in the calls, the administrative burden and the effort to be invested in the programming period.

Implementers – The analysis of different types of implementers have provided understanding of the different challenges that each of the groups are facing. The study has also shown that the portfolio of projects is much significant quality assurance guarantee method than the financial statements.

Beneficiaries – The study has presented that the main problems for rising interest of the private sectors for donor funded schemes applications are: the complicated, thus costly application procedures, solvency problems due to the project payment arrangements and the tight deadlines, often in not suitable periods for the companies.

### 3.2 Instruments

The instruments are in the main focus of the analysed stakeholders. The results from their implementation directly contribute to achieve the project goals, as a main focus of the project donors and implementers, as well as to the improvement of the business performance which is the driving force for inclusion of the private sector.

The research has shown that the cost-effect ratio of specific tools and instruments depends on the precision of the goals of the programme / call that influences the profile of potential implementers and the type of final beneficiaries. According to the conclusions on the questionnaires and interviews, the following criteria for instrument selection have been proposed:

Small / micro grants (up to 10.000 €) for business operation. Small grants are very efficient trigger for making the crucial step in transformation of the business idea into new business. In order to increase the survival rate of new businesses, small grants should be supported by training and mentoring, as well as long, few steps selection procedure. Small grants are also efficient in establishing of the entrepreneurial ecosystems.

#### Achievable goals

- New business development
- Entrepreneurial ecosystem
- Beneficiaries
- Potential entrepreneurs
- High growth potential companies
- Implementers
- Business start-up centres and Business incubators

- NGOs and foundations focused on development of new businesses
- Downsides
- Current non-existence of private equity funds and business angels that need to be developed and encouraged from the ground;
- Awareness of Macedonian start-up owners and entrepreneurs to accept outside investments and share an ownership portion of the company.

Subsidies for new ventures. The subsidies are not directly connected to the company's competitiveness and growth, but they are very efficiently motivating companies to follow trends that are influencing their competitiveness on the long run. Most of the interviewed companies did not identify the received subsidies for using consultants or investments for standardization, energy efficiency or new technology as some of the crucial factors for their success, competitiveness or growth, but most of them have stressed their influence for the implementation of the subsidized improvement.

#### Achievable goals

- Wider acceptance of new trends. Quality standards, energy efficiency investments, instalment of more productive or more precise equipment, etc.
- Specific problems solving. Efficient way of encouraging companies to undertake measures to solve specific problems that would not be solved or would be solved partially.

#### Beneficiaries

- Micro, small and medium enterprises. There is not significant effect of subsidising large companies, except for publicity reasons, or if the subsidies are in respective scale that would significantly increase the competitiveness of the beneficiary.

#### Implementers

- NGOs and foundations focused on development of new businesses
- Organizations that are specialised to work for increasing of the competitiveness of the business sector are always the optimal solution because of the strong network of start-ups, understanding their problems, close cooperation with consultants and their not-for-profit orientation.
- Consultant companies. Consultants specialised in business development or in the specific field (energy efficiency, agriculture, etc.) should be invited in the project consortium, or they even may be good implementers for smaller projects.

#### Downsides

- Specifically designed application evaluation system has to be designed in order to avoid subsidising companies that will not make the best use of the

grant. (Example: energy efficiency subsidies to companies that are not in energy intensive sector.)

- High percentage co-financing by the donor may force companies to create wrong focus.

Top class consultants. Using top class consultants are usually too expensive for companies or they do not understand the benefit for it, so donor support is very often required. Although, the concept of the usage of top class consultants was mentioned and it follows the same implementation logic, the importance given by the interviewed businesses and their different specifics require additional classification.

#### Achievable goals

- Internationalization. Top class consultants, both domestic and foreign have specific business knowledge that may support the increase of the company's competitiveness on a different level. Also, their wide networks usually accelerate the process of building international partnerships.
- Strategy development. One of the biggest problems for the fast growing businesses is the change management. Top class consultants that have experience in the respective business sector may foresee the problems and help the company to prepare and set the right priorities in the decision making process.

#### Beneficiaries

- Micro, small and medium enterprises with specific goals. In order to have efficient use of the expensive consultant time, the selected companies have to have defined specific problems that need to be solved or businesses on an identified strategic cross-road.

#### Implementers

- NGOs and foundations focused on development of new businesses. Organisations that are specialised to work for increasing of the competitiveness of the business sector are always the optimal solution because of the strong network of start-ups, understanding their problems, close cooperation with consultants and their not-for-profit orientation.
- Chambers of commerce, clusters and other business associations. Business development organisations focused on business development. Although the consultancy is the primary benefit for the companies, in order to keep impartial selection of the engaged consultants based on the specific needs of the beneficiaries it is advised that no specific consultant company should be included in the consortium.

#### Downsides

- Wrong consultant. The main challenge for implementation of this instrument is the selection of the right consultant. This includes the right portfolio in terms of competence for solving the identified problem, as well as the possibility to shoot out of cannon into sparrows, by hiring top class consultants for trivial problems. This is one of the reasons why the

profile and experience of the implementer is very important for the effectiveness of this type of projects.

- Consultant's fee. Another problem is the determination of the consultant's fee. If the program/call sets limit of maximum fee, it may cause losing of the best consultants and still overpaying of lower level consultants. To avoid this, direct involvement of the implementer and the beneficiary in the negotiation procedure is advised.
- Not adjusted level of control. Big interfering by the implementer may cause wrong focus of the intervention, but too little control may cause not effective use of the grant. This may be avoided with sufficient co-finance by the beneficiary and support by the implementer in the choosing of the consultant.
- Coaching and training. This is the most general instrument that may be used for different goals and with different target groups.

#### Achievable goals

- Awareness rising. The training may not be intended the immediate behaviour or knowledge, but rather for informational purposes and long-term development of skills, knowledge or perception.
- Capacity building. The coaching or training is specifically designed to address current gap in the skills or knowledge and it is a capacity building activity, but also in entrepreneurial ecosystem, the training is considered as an ongoing activity.

#### Beneficiaries

- Micro, small and medium (and large) enterprises. As general instrument it is applicable to all companies, but it has to be taken into consideration that for most training the donation has larger impact when it is focused on smaller companies.

#### Implementers

- NGOs and foundations focused on development of new businesses. They usually have sufficient understanding of the problems of the business sector and strong network of consultants.
- Chambers of commerce, clusters and other business associations. This is one of their usual activities.
- Consultant companies. Not favourable as a first choice because of the limitation in the selection of vendors. Nevertheless, the field leader may be a good asset in the team.

#### Downsides

- Influence in the company. Main downside is the problem of determining of the real need for this instrument and its influence to the change conducted. This is why this instrument is usually combined with another main instrument (when the project aims to conduct specific change), or is implemented as a wider target group.

- Optimally adjusted focus. The main challenge, especially when the instrument is targeting companies, is to optimally adjust the focus of the training between the programme / project expectation and the needs of the beneficiaries.
- Coach/ trainer selection. Additional challenges are those connected to the selection of trainer, following the same experience described in the "top class consultants" instrument.

Strengthening entrepreneurial habits from the earliest age. Building entrepreneurial habits can be made only through teaching entrepreneurship classes in primary and secondary schools. It requires inclusion of all stakeholders who made an entrepreneurial learning ecosystem as teachers, students, parents, business sector, NGOs, universities and national and local government. This can be done only with a strong network that will enable networking tools between educators and other stakeholders to share their best practices related to entrepreneurial learning, enabling teachers' development and continuous improvement of the curriculum on all educational levels from curriculum centred learning to student-centred learning.

#### Achievable goals

- Student-centric learning. One of the biggest downsides of the traditional education systems is trying to standardise the learning process for all students even the practice has shown us that they are all different. Some of them have logical-mathematical intelligence; some are better in linguistic intelligence, some for arts and so on.
- Continuous improvement of educational system. Bringing all stakeholders on one place where they will share their experience, practice or ideas for future improvements will create the process of continuous improvement of the whole educational system in the country with the strong focus on future entrepreneurial competences.

#### Beneficiaries

- Formal educational institutions
- Informal and non-formal educational institutions

#### Implementers

- National Entrepreneurship Educators Network. NGOs and foundations focused on entrepreneur learning ecosystem development.

#### Downsides

- Encouragement of all stakeholders in entrepreneurial ecosystem.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

Projects financed by international donors play significant role in the development of certain area in the recipient countries. These types of projects are strategically planned and aim to boost the development of the most urgent or most potential areas, such as:

improving the competitiveness, inclusive growth and increasing the employability, green growth, etc. These initiatives have significant effect on the regional and economic developments and social conditions in the recipient country. Also, the donor support plays important role in the promotion of governance based on European principles in society and economic standards.

Republic of Macedonia as part of the EU pre-accession programmes implements the proposed strategies and undertakes reforms to boost the SME sector, which attracts international donors to support these activities.

For the success of the donor programmes and their effective planning, it is vital an objective system for evaluation and assessment to be provided. Each of the projects contains a set of relevant indicators that are proposed and assessed by the project stakeholders (donors and implementers), which might introduce subjectivity and bias in the results.

This paper proposes a strategic approach for evaluation of the programmes by independent party that should be applied while planning the future donor programmes in order to maximise their efficiency and effectiveness. The data source that is proposed to be base for this research is comprehensive database covering all donor projects in the analysed region. The research methodology covering eight stages can be presented as three main phases: analysis of the database(s), gathering primary data from the selected stakeholders, and analysis of the outputs.

The approach is applied for assessment of the international donor projects in the Republic of Macedonia. The analysis of the collected data produced concrete results on the programmes' success, as well as lessons learned on the assessment process, identification of the success factors and challenges, and determination of the driving forces behind economic growth and development. The provided outputs of the study contribute to the understating of the challenges that the main stakeholders - donors, implementers and beneficiaries - are facing, as well as the aspects of the selected instruments relevant for each of them. The selected instruments may be structured into 3 categories: financial support for development boosting (small grants, non-commercial credit lines, and subsidies), knowledge and skills development support (training, mentoring and consulting) and society and eco-system development (changes in policies regarding entrepreneurial education, development of research, doing business legislative, etc).

These recommendations were designed to assist the World Bank Office in Skopje in the planning and preparation of their country partnership strategy.

This study is beneficial for the international donors, but also for the practitioners who propose, implement and evaluate internationally financed programmes. The proposed approach can be also applied by the policymakers in the projecting of future national strategic programmes for the development of the SME sector. Last but not the least, the theoretical

contribution of this paper is also important for the scholars researching in the area of project evaluation and assessment.

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