

## Round table

# Networking for change

Within NGO Days, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of June 2012, a round table was held on the subject of “Networking for change” in the office space of the “Green Action”, in Frankopanska 1, Zagreb. 24 people participated at the round table: 17 representatives of CSOs, 2 representatives of the Government Office for Cooperation with NGOs and Croatian Government, one representative of TACSO project, 3 panellists and 1 moderator. Ms. Zvijezdana Schulz Vugrin, executive director of Association for Civil Society Development SMART, moderated the round table.

The aim of the roundtable was to present successful networks and coalitions, and emphasize the advantages and challenges of networking on a local, national, regional and European level.

The participants were also informed that preparation of the National Strategy for the Creation of an Enabling Environment for the Civil Society Development from 2012 to 2016 is in its final stages of completion and that they could refer to proposals in the draft version during the discussion, as well as suggest amendments to the draft regarding the theme of the round table.

In order to stimulate the discussion, presentations were prepared and the first presentations were by Mr. Bernard Ivčić and Ms. Željka Leljak Gracin from Zelena akcija association and Mr. Dražen Šimleša from association ZMAG.

Mr. Bernard Ivčić presented different types of networks using the following examples:

- Zeleni forum, an informal network of about forty organizations
- Forum za prostor - an informal network dealing in protection of environment (cooperation among all sectors)
- Srđ je naš – a coalition of NGOs in Dubrovnik (in addition to Zelena akcija and Pravo na grad)
- Platform 112 – an informal network with 63 advocacy NGO members
- SEENET – thematic Western Balkan regional network formed as a result of an IPA project
- Friends of Earth – the biggest environmental protection network in the world (76 organizations)

Ms. Željka Leljak Gracin presented the environmental network “Justice and Environment” – a specific European network of environmental lawyers, whereby member organizations are associations that deal with environmental law as one aspect of their work. The network started out as an informal network but was registered in 2004. Today it features 13 member organizations all over Europe. The aim of this network is improving legislation concerning environmental rights and their implementation. The network uses different legal tools, which are exchanged between the member organizations.

Mr. Dražen Šimleša presented an example of networking through different forms based on the example of the Balkan Network of Eco-villages, emphasizing the point of networking is the need for cooperation and not wanting to stand alone. Balkan Network of Eco-villages started out as an informal network and the motive was creating an environmental education centre. The network was registered in 2005, and member organizations come from Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina

and Macedonia. The network is also a member of an international network – The World Network of Eco Villages – builders.

After the aforementioned presentations a discussion followed during which the following main challenges were identified:

- Sustaining of the network (financially and program wise)
- The problem of expenses related to attending meetings (especially when participating in European and international networks)
- An active participation of all member organizations and the understanding of the work of the umbrella organization (if the network is registered formally)
- The problem of creating networks due to financing (noting that it would be interesting to track the results of such networks)
- Advantages and disadvantages of formal and informal networks (informal networks are easier to form and are more flexible in their work, it is easier for formal networks to secure financing for their work)
- The issue of knowing other organizations for the purpose of establishing new partnerships

Main conclusions of the round table are as follows:

- Networking is supported because of the importance of its potential for cooperation. The main advantage of networks (especially the international ones) is exchange of experiences, and the greatest drawback is physical distance and the problem of coordinating its members.
- Networking should have a range of common values
- Donors in the Republic of Croatia lack the awareness for such networks, and it is necessary to create an enabling environment for CSO networking (within the civil sector but also with representatives from other sectors) because a group of diverse members attains better results.
- Financial stability of long-term networks should be secured through grant schemes for networking or sustaining the existing networks and/or provide for possibility to cover expenses related to participation in network activities through the existing projects.
- Funds should be secured for ad hoc coalitions.
- Long-term networks should strive towards a professional leadership (a coordinator) because it has been proved that then they are more successful in their work (as well as in securing financial support for projects).