

Roundtable report
Beyond Project Networking:
Platform 112 – for Croatia of the Rule of Law

Friday, 15 June 2012,
9:30 – 12:00
Human Rights House, Selska cesta 112c, Zagreb

At the start of the round table discussion, representatives of the Platform 112 – For Croatia of the Rule of Law, Mr. Ljubo Manojlović (Serbian Democratic Forum), Ms. Milana Romić (Human Rights House Zagreb) and Ms. Sanja Sarnavka (B.a.B.e.), made a short presentation on the history and work of this CSO network and provided examples of good practices and lobbying experiences. The panelists described the process by which 19 CSOs formed the network Platform 112, and presented program areas, within which the network implements their public advocacy activities (quality of democracy, the fight against corruption and for public interest, equality and human dignity, the heritage of the war, facing the past and rebuilding of peace and building of stable and democratic government institutions, which provide equal access to justice for everyone). It was also pointed out that Platform 112 provided an impetus for the Government of the Republic of Croatia to make several steps forward in the area of the network's activity, by preparing and presenting reports on the readiness of the Republic of Croatia to close Chapter 23 in negotiating accession to the EU. Amendments have been made to the laws and bylaws on free legal help, the controversial Law on Golf Courses, concerning compensation for damaged property of returnees and public announcements of positions and reports on the negotiations with the EU.

The panelists also presented their activities aimed at various target groups – the Government of the Republic of Croatia, National Committee for Monitoring the Accession Negotiations of the Republic of Croatia to the European Union, as well as political parties, EU institutions and the Croatian media.

The following factors have been pointed out as success factors in the public advocacy process:

- External factors, which include the importance of advocacy issues for the political elite, as well as the openness of EU Institutions for the opinions of CSOs, and
- Internal factors, which relate to the reputation and credibility of organisations – network members (within the civil sector, as well as within political and wider public), trust and cooperation within the network, good understanding of relevant issues, ability to quickly and collaboratively gather and analyze information to create reports and public statements, well developed contacts with citizens, but also experience and good contacts with representatives of Croatian media.

The panelists specifically highlighted Platform 112 engagement in ensuring free legal help, as one of the key elements of securing a rule of law in the Republic of Croatia and they expressed their belief that the current legal and implementation solutions in the area of free legal help are still inadequate for most citizens, who truly need it. Likewise, the panelists also feel that the work of organisations and CSO networks in the area of public advocacy still represents one of the key factors in protection of human rights in the Republic of Croatia. At the same time, the overarching attitude is that all the necessary reforms have still not been done and that there is a string of areas in which the state still isn't truly effective in protecting rights guaranteed through relevant laws, which are not being properly enforced as it is.

Specific problem areas pointed out by the panelists relate to media coverage and the sustainability of advocacy initiatives in Croatian civil society. At the same time, as far as presenting the work of advocacy CSOs and their networks in the media is concerned, a general lack of interest and a sensationalistic approach of “profit” media was noted, as well as, in certain cases, problems related to manipulative reporting. Thus, the problem of visibility of such CSOs arises, even though the work done by Platform 112 as CSO network has shown a high level of maturity of the involved CSOs. This is also visible in the constant rise in the number of member organizations, as well as organisations supporting this network.

The problem of long-term sustainability, on the other hand, relates to the lack of formal sources of funding the work of the CSO networks, which is why financing is done “ad hoc”, most often from project funds of bigger network CSO members. Besides, unsystematic funding creates also the problem of regional representation of CSOs, considering that organizations outside of Zagreb mostly lack funds to participate in the meetings with representatives of state institutions, or take part in cooperation with larger organizations stationed in the capital.

After the panelists' presentations, a moderated discussion ensued, within which several key problems and problem areas were identified. Representatives of CSOs pointed to the passivity of the citizens and the low level of social activism or involvement in the work done by civil society. Some of the reasons for this state might be a low sensitivity of citizens towards these issues, but also a predominant belief that positive social changes cannot be initiated in Croatia. This can partly be ascribed to the way media report on the social and political issues, especially as concerns civil society. Also, representatives of organizations dealing with psychological and other forms of counseling pointed to numerous personal problems citizens deal with, the widespread issue of depression and addiction, as well as other factors that make an active participation in political and other issues difficult. Thus, the question is raised on how to mobilize citizens for activities and themes handled by CSOs in the future. Representatives of the Government Office for Cooperation with NGOs emphasized the readiness of state institutions to resolve these issues, mainly through education of civil servants and implementation of civil studies into the education system.

Considering the problem of civil education, representatives of CSOs present at the roundtable are convinced that its introduction into formal education system will not automatically solve the aforementioned problems, which can be supported with bad experiences of some other EU member states, where this subject was inadequately implemented. Representatives of the Homeland War Veterans organisations present at the Roundtable showed particular interest in realization of this program, as they already have considerable experience in this area. Within discussion, the Action Plan for the Education on Sustainable Development was highlighted as an example of good practice in this area, even though it was not fully implemented.

Thus, in terms of visibility as much as sustainability, the key issue remains realization of partnership between CSOs and political parties, as well as activities of informal education, which should help in changing the attitudes and perceptions of the public. However, it has been established that there are forms of short-term support for the increase of visibility and representation in media - not just for CSOs working in public advocacy area, but for the civil society as a whole. This can be achieved by stimulating non-profit media listed at the end of this Report, as formulated in conclusions of the Roundtable.

Further discussion, in which representatives of CSOs and TACSO Croatia Office took part, emphasized the positive role of Platform 112 in Croatian civil society and its successful work. As a

recommendation for a better transfer of knowledge and experiences to other CSOs in the region, further strategic consideration of the work done by this network, its regional and local expansion and mobilization of citizens were pointed out. To facilitate easier inclusion of new organisations into the network, it would be useful to publish in a very visible way the “minimal” program elements with which an organisation needs to comply in order to become a member of the Platform.

The participants agreed on the following conclusions of the Roundtable:

- **In is necessary to establish a fund for financial assistance to ad-hoc CSO initiatives**, irrespective of whether they cover public advocacy or some other activity, considering that that the project/program form of financing is not appropriate for the aforementioned purpose. Namely, social needs to which CSOs respond with their ad-hoc initiatives develop in very dynamic way and cannot be easily predicted within the framework of “classic” project and program planning.
- It would be necessary to also secure **institutional support for individual organisations and CSO networks working in the area of public advocacy**.
- Representatives of organisations providing services of personal and family counseling, expressed a **need to recognize the final result of the counseling process (in the sense of increased wellbeing of the client) as a relevant criterion in calls for award of grants from public sources**.
- A need was also listed for **increased visibility of calls for award of grants to CSOs from public sources**, which would entail systematic publishing of relevant information in various media, including Croatian Radio Television as a public service. This also refers to publishing of other forms of information relevant for successful functioning of CSOs.
- To ensure the highest possible visibility of advocacy CSOs and their networks, as well as civil society as a whole, the participants **emphasised the need to open up a string of financing sources for non-profit media, whereby it was particularly emphasised that financing of non-profit media should become a strategic priority of the Electronic Media Diversity and Pluralism Incentive Fund**.
- The participants singled out the **importance of openness of the process and inclusion of as stakeholders as possible in the development and implementation of the program of civil education**. It is further thought that, no matter how this issue may be “covered” within the framework of formal education, it is still necessary to **recognize and encourage non-formal programs of civil education**. Participants recognized as a special problem the incomplete or late execution of appropriate educational themes and activities, as is currently the case with the *Action Plan for Education on Sustainable development*.
- **An appeal is made for amendments to the Law on Free Legal Assistance, which would secure a simple, complete and transparent implementation of free legal assistance**, as a part of crucial human right – the access to justice.

Report made by:
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Moderator