



**Government of the Republic of Croatia - Office for Cooperation with NGOs
and
Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs - Centre of Excellence**

SUMMARY REPORT

Regional workshop

TRACKING PROGRESS TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE STATE - CIVIL SOCIETY COOPERATION IN THE EU ACCESSION PROCESS

Zagreb, 22 November 2013

Background and objectives of the workshop

Creating more enabling environment for civil society development requires investment in empowering civil society organisations to be effective and accountable actors, as well as in building capacities of government bodies and policy makers to develop meaningful and constructive dialogue with civil society. Improving State-civil society relations is a necessary prerequisite for the sustainability and irreversibility of reforms undertaken in the European Union accession process. Following a number of activities undertaken in past years to establish better cooperation among government bodies from South East Europe in the area of civil society development, Croatian Government Office for Cooperation with NGOs and Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs - Centre for Excellence organized the regional workshop *Tracking progress towards sustainable state-civil society cooperation in the EU accession process*.

This event was part of the follow-up activities initiated during the Regional meeting of States institutions responsible for relations with civil society organisations, held in Zadar, Croatia in September 2012, as well as at the Conference on Relations between Public Administration Bodies and Civil Society Organizations, held in Ankara, Turkey in April 2013. In addition to representatives of State bodies responsible for cooperation with civil society organisations,

the workshop gathered several international CSO experts and representatives of international organizations/donor agencies.

The goal of the workshop was to enhance cooperation between South-East European State institutions in effective tracking of progress in creating enabling environment for civil society development. In view of the European Commission - DG Enlargement draft *Guidelines for support to civil society in the enlargement countries 2014-2020*, but also having in mind principles set in *The roots of democracy and sustainable development: Europe's engagement with Civil Society in External Actions*, the workshop provided opportunity for discussion on key indicators on the basis of which regular self-assessment of progress in the cooperation of State institutions and civil society organisations might be implemented, as precondition for sustainable reforms countries in the region have to undertake on their way to the European Union.

Key challenges identified and recommendations proposed by workshop participants

Civil society development is a complex process implying continuous dynamics of relations among citizens, CSOs, public and private sector in joint work for public good. In order to increase mutual trust and competencies to build up dialogue and opportunities for partnerships among CSOs, government bodies and EU, workshop participants addressed a number of challenges and proposed a series of recommendations for enhancing cooperation and support among South East Europe governments, civil society organisations and EU on civil society development issues.

In order to allow more systematic exchange as well as more open and transparent tracking of progress in the area of enabling environment for civil society development in enlargement countries, in addition to regular meetings organized by various stakeholders, there is a need for establishing new or adapting existing online tool/platform.

- 1. Establish new or adapt existing internet platform that will allow regular access to latest information on recent developments in the area of civil society development in enlargement countries. This (EU-CSO-government partnership triangle) platform would enable regular exchange of latest documents published by CSOs, governments, EU institutions, TACSO. The information on the internet platform should be structured around the key objectives/results/indicators proposed by the Guidelines for EU support to civil society in enlargement countries 2014-2020, so that progress in all countries can be easily followed. It would also allow broad dissemination of case studies, articles, toolkits, news stories, videos, and any other resources that could inspire or inform civil society development reformers in the region. The BCSDN-developed internet platform, built to facilitate exchange of***

information on civil society development, now residing with the Government Office for Cooperation with Civil Society in Serbia, provides for a ready-made tool to be used for such purpose.

At this stage, the benchmarks for monitoring progress in the area of civil society development in enlargement countries are yet to be harmonized. Given rather high level of consensus among key stakeholders on the need to bring more clarity in the assessment of each country progress in this area, it is expected that DG enlargement/TACSO/BCSDN/ECNL efforts will result in common framework supported by CSO networks, governments and international public and private donors in South East Europe region.

- 2. Reach an agreement on country-specific benchmarks for EU support to civil society taking into consideration local context and measuring of progress based on merits which will allow for the measurement of progress at country level. The analysis of country-specific benchmarks can be complemented by more in-depth reports prepared by CSOs/ independent researchers allowing more detailed insight into specific topics.***

DG enlargement Guidelines for EU support to civil society in enlargement countries, 2014-2020, are not yet widely recognized as important and valuable instrument for promoting reforms in the area of enabling environment for civil society development. The EC Guidelines will only produce results if it is contextualized and if clear and measureable country-specific benchmarks are defined in cooperation between civil society-Governments-EU. Additional effort should be invested in promoting this instrument among government bodies at all levels, CSOs, academic community, media and citizens.

- 3. Organize a kick-off event at regional level as well as a series of national events where Guidelines would be promoted, along with the Internet platform once it will be established***

The implementation of DG enlargement Guidelines implies the involvement of various government departments covering wide range of policy issues. There is a need to formalize the involvement of all government departments in implementing reforms required to meet the objectives set by the guidelines. In addition to government offices responsible for cooperation with civil society, all relevant ministries should be adequately involved and regularly allowed opportunity for dialogue with CSOs and exchange with peer ministries from the region at thematic, cross-sectoral events.

- 4. Governments in enlargement countries should produce Annual report on implementing the Guidelines separate or where no specific institution is in charge***

of coordinating/leading civil society issues, as part of the input for the EC Progress Report.

- 5. The topics related to safeguarding space for civil society should be given more prominent place in political dialogue between the EU and national government.*
- 6. TACSO should organized regional thematic events – peer-to-peer discussions and seminars/ webinars on specific indicators proposed by the Guidelines (ex: meetings of representatives of ministries of finance on CSO related fiscal /tax policies, etc.). Such events can also be used for specific discussions related to particular indicators, quality of data collected, mechanisms of collecting it, ways of reporting, looking into how self-assessments can support the whole process and make it more effective and efficient. Furthermore, it is also important to explore opportunities to organise a cross-sectoral events where all relevant players could be practically engaged in discussions and awareness raising related to: 1) using a guidance as a monitoring tool, b) using a guidance as a programming tool, especially in the context of IPA II being sectoral, and support to CSOs being a horizontal.*

In addition to more rigorous conditionality and a series of political and financial support instruments, meeting the priorities set by the Guidelines will require more intensive awareness raising and promotion of best practice examples. Balancing “stick and carrot approach”, using positive reinforcement, rewards and recognition seems to be necessary in order to shape the appropriate behaviour across various government departments in such a demanding policy area, as civil society development.

- 7. Introduce Annual Civil Society Enabling Environment Awards competition for public institutions in enlargement countries. The annual Awards will recognize government initiatives/ public programs in IPA countries for their efforts to become more open, accountable and responsive to civil society and citizens. Every year can focus on different topic. For example, 2014 inaugural topic can be Involvement of civil society in public policy making. Similar award could be organized for most successful practices of CSO advocacy.*

Building capacities of government bodies and policy makers to develop meaningful and constructive dialogue with civil society is a necessary prerequisite for the sustainability and irreversibility of reforms undertaken in the European Union accession process. Therefore more systematic approach to capacity building of civil servants across government departments needs to be developed, especially for senior-level management.

- 8. Regional School for Public Administration (ReSPA) should hold regular seminars on State-CSO cooperation for civil servants, as this is a pre-condition of effective public administration reform. In addition, all national schools for public administration should introduce this type of training in their regular annual plans of activities.*

Regular communication and cooperation among government bodies dealing with civil society development related policy issues proved to be highly beneficial and should be continued and formalized wherever possible.

9. Organize internships, focused study visits and other forms of exchange among government bodies to support effective implementation of national policies influencing civil society enabling environment.

During past twenty years substantial expertise was developed in South East Europe in the area of civil society development. However, fulfilling objectives set by DG Enlargement Guidelines sometimes requires specific skills and knowledge that cannot be necessarily found within national governments/ CSOs in a specific country.

10. In order to allow more extensive exchange of innovative solutions and practices, TACSO should develop and host more effective networking mechanism (ex. part of internet platform mentioned in recommendation 1) to encourage peer learning and knowledge sharing on critical civil society enabling environment issues among civil society, government, and private sector participants. In near future, hosting of such mechanism could be taken over by a regional CSO network.

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