



BALKAN
CIVIL
SOCIETY
DEVELOPMENT
NETWORK

PROGRAMME

Skopje, July 2009

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1 BACKGROUND

1.1. General context

The Balkan region (including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia and Slovenia), found itself in a situation of destabilization and transition in the last ten years. The domestic and international efforts significantly contributed to overcoming of these two problems. Regardless of these efforts, the **political** situation remains delicate in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. The frequent changes of political elites and increased apathy of voters disables the strengthening of democracy in the region. The primary political goal of all the governments is the integration in the Euro-Atlantic alliances.

The **economic** transition in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo was made difficult by the consequences of the war and isolation. The economic transition was an additional strain for all the countries. The GDP – with the exception of Croatia – is on a low level. The high level of unemployment is another characteristic of the countries of the Balkan, especially Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina with up-to 35 % of population unemployed. The productivity is lower than that of the countries of Central Europe and the reform of the financial sector and privatization are modest. Signs of structural strengthening are noticed in the modest growth of GDP, control of the deficit and the budget. An additional challenge to the growth and development is the world economic crisis from 2008.

The civil society in the Balkan countries marks a similar dynamic development, especially in those emerging from the SFRY. The modern civil society in the Balkan mainly began to develop near the end of the 19th with the emergence of the first voluntary organizations, literature and cultural circles. In Slovenia and Croatia an important role has been played by the Catholic Church which initiated the emergence of humanitarian organizations even earlier. After the Second World War, with the creation of the socialist states, the governments looked at civil society as a threat, thus limiting the voluntary activities and put the civil society organizations (CSOs) under control of the communist parties. In this period, the basic forms of association were the sports and cultural associations.

End of 1980s and the beginning of 1990s, after the fall of the socialist governments and the fall of Yugoslavia, a more intensive development of CSOs begins in the newly established states. Civil society is lead by the ecological movements, which for example in Bulgaria played an important role in the fall of the socialist regime. Later on, other forms of CSOs emerge. Establishment of many on the ground of former Yugoslavia was a response to the wars, refugee crises and social disorder.

The period of transition from communism to democracy is followed by intensive political developments which unavoidably have their influence on CSOs, and especially their relations with the government as was the case especially in Serbia. The accession to the European Union, Slovenia, Bulgaria and Romania improves framework for the civil society-state relations, but on the other hand provides for a financial support vacuum drawing sever consequences and break to the sector.

1.2. BCSDN vision, mission and values

BCSDN's vision is sustainable peace, harmony and prosperity of societies in the Balkan region.

BCSDN's mission is to empower civil society in the Balkans through sharing and developing local practices, concepts and strengthening civil society actors.

BCSDN's values are:

- respect of the universal human rights and of the rights of all citizens-men and women of all nationalities, religions and cultures;
- development of a pluralistic and participative democracy;
- socio-economic development and cultural prosperity;
- social cohesion, integration and harmony;
- care for the environment and sustainable development;
- social justice and equality;
- respect for diversity and non-violence.

1.3. Problem statement

The civil society sector in the Balkan region is diverse it is faced with increasing similar challenges described below and is facing the same drop in resources, caused both by the exit of foreign donors and the effects of the economic and financial crisis from 2008.

From the 90s conflicts and ethnic fights which destabilized the region, the Balkan countries experienced a “boom” in the development of their civil society sector. This development was primarily put into action by the international donors and organizations in the fields of human rights, protection and reconstruction. However, while there now is a large number of CSOs their **relative youngness** constrains them with many challenges in terms of their institutional, organizational, technical and financial capacities. There is **limited exchange of information and networking**, which could help in mitigating lacking resources and capacities by pulling these together. The **lacking framework for structural inclusion of CSOs** in the decision- and policy-making or lack of their full implementation (the case in Croatia), in many of the countries result with small influence on CSOs in the decision-making and management of public issues which concern citizens and development actors, mainly on local level. All of the abovementioned limitations together with the considerable dependency on foreign donors limit the capabilities and capacities of CSOs to be completely included in the creation and implementation of the public dialog policies and sectoral policies.

Based on the national reports from the CIVICUS - Civil Society Index research¹, the civil society faces other common limitations and problems. In all of the countries, the **level of participation of citizens in CSO activities is low**, and very few of the organizations can be distinguished with wide membership (exception are the syndicates, some humanitarian, ecological and women’s associations). A small minority of citizens, i.e. up to 35% in Croatia, participate in the work of CSOs, with the exceptions of Slovenia (66%) and Serbia (47%). A large number of the organizations are created and lead by the priorities of the donors which are their major financial supporters, which results lacking wider public support for their work. Consequently, CSOs activities directed at informing and providing support to citizens do little in really strengthening and motivating them to be active.

Another significant common problem is the **lack of balanced geographical distribution and insufficient representation of marginalized groups**. The majority of the organizations are based in the developed urban regions, and some marginalized groups, such as ethnic, religious minorities and the poor, remain insufficiently represented, especially in the management of the organizations.

In all the countries, **the support by the state and the business sector is minimal**. Organizations are thus mainly supported by the external financial resources. The only positive exception is Croatia where annually 80 million Euros are allocated on central level, and together with the local level, over 200 million Euros for activities of the civil society sector. The European Union programmes and pre-accession assistance² is becoming one of the main donors and support of CSOs.

The **low level of trust** is a further common problem. The social capital is also very small and only minority of the citizens think that the other people can be trusted. This is especially a characteristic of the post-communist countries, where the socialist regime contributed to directing the trust primarily toward the family and close friends.

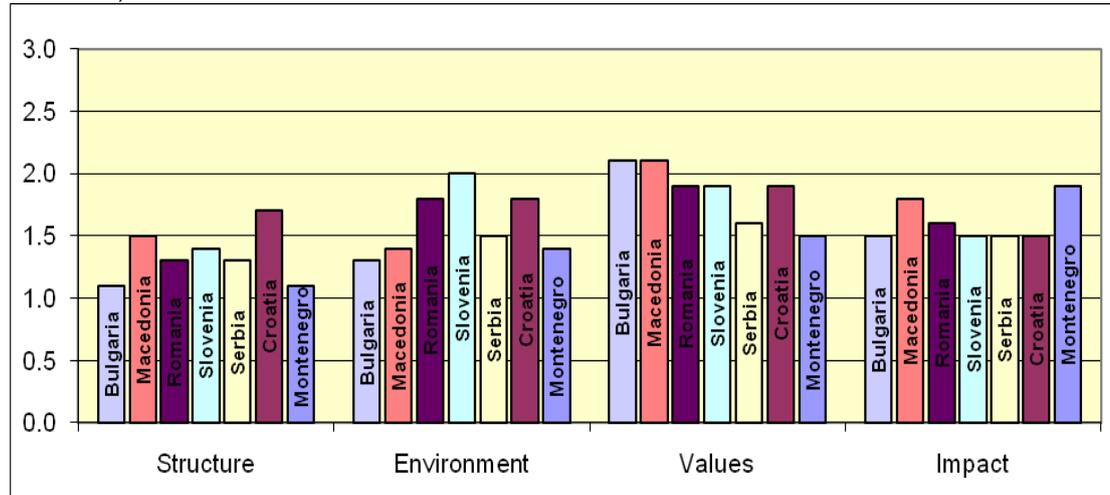
The **unfavorable socio-economic context** includes elements such as prevalence of the poverty, illiteracy, social inequality, war or conflict. Since the autumn in 2008, the world economic crisis additionally hardens the situation.

¹ Up until now there are researches published for Bulgaria, Montenegro, Croatia, Macedonia, Romania, Slovenia, Serbia.

² Through the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA).

Table 1: Comparison of civil society development in Balkan countries

The table summarized analysis of the 4 dimensions (characteristics) of the civil society: structure, environment, values and impact for Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia and Slovenia.



Source: CIVICUS Global Survey of the State of Civil Society: Volume 1, V. Finn Heinrich (ed.), 2007.

The influence of the CSOs and their role in society is still fragile. Their influence over the processes of decision-making and implementation is in most countries focused on sequence of social issues, such as giving social services, children's protection (for example Romania), women's protection (for example Macedonia). When monitoring of the work of the government and demanding accountability, CSOs in all countries have rather low capacity. Such example is the national budgetary process, where very few organizations express their attitudes. At the same time, organizations lack the appropriate resources in terms of research and capacities for advocacy. The evaluation for most of the countries also shows their limited social influence, which the organizations achieve through strengthening of the citizens and satisfying of their social needs, mostly of the marginalized groups.

1.4. Previous activities

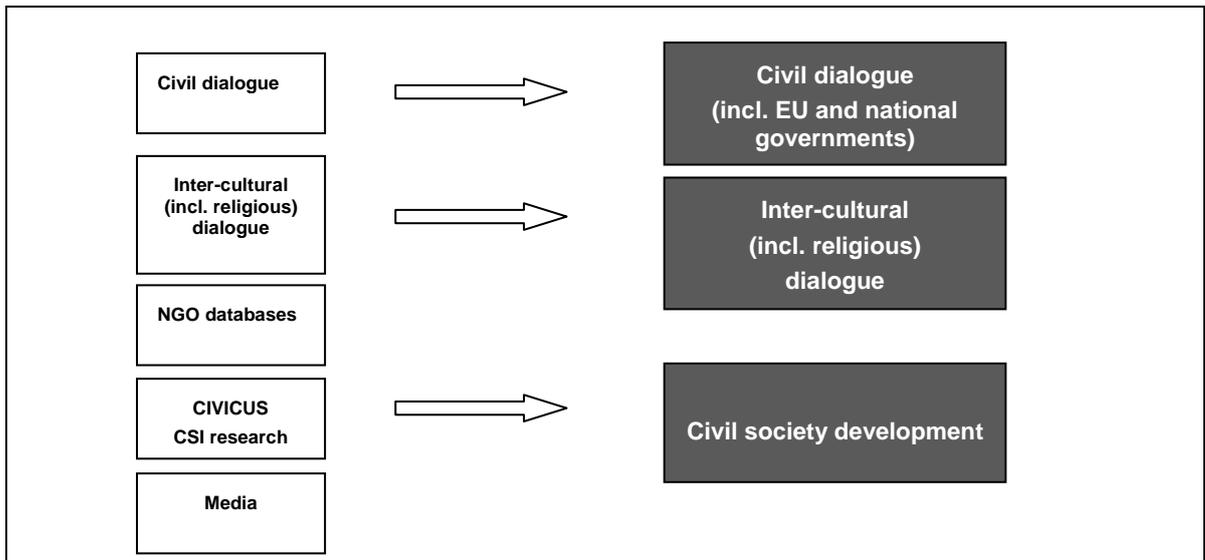
In the frameworks of the **initial pilot Capacity-Building Hub program (2001-2003)**, 5 visits, 3 partner meetings, 5 trainings, 7 visits for exchange and consultations were held. A web-directory training offer and an address book were published. In December 2003, the initiative by 13 organizations grew into the **Balkan Civil Society development Network (BCSDN)**. Between 2004 and 2007, the network implemented an intensive capacity-building programme. Six trainings, 2 study visits to Brussels, 3 workshops, an on-the-job training, 1 conference, a EU help desk service on topics such as EU financing, advocacy and lobbying, mobilization of resources of the private sector, networking and partnership, relations with the media and civil dialog, decentralization, diaconal practices, and volunteering, were organized. Over 470 participants from the civil society sector in the region and wider participated in these activities. In the information-sharing and partnership support, the network established a web-site (www.balkancsd.net) available in English and 3 local languages with updated news for activities in the network. The website featured 9,000 visitors in programme period and includes access to other BCSDN services to CSOs such as the Weekly –email alerts (186 issues published) sent to approx. 700 addresses, Balkan Civil Practices periodical published in English and 3 local languages (5 issues published so far). The network has an established electronic mailing list, a newsletter and 4 databases (members, trainers, donors, projects) which makes it the focal point for cooperation of civil society organizations in the region and globally.

2 STRATEGY AND APPROACH

2.1 Strategy

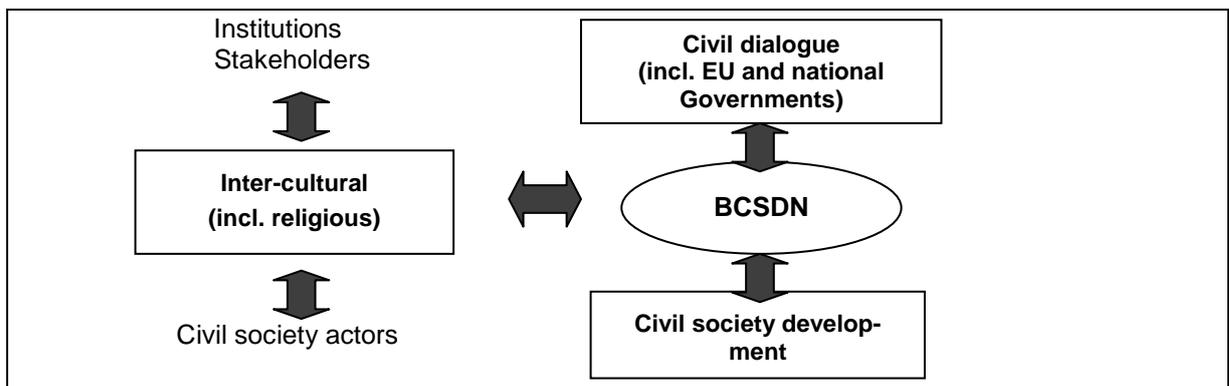
The strategy consists of **five themes** (civil dialogue, inter-cultural (incl. religious) dialogue, NGO databases, CIVICUS CSI research and media), which form **three focus areas**:

- **Civil dialogue** (incl. EU and national governments);
- **Inter-cultural (incl. religious) dialogue**;
- **Civil society development** (incl. NGO databases, CIVICUS CSI research and media).



EU integration and networking and **media** were outlined as specific themes which can function as cross-cutting or specific themes for action by the network. For example: EU networking can be measure for civil society development in the region in the context of EU integration or a measures for improvement of civil dialogue on EU and national level, but can also function independently as a specific theme including both measures. Working with the media can be measure for civil society development as a way for improving image of civil society in the general public or a measure for improvement of civil dialogue through improved networking and development of non-profit media.

While the **civil dialogue themes** are focused on the relations with the public government/international/inter-governmental institutions and stakeholders, the **civil society development** is directed mainly towards improvement of the “internal” environment between civil society actors, mainly CSOs. **Inter-cultural (incl. religious) dialogue**, as the third priority theme, provides for a “link” between the two in addressing issues of cultural and religious diversity as an underlying precondition for positive development of the region and individual member countries.



2.2 Approach

BCSDN realizes its goals mainly through advocacy and lobbying activities by:

- **developing joint positions** and **statements** on initiatives and areas of interest common to all member organisations and by taking necessary action;
- **coordinating** and **cooperating** with **other organisations, networks** and **actors** on joint positions and initiatives;
- **coordinating cooperation between its members** and developing joint projects and initiatives;
- **facilitating exchange of information and experience** between its members and national and local state institutions and the EU;
- **coordinating and compiling researches** and relevant information;
- **coordinating capacity-building** and other events.

3 GOALS AND TARGET GROUP

3.1 Mid-term goals

Goals of the BCSDN are to:

- increase the role of civil society by strengthening its voice in policy- and decision-making on national, regional and EU level;
- strengthen communication, coordination and cooperation between civil society actors in the Balkan region;
- promote civil dialogue between civil society actors, state institutions and the European Union in order to influence public policies;
- develop civil society by increasing knowledge and skills of civil society actors as a base for higher quality of their work;
- promote intercultural dialogue and culture of resource-sharing as a base for efficient exchange and networking.

3.2 Target group and areas

3.2.1. Target group

BCSDN target group are civil society development and resource organizations. Primarily, the focus is on its 12 member organizations and partners. Its target group are also national institutions and international governmental (IGOs) organizations. Among national institutions, focus is on national public bodies/offices for cooperation with CSOs in member countries. Among IGOs, focus is on the EU institutions, Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)³ and related inter-governmental initiatives in the Balkan region.

BCSDN promotes the principle of inclusiveness of marginalized and vulnerable groups in the society (incl. Roma, inhabitants of rural areas)

3.2.2. Target areas

BCSDN works in countries of the Balkan region, Europe and internationally according to its mission, vision and goals.

³ RCC is the successor of Stability Pact for South-East Europe.

4 RESULTS AND ACTIVITIES

4.1. Civil society a partner in policy- and decision-making on national and EU level

4.1.1. Strengthening of civil dialogue structures on national level

Civil society dialogue or civil dialogue is in short defined as “fairly structured practices of dialogue between national, EU and international institution and NGOs”⁴. In the Western Balkan region, practices and experiences of such relations and activities exists on national level through attempts to define relations, legal framework and cooperation between public authorities (both central and local) and civil society organizations (CSOs) fore mostly in form of government’s strategies for cooperation with civil society. Different pace and models exist among the countries in the region, with Croatia as the frontrunner. Due to similarity of experiences, cultural closeness and same strategic objective of EU integration, the institutionalization of relations with civil society is faces with similar challenges and difficulties.

The scope of activities designed to support strengthening of civil dialogue structures on national level is: sharing of experience, comparative analysis on structures and best practices in civil dialogue, practical exchange activities or “twinnings”, study visits, regional workshop for sharing experience and best practice on civil dialogue.

4.1.2. Strengthening civil dialogue vis-a-vis the European Union

In its 2007 Enlargement Strategy, the European Commission for the first time identified civil society development and dialogue as a core priority of the enlargement process in the Western Balkans and announced setting up of a Facility to support it. As the 2008 Enlargement Strategy underlined and Olli Rehn, the Enlargement Commissioner further confirmed in his speech on the DG Enlargement Civil Society Conference in April, 2008: “the civil society plays a key role in the EU accession process in Southeast Europe. [...]. Moving closer to EU membership requires both political will and citizens’ support. Civil society organization can help in achieving this.” With a budget of up to 18 million Euros yearly, the support under the Facility will significantly determine the shape of the further development of civil society and support to local CSOs in the Western Balkans. While CSOs have been recognized as partners and motors of change in the EC documents, the materialization of this through a meaningful, timely and effective consultation process for programming of EC assistance and progress of Governments towards EU integration is still to be implemented.

The scope of activities designed to support the strengthening civil dialogue vis-a-vis the European Union include: publication of a policy paper, workshop with EU stakeholders, advocacy (incl. joint statements and letters) to EU institutions, cooperation with EU networks and other stakeholders.

⁴ Fazi, Elodie & Smith, Jeremy: “Civil dialogue: making it work better,” Civil Society Contact Group, Brussels: 2006, p. 21.

4.2. Strong and active civil society actors informed and able to create cross-border and multi-stakeholder cross-sectoral partnerships

4.2.1. Managing the BCSDN Secretariat

The limited exchange of information and networking between CSOs is best mitigated by establishing coordinative and networking structures by pulling resources and expertise of CSOs together. The BCSDN Secretariat aims at communicating, coordinating and supporting cooperation (the 3Cs) of its 12 member organizations including development, coordination and management of joint projects and initiatives, maintaining communication between members and network bodies, maintaining communication with stakeholders and promotion of the work of the network, compilation and distribution of relevant information and initiation of joint actions.

In 2009 the Secretariat will be focused on the completion of the process of formalization and legal registration of the network, including all preparation and organization of the founding assembly (incl. all documents) and preparation and leading of legal proceedings for registration.

4.2.2. Website and Weekly e-mail alerts

Sharing of information in timely, effective and useful manner is crucial to improved capacity for cooperation and networking of CSOs on both national, regional and EU level. The BCSDN website and the Weekly e-mail alerts are two main core activities since 2003 of the network which support galvanizing joint initiatives and project by the network and individual member organizations. The website is the focal point for cooperation of CSOs in the region. The Weekly e-mail alerts started with a distribution list of 30, which has grown to approx. 700 subscribers currently and still growing. Both resources have demonstrated that by pulling resources and information together a difference can be made in the ability for CSOs to be able to forge partnership across boundaries and across sectors.

Further activities include: re-design of the website to make it more interactive and inclusive for members to post information directly, provision of self-financing of the Weekly e-mail alerts by sponsors and CSOs, improved sharing of local information and best practices by BCSDN members and other CSOs.

4.3. Sustainable and effective CSOs able to be a motor of change and offer solution to problems of their societies

There is double challenge faced by CSOs in the Balkans. The democratization, reconciliation and economic transformation process is still far from completed. CSOs, although relatively big in numbers, are young in its existence and fragile in support and structure. Its public image is often low as the dependence on external funding sometimes precedes the addressing of immediate concerns of the citizens. In order to be able to address the first challenge, CSOs have to address the second more immediate one.

While, the BCSDN member organizations have been addressing both of the challenges on national level, sharing of experience and best (or worst) practices can enable of transfer of know-how and provision of already workable solutions from one country and society to the other. This can provide both for better multiplying effects and sustainability of solutions already established and not "reinventing the wheel".

The scope of activities designed to support this are: sharing of information, practices, knowledge and resources on civil society sector research (e.g. CIVCUS Civil Society Index), state funding for CSOs (e.g. NGO budget lines, lotteries, sponsorships and donations) and law on citizens associations and foundation (currently, at least three laws are in process of revision – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Serbia).

4.4. Respect for multiculturalism and shared culture of resource sharing as a base for development societies in the Balkans

The multifaceted structure of society in the Balkans is especially rich. But in the last two decades, this has expressed itself in terms of highlighting differences and not diversity as a positive value and characteristic of societies. Thus, promotion of multiculturalism and inter-cultural dialogue is key to promotion of positive values and affirmation of the role of CSOs through the support to status and problems of the most marginalized and vulnerable groups.

The scope of activities designed to support this are: exchange between religious-based and ecumenical organizations on the issue of inter-religious cooperation, inclusion of ecumenical CSOs into the wider civil society, etc.

THA/THA
No. 02-3/1-2009
Skopje, 6th July, 2009

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