BALKAN CIVIL SOCIETY
DEVELOPMENT NETWORK

BCSDN Strategic Outlook

2021-2024

Skopje, Macedonia
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1. OVERVIEW

The preparation of the Mid-Term Strategy of the Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN) was done in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, when numerous circumstances, such as closed borders, restrictions on physical meetings and the shrinking of civic space, posed significant challenges for conducting an inclusive and accountable strategic planning process, as the network has been committed and accustomed to. These challenges were to some extent overcome thanks to several processes conducted in the past year and a half that served for collecting the feedback from BCSDN's members, such as a Diversity and Inclusion audit, the BCSDN's first accountability report against the self-assessment framework of the Code of Conduct, and the first external evaluation of the network's performance. In addition, a thorough due diligence process was conducted on request by Sida - BCSDN's largest donor. All these processes, as well as the collaborative work of the BCSDN Executive Office (EO) with its members on most of its activities, provided sufficient input for the preparation of a new mid-term Strategy of the network.

Having in mind BCSDN's commitment to continuous monitoring, adapting and learning on one hand, and the higher level of unpredictability of the political, socio-economic developments affecting the state of play with the civic space and the civil society operating environment on the other, this Strategy is to be viewed as a 'live' document that will be continuously reviewed and might be revised depending on ongoing developments and circumstances.

2. CONTEXT

POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

The general situation in the Western Balkans has faced lingering socio-economic and political challenges, which have been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting the environment and operations of civil society.

The EU integration of the Western Balkans has been moving slowly and the transformational power of the EU enlargement policy has been losing its strength. After eight years of accession negotiations with Montenegro and six years with Serbia, Montenegro has opened all 33 negotiation chapters and provisionally closed only three, while Serbia has opened 18 chapters, and has provisionally closed only two. Kosovo still waits on the liberalization of the EU visa regime. Although the Stabilization and Association Agreement between Kosovo and the EU is still in force, as well as the European Reform Agenda launched in November 2016, the implementation of activities that would accelerate the country's EU Integration has been slow. At the beginning of 2019, North Macedonia changed its name by enforcing the Prespa Agreement with Greece, paving the way towards NATO accession and opening of the EU negotiations. In May 2019, the European Commission issued a positive unconditional recommendation to start the accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. In October, however, the European Council decided to postpone the decision, and none of the two countries has started negotiations yet, giving rise to deep dissatisfaction in both countries. An Ipsos poll, conducted in 2020, shows that public opinion in the Western Balkans continues to be overwhelmingly

in favour of EU membership (82.5% on average). However, significant number of citizens think that their countries will never join the EU and are concerned that "the EU does not want [them]". More than 44.9% of respondents in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 42% in Serbia, 40.5% in North Macedonia, and 36.8% in Albania expect their country to become an EU member only after 2040, or possibly never.

The slow accession process, the repeated blockage of the start of the accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, the lack of effect of the EU's rigorous democratic conditionality in overcoming state capture and patronage in the Western Balkans, as well as the bad examples set by some EU countries in (not) respecting the core EU values of democracy and rule of law, have caused irreparable damages to the credibility of the EU enlargement policy. As a consequence, the commitment and trust has been in decline by all stakeholders involved in the EU accession process, including the political elites, the institutions on both sides of the process and the civil society in the WBT countries.

The political environment in most countries remained unfavourable. Political crises, frequent boycotts, early elections and lack of meaningful positive changes have been the norm across the region. Further deterioration of the situation with media freedom and fortified media polarization continued almost in all the countries. Pro-government media houses have become increasingly torn between the political party and the public interest, acting as an extended arm of their governments, reporting in sensational and selective manner, spinning the news and promoting governmental positions, with political powers being the actual media editors-in-chief.

Similar to the political state of play, the economic situation has also deteriorated, and the region's already weak economies have been hit hard by the consequences of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, with economic activity in the region projected to contract by 4.8 percent in 2020. SMEs, which have been hit the hardest by the pandemic, make up 99% of all firms in the Western Balkans, and generate around 65% of total business sector value added and account for 73% of total business sector employment.

The lack of attractive jobs and poor living standards has been pushing many people to migrate to the countries in Western Europe causing brain drain, which is a trend that can only be expected to get worse after the pandemic. The high levels of unemployment, especially among the youth, as well as the widespread corruption, have remained a serious concern. The public debt, too, has been worsening, with countries facing growing fiscal risks by the rapidly rising public debts, undermining potential growth prospects.

CIVIC SPACE and CIVIL SOCIETY ENVIRONMENT

The civil society in the region has noted a dynamic development playing a pivotal role in the recent years and especially during the pandemic in serving to the marginalized groups, in promoting and advocating for accountability of the public institutions and for sustainable democratic development.

Immediate triggers of discontent, yet with far deeper roots, have led to increased civic engagement, unrest of thousands of citizens' demands for justice. The challenges caused with the pandemic have additionally prompted significant increase in grassroots-led initiatives and emergence of professional organizations advocating for their interests and rights.

There were certain achievements (which civil society has been advocating for) that contributed towards a more enabling operational environment. Despite the achievements and the CSOs' efforts, an "increasingly difficult environment for civil society" and shrinking of the civic space in the Western Balkans had been noted in several reports, including the EU Enlargement Packages. Negative rhetoric towards CSOs used by government officials, politicians, and media

outlets have been creating hostility towards the civil society, especially organizations focused on human rights, women's rights, and good governance, while journalists and activists have been targeted for their investigative work.

Civil society, being heavily donor-driven, has not been able to push back to these attacks, and only a handful of organizations in each country have been involved in the 'fight' for protecting the civic space. In almost all the countries, public funds continue to be distributed in a non-transparent and selective manner, often favouring pro-government organizations and thus undercutting the independence and credibility of the sector.

In terms of cooperation between CSOs and the state, the situation has improved only in North Macedonia following the change of the government, and to slight extent in Kosovo. In the rest of the countries, substantial civil society involvement has been lacking. In addition to Turkey, where the overall situation has been most worrying, hostile attitude towards CSOs has been building up also in Serbia, with CSOs being portrayed as political opponents to the ruling party and enemies of the state in the majority of pro-government media. This situation is further exacerbated by the frequent founding of GONGOs (government-organized non-governmental organizations), which do not only receive state financial aid, but also use the space they are given in pro-government media to discredit CSOs – which they have been doing with a long-standing tradition and great expertise. Furthermore, the state's lack of interest in the work of the civil sector is reflected in the abolishment of the Office for Cooperation with the Civil Society in Serbia towards the end of 2020.

The legislative and tax framework for CSOs continues to pose challenges for donors. A shared characteristic among the countries in the region is that foreign donors are the dominant source of funding, and that CSO funding lacks diversification. Individual and corporate giving in the region is still insufficiently practiced. Moreover, practice shows that state funding is not a viable source for CSOs as it is limited in the ability to support the work of CSOs, in addition to the lack of transparency in the distribution and management of public funding. In all of the countries, the legislation and policies pertaining to employment do not take into account the specific nature of CSO operation. Therefore, employment in CSOs is still quite low in practice. On the other hand, volunteering continues to be a practice for CSOs in the majority of countries, which is mainly due to stimulating regulation, although in some countries special laws are still to be enacted, such as in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Turkey.

In regards to CSO capacities, despite significant investments by donors in capacity building programs over the past two decades, CSOs still have limited organizational capacities. As indicated in the Assessment on the State of the Enabling Environment and Capacities of Civil Society against the Guidelines for EU support to Civil Society in Enlargement Region, 2014-2020, for the period 2018-2019, which was commissioned by TACSO and conducted by BCSDN, the state with the capacities of CSOs across the region is diverse. CSOs received capacity building support mainly from foreign donors, but this has not proven to be sufficient for them to be sustainable. With a huge staff turnover and untargeted support, capacities of CSOs in general are not at a much higher level as two decades ago. Still, similar needs exist, but in some areas, there are now higher demand due to environmental changes, i.e. communications, transparency and accountability. Due to lack of stable funding, the majority of CSOs lack the strategic approach to capacity building. Their decisions on capacity building are mostly made on an ad-hoc basis, depending on the offer of free trainings and other capacity building activities, as a vast majority of CSOs do not invest their own funds in this area. Having this in mind, there is a large discrepancy between larger CSOs, whose capacities resemble those of professional organizations, and the small and especially grassroot CSOs in the region. On the other hand, there seems to be a growing trend of detachment of the bigger and more professional CSOs from their constituencies, as they tend to focus more on conforming to the rules and procedures implied by their donors, instead of building trust and relationships with the constituencies they serve.

3. BCSDN THEORY OF CHANGE
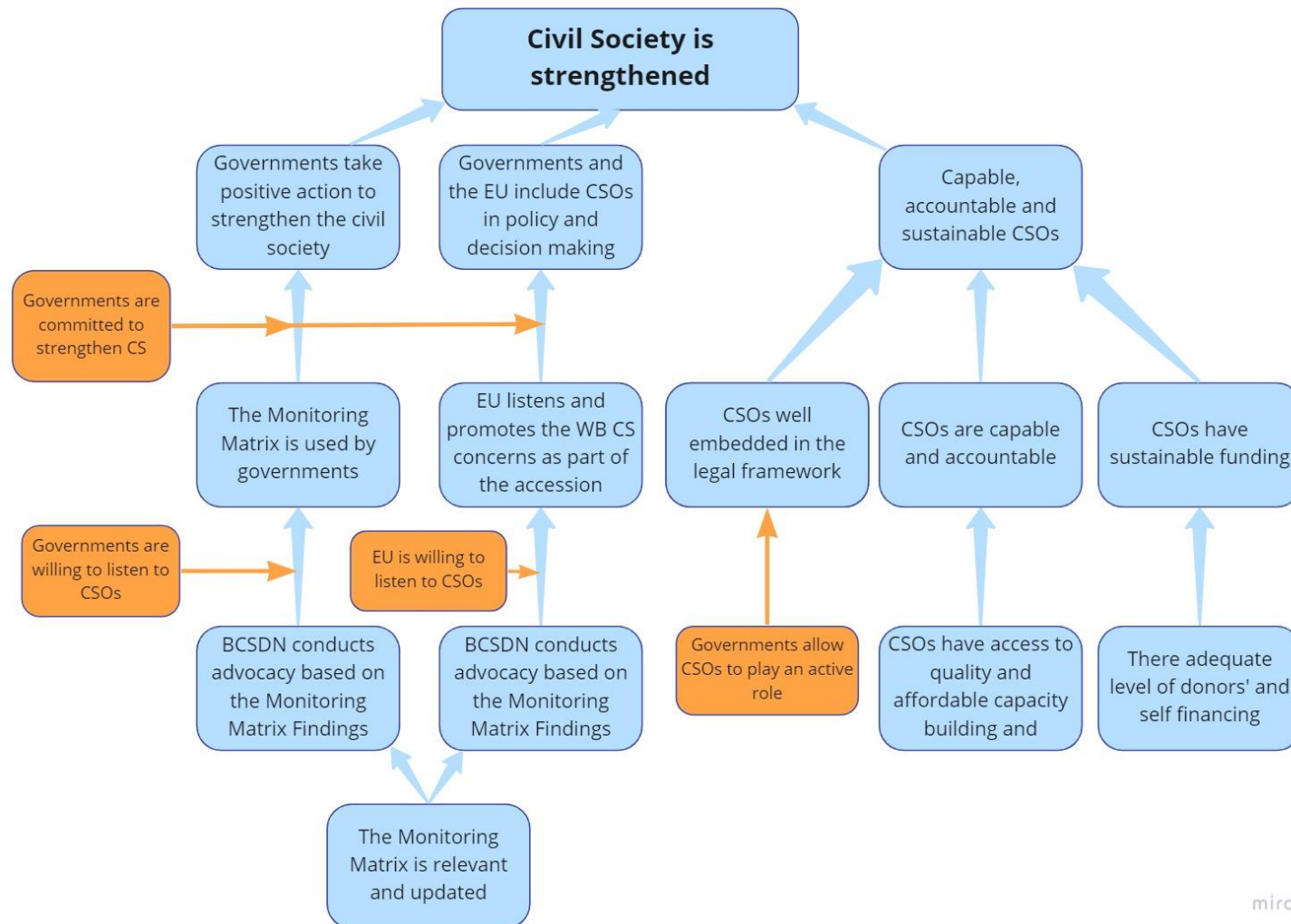
4. STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

Overall objective/ Vision: Peaceful, democratic and prosperous societies in the Balkan region.	
Overall objective/ Mission: To empower civil society and influence policies towards more enabling environment for civil society development in order to ensure sustainable and functioning democracies in the Balkans.	
Results/ Strategic Objectives	1. To facilitate a common understanding of the enabling environment for civil society development and a recognition of its role in the sustainable development of the region and its accession into the EU;
	2. To strengthen CSO capacities to become legitimate and accountable actors in in functioning democracies;
	3. To increase the collaboration and the recognition of the network with and among the core stakeholders;
	4. To improve the functioning, communication and collaboration of the network.

5. ACTION PLAN

> ### 1. To facilitate a common understanding of the enabling environment for civil society development and a recognition of its role in the sustainable development of the region and its accession into the EU

RATIONALE: BCSDN sees civil society's effective role in tackling societal challenges as essential. A prerequisite for this is the existence of environment that is enabling for the functioning and further development of the civil society. Therefore, a common understanding among key actors – CSOs and institutions – of what constitutes an enabling environment (EE) for civil society development needs to be established, and thereafter integrated in the key national instruments in the respective countries. The strategic approach is to utilize the Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development (MM) as the framework onto which a consensus shall be established, and which has the tools for identifying key measures that need institutional consolidation. The MM findings will be the basis for BCSDN's national-level advocacy (conducted by its members) and for the coordinated regional-level advocacy conducted and coordinated by BCSDN towards the EU, as a key stakeholder who directly influences the development of the civil society through the conditionality of the EU enlargement policy, as well as through the EU financial support, which is a major source of funding in the region. In addition to the EU advocacy (and having in mind the declining transformational power of the EU enlargement policy), BCSDN will explore other venues for international advocacy (such as other international organizations, Council of Europe, OECD, UN, etc.) through which the policy makers in the region might be influenced, but also the key donors who are present in the region.

For promoting CSO financial viability as a core component of the enabling environment, BCSDN will rely on the MM findings, but also monitor the donors' presence in the region and their funding strategies, in order to promote financial support that is accountable, coordinated, effective and based on the needs and experience of CSOs. Having in mind that most of BCSDN members manage and forward donors' funds through various programmes in their countries, or are managing the EU-funded National civil society resource centers, BCSDN will facilitate exchanges of knowledge and good practices among its members to contribute towards more effective funding strategies and implementation practices.

BCSDN views CSOs as key stakeholders in the EU integration and will continue to advocate for civil society's effective involvement in the planning, programming, implementation and monitoring processes related to accession reforms.

BCSDN will build further on the achievements reached in the past (such as contributing to the state of the civil society being more closely monitored under the EU Enlargement Process, establishing understanding of the importance of an enabling environment and recognition of the MM beyond the Western Balkans) to bring more actors on board in its efforts to ensure a more conducive environment for the operations and development of civil society.

RESULT	MEASURES	CONCRETE ACTIVITES (EO & members)
1.1 Identified key EE measures (until 2024) are implemented	**1.1.1** Continued *monitoring* incl. exchange, capacity building and standardization of methodology; **1.1.2** *Advocacy* on key issues from annual monitoring identified and implemented	- Bi-annual **monitoring** (members & EO) of enabling environment (2020-2024) - **Country reports** (members) and regional report (EO) - Annual **capacity building** of the monitoring team (pending funding) - Tailored **advocacy actions** on national level (members) - Regional Advocacy led by the EO towards the EU and other international organizations

RESULT	MEASURES	CONCRETE ACTIVITES (EO & members)
1.2. Civil society is actively involved in EU integration processes and continues to be regarded as a partner by the European Commission for achieving accession related reforms	1.2.1 *Information-sharing* on EU related issues regarding civil society dialogue and CSDev; 1.2.2. Promoted *mechanisms for involvement* of civil society in current political processes (e.g. Berlin process, Future of Europe, EU's New Accession Methodology etc) 2.3.1. Collaboration with other *regional networks* and *actors* and involvement in relevant *global networks* and *initiatives*;	- **Information-sharing** on EU related news regarding civil society dialogue and CSDev - **Occasional Advocacy briefs, Position Papers / Policy Documents** - **Advocacy actions/campaigns** vis-à-vis EC, EP, EESC and EU MS and cooperation incl. with EU networks and relevant regional stakeholders - **Participation** in relevant actions in other regions (e.g. Black Sea region, ENPI etc.);
RESULT 1.3 Proposed improvements in funding policies and procedures (domestic, business, philanthropy and other alternative models)	MEASURES 1.3.1. *Practical strategies* to engage key donors (donor conference, direct meetings) on how to incl. local CSOs in donor strategizing process and inputting; 1.3.2. Promotion of *best practices* and *exchange of experience* for improving funding for CSOs (modalities, transparency); 3.2.2. *Monitoring* and promoting *good practices* in EU funding (EU co-financing; CSF programming) 1.3.3*. Involvement* and *contribution* to global aid effectiveness processes and promoting accountability and transparency in funding from international to local level	CONCRETE ACTIVITES (EO & members) - Additional **research** on donors, incl. **monitoring** donor strategies developments and further in-depth research - Coordination of **exchange** of lessons learnt and best practicing in forwarding of donors' funds among members - Occasional Research/ Policy Documents - Contribution to IPA Programming - Input to annual monitoring for the DG NEAR (IPA) under Inter'l Aid Transparency Initiative (2021-2024); - Following developments in OECD-DAC and information-sharing (occasional). - Contributing to CSO Development Effectiveness via CPDE

RESOURCES

(Potential) Donors: EU, SIDA, USAID, CIVICUS (via Civic Space Monitor), RBF Core Funding;

Joint fundraising between members and EO, incl. bilateral, multi-lateral project;

Country level activities by members, regional and coordination by EO;

Input from BCSDN Members.

2. To strengthen CSO capacities and their place in functioning democracies

RATIONALE: In times of changing role of civil society, active pressures and shrinking civic space, civil society actors need to ensure they retain their core missions, integrity, purposefulness and high levels of trust. Independent organizations are needed to act as watchdogs, ethical guardians and advocates of the marginalized or under-represented. Civil society in all its forms has an important role in holding all stakeholders, including itself, to the highest levels of accountability. BCSDN will work in strengthening its own internal capacities and practices and sharing those accountability standards with wider civil society and will be actively involved in the promotion of the Global Standard for CSO Accountability among its stakeholders.

With trends of shrinking civic space across the region and globally, it is evident that the key to free civic space, and environment that is conducive for CS operations, is to ensure wide societal support and more actors aware and committed to promoting this common cause. Building on its own experience in addressing common challenges by cooperating regionally, BCSDN started the development of its Regional Civil Society Development Hub, and views the Hub as a key instrument for empowering other CSOs to contribute to advancing the civic space, more enabling environment for CSO operations, and a more resilient civil society. Through the HUB, BCSDN aims to create a regional center with a global impact that will serve for sharing knowledge and innovation in supporting the development of civil society in the Western Balkans in the long term. The Hub will support effective, transparent and accountable CSOs that will contribute to protecting and promoting civic space for a vibrant, pluralistic and rights-based civil society in the Balkans. The Hub will support other CSOs by providing a grant scheme support for regional initiatives to address challenges identified with the monitoring; and ad-hoc grants for supporting innovative uptakes and immediate needs of CSOs to reclaim civic space in any of the WB6 countries. Supporting CSOs to be democratic institutions in service of the citizens will also be the focus under this objective by promoting tools and supporting CSO to directly engage citizens in their work, to build stronger links to their communities and collaborate with other actors for achieving their goals.

RESULT	MEASURES	CONCRETE ACTIVITES (EO & members)
2.1. Strengthened civil society organizations' accountability effectiveness by promoting accountability and development effectiveness among the wider civil society in the region. 2.2 Strengthened regional cooperation for promoting civic space by supporting the actions and capacities of regional formal and informal CSO networks 2.3 Empowered CSOs to respond to immediate challenges to reclaiming/ advancing their civic space	2.1.1. **Stock taking** of existing e.g. training modules, codes of conducts, internal development acts, expert database; 2.1.2. **Promoting existing resources, tools**, **know-how** among members and others on CSO capacities and on CSOs being responsive and open to citizens 2.1.3 Action grants for supporting CSOs to be democratic institutions in service of citizens 2.2.1 Supporting regional CSO initiatives addressing challenges identified with the monitoring; 2.3.1 Ad-hoc grants for supporting innovative uptakes and immediate needs of CSOs to reclaim civic space in the WB6 countries.	- Consultation and promotion of Global CSO Accountability Standard, and providing tools for CSOs' to be open and responsive to citizens' dynamic accountability. - Exchange of experience via webinars, info-sharing - Grant Support for regional actions via the Regional Civil Society Development Hub - Expert database for providing expert support for CSOs to address immediate civic space challenges - Action grants for citizens' engagement in CSOs work - Innovation for Change - Regional CSO Leadership Academy (depending on funding)

RESOURCES:
Regional Civil Society Development HUB; Global Standard, Innovation for Change
(Potential) Donors: SIDA, EU, USAID, NED
BCSDN EO and engagement of members

3. To increase the collaboration and the recognition of the network with and among the core stakeholders

RATIONALE: BCSDN will build on its achievements and its growth into a prominent network recognized among international CSOs and key EU institutions for its efforts to promote the development of civil society and the civil society operating environment in the region. However, to mitigate the challenges related to the declining political will and commitment of the key actors to promote the development of the civil society in the region, BCSDN needs to strengthen further its recognition and cooperation with other international actors and to join forces with likeminded organizations for achieving its goals. For this purpose, it will be key for BCSDN to develop a communications strategy accompanying the current Strategic Framework, and to commit to further expanding its collaboration with other regional networks and international organizations in advancing the common goals and for strengthening the capacities of the network. BCSDN Executive Office is the organ in charge to initiate and coordinate joint projects and actions, maintain communication with all relevant stakeholders, promote the work of the network and strengthen its visibility on national and regional level. In terms of outreach to the wider public, the focus is on communicating the enabling environment standards through innovative communication tools and methods with tailored-content, translated into the local languages for stronger effects of the network's advocacy efforts.

RESULT	MEASURES	CONCRETE ACTIVITES (EO & members)
5.1 Increased outreach of network activities to civil society actors and wider public	5.1.1. Develop and enhance a *communications strategy;* 5.1.2. *Communicate enabling environment standards* to CSOs and wider public and with key relevant stakeholders (other thematic regional networks, SIGN, Catalyst, NGI, CPDE, CIVICUS, CoE INGO, CONCORD) 5.1.3 Build partnership and join efforts with other international organizations for advancing common objectives 5.1.4 Improve the communication of the network with established and alternative media outlets	- Communication Strategy to follow BCSDN Strategic Outlook - Development of new website - Produce and promote audio-visual campaigns targeted to wider audiences - IT solutions - Regular communication tools - Continuous engagement and collaboration with other CSOs network, platforms and alliances (CIVICUS, CPDE- Coordination of the Europe Region, Global Standard for CSO Accountability, Black Sea NGO Forum, Civil Society Europe (especially on the Future of Europe Convention) - Participate in peer-to-peer and capacity building programmes with other international partners (CPDE, Innovation for Change)

RESOURCES

Incl. in all projects

BCSDN EO

RBF Core Funding, SIDA, Funding ensured for the communication strategy

HORIZONTAL: 4. To improve the functioning, communication and collaboration of the network

RATIONALE: The external evaluation of the network conducted in 2020 has shown the EO communicates effectively and has an inclusive approach when it comes to involving members in important decisions; however, the feedback form the members highlights there is a need for improving the horizontal communication among member organizations. To address this, the EO in the forthcoming period will be committed to providing more opportunities for people to meet personally, in order to foster personal relationships, trust and enable opportunities for joint cooperation. The network will also take stock of the experience of the online communication and collaboration which was successfully facilitated during the pandemic to provide opportunities for exchange by using online tools. The EO will continue to timely share relevant information to its members and other civil society actors through its regular communication tools (E-mail alerts, newsletters, social media, websites).

The development and expanding of the BCSDN Network, especially the launch of the Regional Civil Society Development Hub has imposed the need for BCSDN to strengthen its internal control mechanisms, to define responsibilities and to create a control and a feedback mechanism or a feedback protocol for the EO and the network itself. In the forthcoming period, BCSDN will be committed to establishing a system for monitoring evaluation and learning that will serve for improving the effectiveness of the network's performance by systematic evidencing of experience and lessons learnt.

The due diligence process performed for BCSDN, as well as recent events in the region, has shown that we need to develop and show a clear and undeniable anti-corruption, anti-money laundering policy, and a risk management policy. To ensure its financial sustainability, a priority for the forthcoming period will be the development of a fundraising strategy.

Finally, BCSDN is committed to developing a rewarding working environment and inclusive workplace for building a committed and motivated team. In addition, the network is committed to advancing its commitment to diversity, justice and equality by improving its own accountability and integrating clear annual targets against its Code of Conduct.

RESULT	MEASURES	CONCRETE ACTIVITES (EO & members)
4.1 Strengthened and sustainable network	4.1.1. Enforce and create protocols and policies ensuring effective and **sustainable functioning** of the network 4.1.2 Create more opportunities for exchange and collaboration among and with the members 4.1.3 Establishing a system of Monitoring, Evaluation and Learn	- Development of Anti-Fraud and Anti-Corruption policy; Risk Registry and Risk management policy - Developing of fundraising strategy - Organize face to face and online events (meetings, trainings, workshops)
4.2 Further strengthened accountability of the network	4.2.1 Share responsibilities through **committees/working groups**; 4.2.2 Test accountability Framework and set targets against Code of Conduct with members 4.1.3 Create a **rewarding working environment** for the employees	- Implementation of HR Policy with system of hierarchy, salary incentives, staff capacity building of - Develop and implement Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning system - Identifying and undertaking fundraising opportunities

RESOURCES
SIDA, Core funding, reserve use.