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COOPERATION BETWEEN CSOs AND LSGs - SURVEY RESULTS AND ANALYSIS -

Introduction

Strong and genuine cooperation between civil and public sector represents an important factor in the process of democratisation and overall development of each society. Civil society is seen as a valuable mechanism for identification and addressing of priority needs of citizens. Their independency from government institutions and activism can contribute significantly to better accountability of government authorities.

On the other side, public sector has to recognise the CSOs as their partners in servicing citizens' needs and enable their involvement through a participation process. Through outsourcing of civil sector in designing and implementation of interventions for addressing pressing needs of their citizens, government authorities are being ensured that the public interest is indeed fulfilled.

European Commission's 2015 report on Serbia's progress¹ indicates that some improvement in cooperation between government and civil sector has been made, where the Office for Cooperation with Civil Society took a leading role in the process through change of regulations and organisation of capacity building trainings for both sectors. However, CSOs' involvement in policy making is still not satisfactory, lacking more systematic engagement of civil sector and use of their resources by the public institutions. Transparent funding of CSOs still remains a challenge for the governmental institutions, given that the transparency ensuring mechanisms are not fully put in practice. Further, CSOs as social services providers are yet to be recognized at local level.

European PROGRES recognized a need for enhancing cooperation between two sectors, which is reflected through implementation of LSG/CSO partnership projects within the Citizens' Involvement Fund and through introduction of good governance reforms directed toward increasing transparency of public budget expenditures provided to the CSOs at local level. For the purpose of these activities, the Programme realised a researcher about cooperation between civil society and local self-governments.

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2015/20151110_report_serbia.pdf

Objectives

The research was conducted with the aim to provide data on the status of the cooperation between CSOs and LSGs in 34 municipalities covered by the Programme's, where the results will be used as a planning tool and as baseline for forthcoming programme's interventions in this field.

The survey was designed with the objective to obtain data and examine opinion of both sectors on following subjects:

- Frequency of cooperation
- Areas of cooperation
- Institutional support to civil sector
- Transparency in distribution of public funds to CSOs
- Satisfaction with the cooperation and possibilities for its improvement
- Donor's support to cooperation

Methodology

Two similar questionnaires were designed, adjusted for CSOs and LSGs representatives, with the goal to identify differences in answers and opinions of two groups of respondents. The survey was conducted on-line at the end of January and beginning of February 2016 and resulted in very satisfying response from both surveyed groups. In total, 83 responses were received.

The questionnaire for civil sector was addressed to around 70 organisations from almost all 34 municipalities, and 41 CSOs from 22 municipalities responded. The research included different types of organisations in terms of areas and years of service, and scope of work (annual turnover of funds, number of realised projects per year). The organisations which have participated in the research came from various fields of work such as social protection and entrepreneurship, human and minority rights, support to marginalised groups, humanitarian aid, activism and volunteerism, youth, culture, local development, agriculture, tourism, etc. The survey covered small-scale as well as large-scale organisations.

All 34 LSGs submitted their answers, participating with 42 submitted responses. Several LSGs filled in the questionnaire more than once and given that such answers came from different respondents they were taken into consideration as relevant. In small number of cases, the LSGs duplicated their answers. This number was insignificant and couldn't affect the overall result of the research.

Results and analysis

Frequency of cooperation

More than 80% of LSGs and 37% of CSOs evaluated their cooperation as frequent. Almost 60% of the LSGs share opinion that the frequent cooperation is initiated from both sides, but only 20% of organisations share the same opinion. Majority of organisations (around 65%) think that the cooperation is occasional, minimal or doesn't existing at all.

Such result could indicate that there is one group of organisations that cooperates with LSGs on regular bases and as such, could be seen as “privileged”, while a larger group of organisations stays out of focus of local authorities.

Areas of cooperation

Two sectors mostly agreed in identifying common areas of cooperation. Social protection, local economic development, and youth are recognized by both sides as the most frequent areas of joint work, followed by issues of human and minority rights, gender equality, agriculture, environmental protection, culture, etc. They shared opinion that there is a need for further improvement of existing areas of cooperation.

Both sides provided mostly similar responses when asked to list the areas which are lacking cooperation. They singled out need for cooperation in rural development and agribusiness, youth employment and employment in general, economic development, tourism, etc. Expectedly, CSOs emphasized lack of cooperation related to good governance and citizens’ participation, accountability of local authorities, development of local politics and democratisation process. It is significant that certain number of LSGs also recognized need for cooperation in these areas.

Institutional support to civil sector

Based on answers of both surveyed groups it can be concluded that 50% of LSGs have entrusted person(s) or department(s) with the responsibility of cooperation with civil society. Usually, this role is assigned or shared between following departments: LED and Youth Offices, Department for Social Affairs, member of Municipal Council and Financial Department.

Based on information provided by LSGs, institutional support to CSOs is mostly related to the process of disbursement of budget funds to CSOs, but in some cases include assistance in preparation of project, forming of working groups, etc. The CSOs said that when there is a support of delegated municipal personnel, it is embodied in providing information on open calls for financing (local, national or donors’), consultation and translation services for project proposals and reports preparing, assistance in establishing cooperation with other municipal representatives and in formalisation of cooperation with LSGs, etc. It should be noted that 25% of CSOs don’t have information is there a person/department assigned for cooperation within their LSG.

It can be concluded that significant number of LSGs is providing support to CSOs to some extent, but this support is not sufficiently defined nor systemized and it is usually related to information sharing or some type of technical assistance in reduced number of cases.

Transparency in distribution of local budget funds to CSOs

Through years, this have been of one of the most significant issues and biggest challenges in relation between two sectors. Based on survey results it can be concluded with most certainty that all LSGs have dedicated budget line (line 481) for financing of activities of civil organisations. However, the funds from this line are used for financing of activities of broadly defined civil sector (including sports,

religious and political organisations, Red Cross, etc.), although the line was primarily designed for “classical” project-oriented civil organisations, such as NGOs and citizens associations.

Around 70% of LSGs answered that in last three years there was increase of funds on budget line 481, but almost half of organisation don't have information on possible changes related to this line.

Based on the results it can be conclude that almost all LSGs have open calls for distribution of budget funds to CSOs and rate of municipalities that are applying this procedure for all types of organisations is positive. Although, majority of LSGs (around 85%) stated that they have clear procedures and criteria for funds assigning and monitoring of funds expenditures, the CSOs have different opinion. More than half of organisation is not satisfied with the way this procedure is being conducted. They think that criteria selection are not clearly defined or not applied, and evaluation commissions are often incompetent. The selection process is under strong influence of ruling political parties and funds are too often assigned to “politically suitable” CSOs. In some municipalities, the funds are used for financing of wages of employees of predefined CSOs and not for project activities or the LSGs simply distribute the funds to all organisations that have applied.

Satisfaction with the cooperation and possibilities for the improvement

Most of LSGs answered that in last three years cooperation with CSOs was significantly improved and all LSGs expressed satisfaction with current cooperation in general. Such optimism is coming from the fact that, in last few years, the LSGs have adopted new procedures that have contributed to better regulation of this aspect of their work. Most of the LSGs have emphasized that they see improvement in transparency of funds distribution, in communication with CSOs and that participation of CSOs in development of local strategies had increased. Deeper analyses have showed that the LSGs are not so satisfied with the capacities of civil sector at local level. They stressed out that there are many inactive organisations or that they are lacking capacities for application preparation and project implementation. The research results are possibly confirming LSGs' claims. It seems that certain number of organisations (based on provided answers, around 25% of them) are not informed about possibilities for cooperation or not using available mechanisms of cooperation.

More than half of civil organisations doesn't see real improvement in last period, saying that the cooperation is seemingly improved through introduction of formal procedures, but that political influence is still too strong and prevailing against regulations. The organisation which have recognized visible progress mainly see improvement for the same reasons as the LSGs. Interestingly, when asked to say whether they are satisfied with overall cooperation with the local authorities, more than half of organisation provided answer that was more or less positive. However, other half of organisation is mostly unsatisfied.

Donor's support to cooperation

Both civil and public sector have listed many different areas of cooperation in which they see a need for donor's support, but following answers were the most frequent: social entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship in general, social protection, youth, rural development, human and minority rights, etc. The civil sector is more inclined toward resolving the issue of unemployment and dealing with the

problems of the most vulnerable and marginalized citizens. The LSGs is emphasizing importance of the sport, culture and environmental protection.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the majority of municipalities have adopted regulations that are defining the process of funds distribution to civil society, but they are still struggling with implementation of procedures. Clearly, both sides need to put effort in improvement of cooperation and, more importantly, both sides more or less recognized need and possibility for further enhancing of their relationship in different areas. The research results will be a good starting point for the designing of forthcoming project activities related to civil-public relationship.

Annexes:

- *Annex1_CS0 Summary of the responses* (or go to link <https://goo.gl/3aJgRR> for more accurate overview of the results)
- *Annex2_LSG Summary of the responses* (or go to link <https://goo.gl/RGFd5V> for more accurate overview of the results)