



Strategic Framework for Civil Society Cooperation in the Black Sea Region

Introduction

Considering the growing importance of the space provided by the Black Sea NGO Forum annually for civil society organizations and their partners, its progress and results synthesized in the study on the *"Impact of the Forum after the first 4 editions (2008-2011)"*,

Having in mind the common needs and challenges identified by civil society organisations (CSOs) in the regional consultation on enabling environment held at the 2014 edition of the Forum in Kyiv, related to: a restricted legal environment in which CSOs operate in terms of freedoms of association and speech, registration requirements, reporting procedures and fiscal frameworks); limited policy influencing possibilities due to an absence of comprehensive and mandatory legal framework for CSO involvement in policy-making and limited CSO advocacy capacity; barriers to access foreign funding and donor – CSOs relationships based on a top-down approach, mostly offering project-based funding,

Following participants' recommendations on the role of the Black Sea NGO Forum expressed in the *"Report on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development in the Black Sea Region"*, with regard to: creating a format for the Forum that is able to support long-term, sustainable regional cooperation; acting as an information & knowledge hub on topics of regional interest; carrying out advocacy at regional level; and facilitating the exchange of best practices among stakeholders in the region,

In 2015 the Black Sea NGO Forum aimed to elaborate a Strategic Framework for Civil Society Cooperation in the Black Sea Region with thematic and cross-cutting cooperation areas that would provide sustainability, coherence and focus to regional initiatives, bring closer CSOs and stakeholders across the region, contribute to the consolidation of a regional identity, and stimulate cooperation also at a political level.

In this sense, a participatory process was designed to make sure all of the participants' valuable input was included, based on a preparatory online survey which took into consideration the 2014 regional consultation results as well as the participants' recommendations from the enabling environment report.

Working groups were established based on the participants' proposals of cooperation areas for civil society at the Black Sea with the purpose of continuing their work in between Forums. To this end, each working group has developed brief working plans highlighting their goals, key action steps, potential funding opportunities, follow-up after the Forum and the support needed from the Black Sea NGO Forum.

At the end of the session, participants voted each proposed topic, resulting in 5 thematic priorities (Knowledge networks for development – Knownet; Anti-corruption; Civic engagement; Youth; and Education & culture) and 5 emerging issues (Sustainable development; Youthbank; Human rights; Networking; and Media & communication).



History & Context

The Black Sea NGO Forum was first organised in 2008 as a unique regional event, by the Romanian NGDO Platform (FOND), with the support of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Representation of the European Commission and the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation, within the framework of the Black Sea Synergy – a European policy launched at the initiative of Romania, Bulgaria and Greece with the purpose of consolidating regional cooperation at the Black Sea.

Since its first edition, the Forum has been a driver of change in the region, reuniting more than 800 participants with various backgrounds from 11 countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, the Republic of Moldova, Turkey, Ukraine, Romania and Russia. The Forum has facilitated 18 bilateral projects and 19 regional projects and supported the creation of two regional networks: The Coalition for Child Protection in the Wider Black Sea Area – ChildPact and a regional youth network initiated by the National Youth Council of Moldova.

The Black Sea NGO Forum has managed to build trust in the region by encouraging NGOs to develop contacts, make their projects visible, meet donors, find new partners, and offering the space for the creation and growth of new initiatives. In this respect, the Forum builds each year strategically on the objectives of the previous editions, thus contributing to the emergence of common regional goals.

The Black Sea NGO Forum is considered a success story of the Black Sea Synergy, with an added value in the region, which enables and supports CSOs in fulfilling their role. The Forum is perceived and appreciated by its participants as an impartial mechanism for facilitating regional cooperation between CSOs, donors and institutional stakeholders. The Forum's crucial importance was emphasized both by the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the European Commission.

Since 2013, the Black Sea NGO Forum received substantial support from important partners. On the one side, the Forum gained more visibility and sustainability through the support offered by the European Commission. On the other side, the Forum developed a partnership with the global network CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness – CPDE which aims to bring the regional discussions of the Forum in the broader global context of development.

Vision

The vision of the Black Sea NGO Forum is to contribute to prosperity and stability in the Black Sea Region with effective CSO participation, by creating an open space for debate, mutual knowledge and understanding, communication and cooperation among civil society representatives, governments and international organizations active in the wider Black Sea Region, with a focus on sharing good practices in various domains and success stories of regional cooperation.

Mission

The Black Sea NGO Forum aims to:

- Increase the level of dialogue and cooperation among CSOs and other stakeholders in the wider Black Sea Region;



- Strengthen CSOs' capacity to influence regional and national policies;
- Increase the number and quality of regional partnerships, projects, networks on thematic and cross-cutting priority issues.

Geographical coverage

The Black Sea countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Ukraine, Russia, and Turkey.

Strategic positioning

The strategic positioning of the Forum is to offer the base for a solid regional cooperation among CSOs on clearly defined thematic and cross-cutting cooperation areas that in turn will increase civil society capacity to address local needs, contribute to development efforts, cooperate on thematic issues and engage in policy influencing.

The Forum is committed to offer a flexible support to CSOs in the Black Sea Region, tailored to the needs and challenges of its participants and working groups, coordinate with similar initiatives developed in the Black Sea Region and pursue those synergies that allow for a stronger impact of the regional initiatives supported by the Forum.

Moreover, the Forum aims to bring the common needs and challenges of CSOs in the Black Sea Region in the broader global context of development, through its partnership with CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness, and make the voice and concerns of CSOs in the region heard at international level.

Priority cooperation areas

Following the participatory process carried out at the 2015 edition of the Forum, two main directions were established:

1. Supporting formal and informal thematic networks in the following cooperation areas endorsed by voting:

- Priority cooperation areas: Knowledge Networks for Development; Anti-corruption; Civic engagement; Youth; and Education & culture;
- Emerging cooperation areas: Sustainable development; YouthBank; Human rights; Networking; and Media & communication.

In order to be sensitive to the changing regional context, but also the needs, challenges and opportunities for CSOs, the Black Sea NGO Forum will also take into consideration supporting relevant regional initiatives in other thematic areas than those mentioned above, provided that they contribute to the overall priority of the Forum - offering support to formal and informal thematic regional networks.



2. Promoting and supporting enabling environment for CSOs in the Black Sea Region as a cross-cutting priority for the Forum and a pre-requisite for regional cooperation, in the following dimensions:

- Basic legal guarantees of freedoms;
- The framework for CSOs' viability & sustainability;
- Public institutions/state – CSOs relationships;
- Donor CSO-relationship.

Support

The Black Sea NGO Forum commits to support the established working groups and formal/informal networks by:

- Providing information, opportunities in the region, partner search, facilitating dialogue and face-to-face meetings, best practice exchange among CSOs, providing opportunities for synergies with other initiatives etc;
- Advocating for a regional support mechanism for the activities of the Black Sea NGO Forum and its working groups;
- Conducting regional research that would support the activities of the Black Sea NGO Forum;
- Providing capacity building opportunities for CSOs.