



**THE BLACK SEA
NGO FORUM A DECADE ON:
EVALUATION, IMPACT
AND PERSPECTIVES**

2017

This report is the result of an evaluation commissioned by the Romanian NGDO Platform – FOND and conducted by Kerry Longhurst PHD, Jean Monnet Professor, Collegium Civitas, Warsaw, Poland and Visiting Professor, College of Europe, Natolin, Poland, in the period July – September 2017.

The opinions expressed in this report belong to and reflect solely the position of the author on the presented findings.



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables and Illustrations	4
List of Acronyms	4
Executive Summary	5
Introduction to the Black Sea NGO Forum and the Evaluation	7
Who are the Members of the Black Sea NGO Forum?	10
Despite Turbulence and Uncertainty: A Context of Opportunity	12
Presentation of Black Sea NGO Forum's Activities 2012 – 2016	14
Overview of the Results of the Evaluation	17
Who Takes Part in the Black Sea Forum and Why?	17
Do Stakeholders Appreciate the BSF Format?	18
Are Stakeholders Engaging with BSF Thematic Priorities and Working Groups?	21
The BSF as a Facilitator for Creating and Sustaining Networks and Projects	23
The Future of the Black Sea NGO Forum – Stakeholder Perspectives	25
BSF Successes and What to Learn From Them	26
Synthesis of Findings: Considerata and Recommendations	28
Recommendations for the Future Development of the Black Sea NGO Forum	29
Institutional Issues	29
Configuring a Better Forum Format that Delivers and Innovates	29
Monitoring and Optimising Thematic Priorities and Working Groups	30
Ensuring Visibility, Voice and Communication at Internal and External Levels	30
Building Capacity and Strengthening NGOs	31
The BSF's Added Value – New Issues on the Agenda	31
Bibliography	33

LIST OF TABLES AND ILLUSTRATIONS

- Figure No. 1 – ‘The Relevance of the Black Sea NGO for its Members’
Figure No. 2 – ‘Annual Budgets of NGOS’ (Euro)
Figure No. 3 – ‘Sources of Funding for NGOs’
Figure No. 4 – ‘Relevance of the BSF Annual Forum’
Figure No. 5 – ‘Meeting Stakeholder Expectations’
Figure No. 6 – ‘The BSF as a Source of Skills and Training’
Figure No. 7 – ‘Relevance of Thematic Priorities for Stakeholders’
Figure No. 8 – ‘Participation in Working Groups’
Figure No. 9 – ‘What do NGO’s gain from the BSF?’
Figure No. 10 – ‘The Future of the BSF’

LIST OF ACRONYMS

- AA – Association Agreement
BSEC – Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation
BSF – Black Sea NGO Forum
BSS – Black Sea Synergy
CPDE – CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness
DCFTA – Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement
EaP – Eastern Partnership
EED – European Endowment for Democracy
EU – European Union
EEAS – European External Action Service
FOND – The Romanian NGDO Platform
NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation
RoAid – Romanian International Development Cooperation Agency

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Black Sea NGO Forum (BSF) is a unique platform for Non-Governmental Organisations from the region to cooperate across national borders. Bringing together NGO's from EU and Eastern Partnership states, as well as from Russia and Turkey, the diversity of the BSF's membership is a fundamental strength. Organised around common thematic priorities, working groups and an annual conference the BSF has made a positive and indelible impact by supporting regional integration, amplifying the voice of civil society and also by furthering the broad objectives of the European Union's Black Sea Synergy. It is no exaggeration to say that the BSF has, under the direction of the Romanian NGDO Platform (FOND), more than met its mandate, delivered added value and is the most enduring and vibrant organisation within the Black Sea region. This is a significant achievement given the political turbulence in the region and the fact that the space and funding for civil society to operate has manifestly diminished in a number of member states. The logic behind the BSF's methodology is that dialogue and networking leads to joint initiatives and projects, which in turn builds trust and cohesion. The evaluation of the BSF confirms the effectiveness and potential of this approach.

The tenth-anniversary of the BSF in 2018 offers a vantage point to highlight its achievements and impact. A decade on is also a critical moment to map a path for future development BSF with a view to ensuring sustainability, relevance and effectiveness for current and future stakeholders. The evaluation of the BSF's activities 2012-2016 reveals broad satisfaction amongst members and other interested parties. Evidence demonstrates that the BSF has helped to forge a regional identity and has led to tangible results – though many remain nascent. The evaluation also shows that the BSF continues to play a role in cultural diplomacy and the promotion of confidence building amongst its partners. There is goodwill in abundance and a firm hope amongst stakeholders that the BSF be further developed so that it can have an enhanced and more sustained role in enabling NGOs to pursue their interests, build networks and create common projects. Equally, the success of the forum depends on the engagement and active involvement of participants. The results of the evaluation posit that regional ownership also means that members play their part by investing time and resources to BSF initiatives, working groups, and follow-up between editions and to keep FOND updated on the projects and initiatives that come out of the forum.

An overall conclusion of this evaluation is that on the eve of its ten-year anniversary the Black Sea NGO Forum is more relevant and necessary than ever before. Problems associated with a lack of resilience across the region twinned with diminishing space and funding for NGOs points to the need for a 'common vision' for civil society.

The evaluation submits that if the BSF didn't exist the state of the NGO sector across the Black Sea region would be far weaker. Accordingly, evidence strongly suggests that the BSF is both essential and ripe for renewal in terms of its thematic priorities, the format of its events, its communication strategy and also the overall scope of its ambition and remit. A renewal of the Black Sea NGO Forum should also be conceived of in terms of raising its profile within the EU' foreign policy agenda – especially in light of the EU's Global Strategy and any rejuvenation of the Black Sea Synergy; after all, the BSF is a flagship for regional cooperation. Successful renewal will depend on adequate financing, not just in terms of the amount of resources made available, but also in terms of 'perspective'. A multiannual financial arrangement will allow the BSF to develop a long-term strategy, deliver efficiently on its mandate and satisfy stakeholder expectations both in the region and in Brussels.

INTRODUCTION TO THE BLACK SEA NGO FORUM AND THE EVALUATION

The evaluation of the activities of the Black Sea NGO Forum 2012–2016 takes place at an important time in its development as it approaches a ten-year milestone. Over the course of a decade much has been accomplished in terms of sustaining and growing its membership and nurturing an organisational identity grounded in a broad definition of the Black Sea region. It has also managed to diversify and renew its foci and work programme in response to stakeholder interests and has garnered continued support from the EU and the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Such achievements should not be downplayed given the challenging regional context in which the BSF operates and the shrinking environment in which civil society finds itself.¹

A reminder of the genesis of the Black Sea NGO Forum is always useful as we look forwards to the next decade and beyond. The BSF was established in 2008 as part of the EU's Black Sea Synergy (BSS). The BSS was inspired by Romania and Bulgaria's EU accession in 2007, a development that brought the EU directly to the shores of the Black Sea. In brief, the BSS aimed to capitalise upon the positive momentum set by enlargement by sketching out an ambitious regional agenda to tackle common problems and to build 'interconnections' between the countries and peoples of the region within and across the EU's outer borders.² Accordingly, the BSS stressed a methodology that proposed the full range of EU policy tools to encourage multi-sector cooperation, practical partnerships and cross-border initiatives all with a view to enhancing regional security and prosperity and in so doing furthering the EU's own interests. Crucially, from the very outset the BSS was a regional project with a positively inclusive notion of the 'wider' Black Sea region.

The Black Sea region has met turbulent times and it is no exaggeration to claim that the agenda of the Black Sea Synergy remains unfulfilled. Tangible region building based upon interconnections whether via transport infrastructure, people to people contacts, common policies and so on are apparent but rather negligible in achievement.

¹ See Angela Gramada (December 2016), *Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development in the Black Sea Region (Black Sea NGO Forum / FOND)*, <http://www.blackseango.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Report-on-Enabling-Environment-for-Civil-Society-in-the-Black-Sea-Region.-Second-Edition.pdf>

² European External Action Service (2008) *Joint Statement of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the countries of the European Union and of the wider Black Sea area*, http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/blacksea/doc/joint_statement_blacksea_en.pdf

Meanwhile, the security situation in the Black Sea region has substantially deteriorated; the return of geopolitics, territorial conflict and attendant militarisation over the past few years has eroded the potential for the Black Sea Synergy, as currently conceived, to meet its original objectives.³ Furthermore, entrenched frozen conflicts still pepper the region and competition between the EU and Russia in the Eastern neighbourhood seems set to continue. Stalled democratisation and a return to authoritarianism across much of the region effectively shrinks the space for civil society to operate nationally and across borders and also for donors to operate effectively. A general resource-crunch for the NGO sector across the region also entails that CSOs become competitors as opposed to collaborators and in so doing diminish civil society's voice and effectiveness, especially at the national level.

Nestled within the Black Sea Synergy the BSF was established as a joint initiative of the European Commission and the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and run under the stewardship of the the Romanian NGDO Platform (FOND). The BSF is closely aligned with the overall character and objectives of the BSS in that it defines membership based on an inclusive notion of the 'wider' Black Sea region, namely Romania, Bulgaria, the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Turkey, Greece and Russia. At the same time, the BSF furthers the 'region building' goals of the Black Sea Synergy by nurturing cooperation amongst NGOs with a view to:

- **Fostering and supporting dialogue and cooperation amongst NGOs in the region**
- **Strengthening NGO's capacities to interact with and influence policies at national and regional levels**
- **Increasing the number of quality regional projects and partnerships in the NGO sector.**

Importantly, despite the apparent shortcomings of the Black Sea Synergy more broadly the BSF has become an enduring feature in the civil society sphere and a tangible building block of regional integration.⁴ In short, the Black Sea NGO Forum should be regarded as a showcase of achievement and a model, if not a template for how to build co-ownership and effective dialogue in the region based on networked approach.

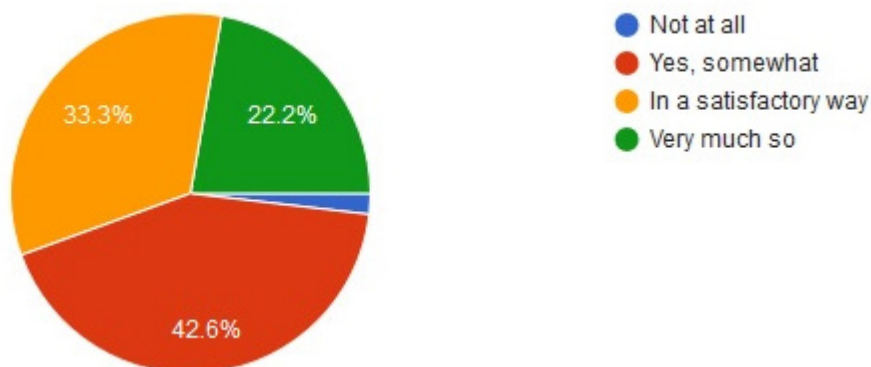
As this report will later illustrate, the success and longevity of the BSF can be attributed to a number of factors, including its characteristic as a 'network' or platform, as opposed to a fully institutionalised body, the fact that its agenda is driven by and reflective of

³ NATO Parliamentary Assembly (2017) *Advancing Security in the Black Sea Region* <https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?-filename=sites/default/files/2017-11/2017%20-%20159%20CDS%2017%20E%20rev.%201%20-%20BLACK%20SEA%20-%20SCHMIDT%20REPORT.pdf>

⁴ European Commission (2015) *Joint Staff Working Document: Black Sea Synergy: review of a regional cooperation initiative* http://ec.europa.eu/environment/international_issues/pdf/Joint%20Staff%20working%20document%20-Black%20Sea.pdf

member's interests, that it has a relatively flat hierarchy with FOND as its steward and furthermore, that it acts as an impartial facilitator for interactions with donors. Such factors, according to the evaluation, meet the interests and expectations of NGO members and assure that the BSF provides a safe and open space for dialogue and a platform for confidence building amongst participants.

Figure No. 1 – 'The Relevance of the Black Sea NGO for its Members'



The Black Sea NGO Forum is a reflective organisation and is keen not to stand still but to adapt to new circumstances and demands; to take account of challenges in the civil society area and also to find optimal ways of working and contributing to region building despite tough geopolitical times. The BSF, led by FOND strives to be relevant and to deliver significant added value for its stakeholders and to consult them at all stages. Already in 2012 the BSF went through an evaluation, which focused on the first years of its existence.⁵ The conclusions were instructive and suggested that the BSF was at a 'crossroads' and would benefit from some rejuvenation and fine-tuning of its foci and methodology. One of the main outcomes of the review was the need for further elaboration of a Strategic Framework involving cross-cutting and thematic priorities aimed at getting civil society better equipped to address the region's needs.⁶ The Strategic Framework also offered an opportunity to for the BSF and its members to better articulate its 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.

⁵ Alin Teclu (2012) 'The Impact of the Black Sea NGO Forum after Four Editions' (Black Sea NGO Forum / FOND) <http://www.blackseango.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/The-Impact-of-the-Black-Sea-NGO-Forum-2008-2011.pdf>

⁶ Black Sea NGO Forum 'Strategic Framework for Civil Society Cooperation in the Black Sea Region' <http://www.blackseango.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Strategic-Framework-for-Civil-Society-in-the-Black-Sea-Region.pdf>

Subsequently, FOND, alongside stakeholders, initiated a number of reforms and adjustments and especially to bring about changes to the actual format of events and to instigate thematic priorities replete with working groups in order to meet its vision. Such reforms, which also involved the moving out of Bucharest of the annual forum meeting to other Black Sea capitals and cities helped improved the sense of common ownership, align the BSF with core civil society concerns and common problems in the region and confirmed that already by 2012 the BSF was maturing into a truly regional organisation with committed stakeholders; it was no longer seen just as an 'event', but rather an organisation. The BSF also went through a period of reflection in 2015 when a substantial study arrived at the conclusion that the organisation should hone in on two distinct directions in order to maximise its impact. Consequently, the BSF became oriented around two pillars – the promotion of an enabling environment for civil society in the region and second, the development of horizontal cooperation amongst members manifest in specific thematic areas.⁷ Crucially, this provided further impetus for the creation of the BSF's thematic priorities, which were elaborated during the annual forum in Tbilisi in 2015. Alongside these processes, the BSF held meetings with EU institutions and the Romanian Permanent Representation to the European Union with a view to finessing the evolving role of the forum. In brief, it would seem that it is the overall 'strategic direction' – namely where the BSF should be going and how to get there that remains the outstanding question.

Who are the Members of the Black Sea NGO Forum?

The BSF's stakeholders are diverse, involving NGOs and Civil Society groups from eleven member states working on a very broad range of areas: from Youth to gender, from children to culture and from environment to corruption. The evaluation revealed that there is no 'one type' of NGO that engages with the BSF. Size, profile and interests vary massively. The average personnel size of BSF NGOs stands at around six paid employees, with most having an additional one to five volunteers at any given time, many exist purely on the basis of volunteers only. The average age of an NGO employee tends to be around 35 years old. Most of the NGOs in the BSF were established in the mid to late 1990's, which is to be expected, but there are also a good number that were set up after 2000 mostly in response to growing concerns to do with governance, corruption and the need for civic action. The BSF does not seem to attract very new NGOs or civil society workers. Crucially, most NGOs are established nationally, but in terms of their core concerns and missions they indeed focus on issues and campaigns that naturally transcend national borders, evoke regional matters and thus lend themselves to an enhanced collaborative regional approach. In this context, the BSF is uniquely placed to nurture greater regional collaboration though to do this would arguably require an augmented mandate and a stable and long-term financial perspective.

In terms of their budgets BSF NGOs tend to be on the small side; the majority have an annual budget of less than 100,000 euros. BSF NGOs appear to have diverse and mixed

⁷ See Tanja Hafner Ademi and Milka Ivanovska Hadjievska (August 2015), *Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development in the Black Sea Region: Towards a Regional Strategy for Cooperation (Black Sea NGO Forum / FOND)*, http://www.blackseango.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Report-Enabling-Environment-for-CSOs-in-the-Black-Sea-Region_final.pdf

channels of funding, which can be understood as a source of strength, but is also a reflection perhaps of diminishing amounts of public money (or politicisation of it) being made available for civil society. The sources of funding may also affect the remit and independence of an NGO and its capacity to make long term plans.

Crucially, the notion of drawing more from the private sector to support and sponsor civil society initiatives is viewed by most NGOs as something inevitable that they need to confront. But at the same time as well as many pervading and knotty ethical questions to deal with there is a universal concern that as NGOs they do not yet have the capacity, culture and confidence to interact with and establish functioning partnerships with businesses. Interestingly, consultations conducted in the course of the evaluation suggest that NGOs in the Black Sea region would like the BSF to initiate or ‘chair’ a discussion to probe issues to do with private sector funding and philanthropy and the implications for the NGO sector.

Figure No. 2 – ‘Annual Budgets of NGOs’ (Euro)

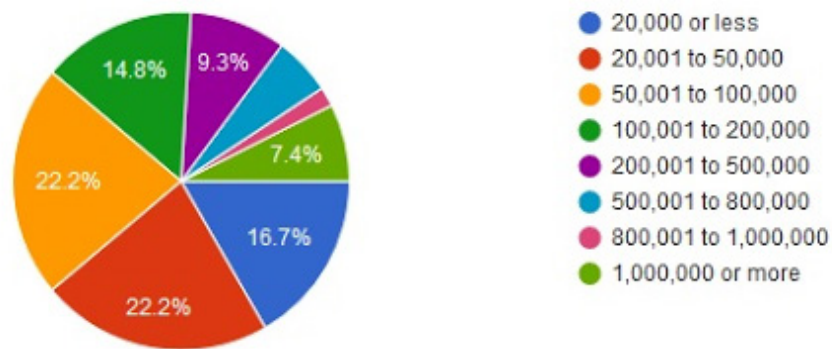
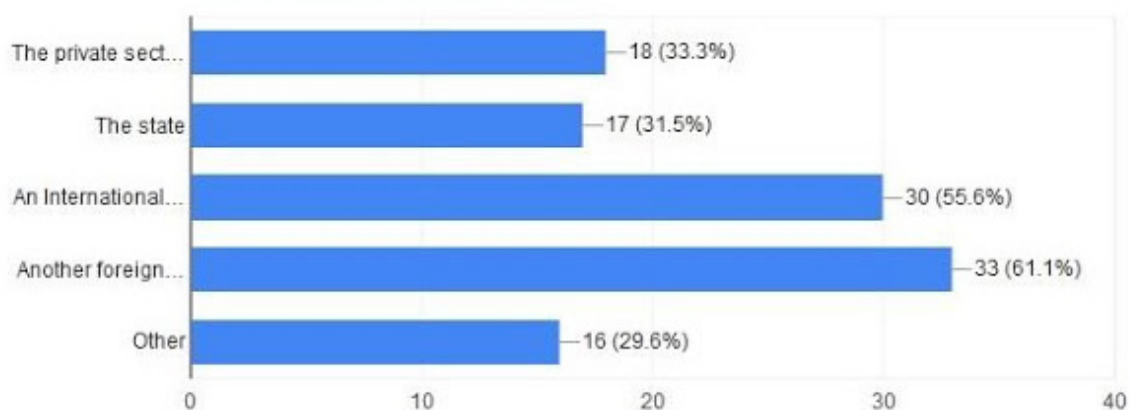


Figure No. 3 – ‘Sources of Funding for NGOs’



Key Finding #1 The BSF is distinguished by a broad and diverse membership. This diversity is both a source of strength, as well as a weakness – in terms of trying to assure internal/ external coherence, positioning the BSF in and beyond the region and also with regards to influencing policy. Namely, which policy areas and at which level should the BSF focus on in terms of trying to exercise its influence and remain relevant?

Key Finding #2 Most BSF NGOs have small budgets and rely to substantial levels on volunteers (despite there being weak cultures of volunteering in most of the Black Sea states). The apparent resource crunch is exacerbated by the fact that many of the NGOs surveyed lack the capacity for making grant applications and / or see that existing funding opportunities and schemes are too big and burdensome and are not suited to their interests nor their administrative capabilities.

Despite Turbulence and Uncertainty: A Context of Opportunity

As already mentioned, the context in which this evaluation takes place is one of flux, conflict and uncertainty with numerous challenges for the NGO sector. But at the same time the review is arguably taking place at a moment of opportunity for the BSF, which could provide fresh ‘footholds’ for a renewal. Six points stand out in this respect.

- According to its Global Strategy the EU is a ‘global stakeholder’ and seeks to affirm itself as a distinctive global actor with regional relevance and a safe harbour for civil society to grow. This is consequential for the BSF as the EU increasingly regards civil society as a partner to foster resilience building and anchoring the processes of Europeanisation in the East, where standards of governance remain problematic.⁸
- Much investment and energy has been given to the Eastern Partnership’s (EaP) own multilateral Civil Society Forum,⁹ which due to its overlapping agenda and membership with the BSF should be regarded as bolstering and complimenting rather than contradicting the latter’s relevance and purpose. In essence, the EaP and the BSF should capitalise on the potential for gaining collective advantages particularly to do with improving the environment for civil society.
- The EU’s deepening relations with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine through the Association Agreements (AAs) and Deep and Comprehensive Trade Agreements (DCFTA) should help underpin sustainable Europeanisation in those countries and along with that support a buoyant civil society equipped to contribute to and scrutinise the policy making process.
- The proposed re-launching of the Black Sea Synergy replete with a reinforced sectoral approach should be ‘the’ opportunity to present a renewed a Black Sea NGO Forum and to raise its profile in Brussels. In short, the ‘return’ of the BSS can provide the BSF with a chance to reassert its relevance and to gain a more secure foothold in the Brussels scene.
- A number of Central European states are attempting to configure regional integration incorporating all or part of the Black Sea region in the form of projects, which have become known as the ‘Three Seas Initiative’ (TSI) or ‘Intermarium’.

⁸ European External Action Service (June 2016) ‘Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe – A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy’ https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/sites/globalstrategy/files/pages/files/eugs_review_web_13.pdf

⁹ See <http://eap-csf.eu/civil-society-forum/>

Though still in planning phases, such initiatives should be monitored as they may well include instruments to advance civil society's influence across the region and the BSF is in pole position to play a defining role.¹⁰

- Romania is in the midst of setting up and staffing an international development cooperation agency (RoAid), which has the potential to positively affect the way in which the BSF is funded and how it can use those funds. RoAid might also pave the way for the BSF to diversify its donor base and consider the private sector as a funder of its activities. In short, RoAid may provide a foothold for the BSF to develop a longer-term perspective.

This dynamic and challenging context arguably raises the stakes of the current evaluation and reinforces the need for it to deliver some concrete ideas to advance the relevance and value of the BSF for the years to come. With this in mind, the evaluation aims at mapping and providing clear and feasible signposts for the internal and external renewal of the Black Sea NGO Forum. With these points in mind, the current evaluation takes stock of and critically appraises the activities of the BSF in the 2012–2016 period from the viewpoint of stakeholders and in light of other regional developments and relevant variables. The second element of the evaluation presented in this report is made up of concrete recommendations and proposals that should be used as considerations for the future development of the BSF.

The key points of orientation for the evaluation and recommendations revolve around questions of the BSF's sustainability, relevance and added value. Accordingly, the terms of reference for the evaluation were to (a) Map participation in the Forum over the past four years and to identify activities that occur between annual Forum meetings and projects that emerged as a result of engagement with the BSF (b) Evaluate the overall strengths and weaknesses of the BSF, especially in terms of format of the annual event and the relevance of its thematic priorities (c) Identify and evaluate the added-value of the Forum, especially vis-à-vis other similar regional fora, particularly the Eastern Partnership (EaP) Civil Society Facility (d) Draw up concrete recommendations based on the evidence gathered. To meet these requirements the evaluation relied upon an online survey sent out to all BSF NGOs, analysis of existing policy documents and evaluations (listed in the bibliography) and a series of semi-structured interviews with numerous stakeholders – numbering more than 25. In addition, an interim version of the evaluation was scrutinised by NGOs, Romanian, BSEC and EU officials at a tenth anniversary event for the BSF. Stakeholder interviews were arguably the most valuable aspect of the evaluation since they yielded in-depth insights and perspectives regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the BSF, its capacity to deliver added value, organisational factors and possible future orientation. Crucially, in comparison to earlier evaluation of the BSF, the current review decided to put a larger emphasis upon setting out recommendations.

¹⁰ *The Second Summit of the Three Seas Initiative – Joint Declaration* <https://www.polska.pl/politics/foreign-affairs/three-seas-initiative-will-rebuild-whole-region/>

Presentation of Black Sea NGO Forum's Activities 2012 – 2016

As noted above, the overarching objectives of the BSF are to foster and support dialogue and cooperation amongst NGOs, strengthen their capacities to interact with and influence policies at national and regional levels and third, to grow the number of quality regional projects and partnerships in the NGO sector. How does the Black Sea NGO Forum pursue these objectives and with what degree of success? The BSF commits to support member's activities 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.¹¹

The Black Sea NGO Forum's agenda is led by an overall 'crosscutting' strategic priority – the promotion of an enabling environment for civil society organisations in the Black Sea region. This has become an ever more urgent issue owing to the apparent shrinking space for NGOs to operate in a large majority of Black Sea states, as documented in BSF publications, twinned with the afore mentioned resource crunch. The BSF's voice in this regard is amplified by working with the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE). Meanwhile, the BSF's ten thematic priorities, which were determined by stakeholders, represent a diversity of topics of current and emerging topicality.

- **Knowledge Networks for Development**
- **Anti-Corruption**
- **Civic Engagement**
- **Youth**
- **Education and Culture**
- **Sustainable Development**
- **YouthBank**
- **Human Rights and Freedoms**
- **Networking**
- **Media and Communications**

The thematic priorities were adopted as a means to render the BSF coherent and focused, to nurture cooperation amongst members with a view to instigating joint projects and

¹¹ See Black Sea NGO Forum 'Strategic Framework for Civil Society Cooperation in the Black Sea Region'<http://www.blackse-ngo.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Strategic-Framework-for-Civil-Society-in-the-Black-Sea-Region.pdf>

to create access routes to influence actual policy, whether that be at national, regional or European levels. The thematic priorities and adjoining working groups further the original goals of the Black Sea Synergy in as far as they reflect and promote societal wellbeing, people to people contacts and trans-regional problems that are common to all member states. The working groups have advanced at varying speeds and according to the evaluation with mixed levels of visibility and impact. However, in general they have started to elaborate and develop concrete agendas and have fleshed out of nascent work programmes. Leadership capable of forging a consensus within a working group is essential.

The flagship of the Black Sea NGO Forum is the annual forum meeting, which is a large-scale event with an ambitious and full agenda. From the perspective of the evaluation the annual event seeks to serve a number of goals – to bring members together to facilitate existing and new contacts and network building – to facilitate dialogue between donors and NGOs – help NGOs build their capacities (broadly defined) – spread knowledge and understanding of the Black Sea region. Crucially, for many of the NGOs it provides the sole opportunity to meet with existing and new potential partners from across the wider Black Sea region including EU and non-EU states. It offers, what many respondents in the evaluation described as a ‘safe place’ for NGOs and one that doesn’t have an overarching set of political expectations or an externally imposed agenda. Essentially, the BSF is nestled within the Black Sea Synergy, but it is not beholden to the EU’s agenda – which is regarded as a key strength and point of attraction. Beginning in Bucharest in 2007, since 2014 the annual BSF meeting has taken place at a different location each year and has even moved out beyond capital cities. Changing the location each year and moving beyond Bucharest, though creating more work for FOND, has successfully heightened the regional profile and identity of the BSF and according to the evaluation, nurtured a good sense of shared ownership amongst BSF members. Moreover, the ‘roving’ nature of the forum means that the BSF as a whole can, in theory, learn about local problems and challenges for civil society in the host country. The BSF has managed successfully to become an organisation ‘of’ and ‘for’ the region and does not suffer from ‘founders syndrome’ in the way that some organisation do. Moreover, it has transformed itself from being perceived as an ‘event’ in to being a platform.

‘An Ambitious Agenda: The Editions of the Black Sea NGO Forum 2012–2016’

2012 – Bucharest ‘Participation and Inclusion for Responsible Development’

2013 – Bucharest ‘Building Sustainable and Effective Regional Cooperation’

2014 – Kiev ‘Enabling Environment for CSOs: Towards a Strategy for Civil Society for the Black Sea Region’

2015 – Tbilisi ‘Defining a Strategic Framework for Regional Cooperation at the Black Sea’

2016 – Varna ‘The Implementation of the Strategic Framework’

Over the past three years the annual BSF meeting has focused on driving forwards the implementation of its strategic framework, embedding the thematic priorities and launching the working groups. Each yearly meeting comprises a mix of plenary and small group working meetings aimed at encouraging interaction and networking between NGOs, policy practitioners and other stakeholders. In Varna in 2016 a significant part of the forum was devoted to the development of the working groups. The forum also brings together key donors and NGOs for mutual learning, facilitating contact and of course opening dialogues about funding opportunities. Meticulous reporting of the contents of the BSF annual fora are always produced which provide very comprehensive coverage for insiders and outsiders.¹²

A further area of the BSF's activities is research. To this end the BSF/FOND have produced substantial reports on subjects relating to the 'enabling environment' for civil society in the region, which is the BSF's cross cutting priority.

¹² BSF Annual Reports <http://www.blackseango.org/resources/bsf-reports/black-sea-ngo-forum-reports/>

OVERVIEW OF THE RESULTS OF THE EVALUATION

The following sections provide an overview of the main findings of the 2017 evaluation of the Black Sea NGO Forum by bringing together and synthesising results derived from the online survey with feedback and opinions presented through stakeholder interviews and consultations.

Who Takes Part in the Black Sea Forum and Why?

Between 2012 and 2016 319 NGOs took part in the annual BSF meetings that took place in Bucharest (2012 and 2013), Kiev (2014), Tbilisi (2015) and Varna (2016). Participation in the BSF annual fora remained buoyant between 2012–2016. The profile of participants and overall themes of the events demonstrates the very broad and inclusive membership of the BSF in terms of country of origin, diversity of profiles of NGOs, size and sources of funding.

In order that the BSF remains relevant and provides added value for its members it is vital to find out what members actually want from participating; essentially, what are the reasons behind getting involved? According to the evaluation the principle reasons for NGO's applying to come to the BSF annual event are (in order of ranking) to meet up with prospective new partners, to gain regional knowledge and to learn about Black Sea issues in terms of politics, economics, geopolitics, to gain new knowledge about NGO issues or factors affecting the NGO sector, to meet up with existing partners and to learn about funding opportunities and to interact with donors. Many respondents were also motivated by the prospect of setting up new collaborative projects or gaining new skills and professional training from experts and more experienced NGO workers. The main observation here is that participants have quite high and concrete expectations of the BSF and what they want to get out of it. Meeting with donors is important, but not as much as the network, project building and learning opportunities provided by the BSF.

If one looks at this issue from a more critical perspective it is possible to glean that there is not as much renewal of the BSF's membership as there could or should be, especially if the BSF wants to remain relevant, outwards facing and inclusive. The evaluation tends to suggest that in many cases the same NGOs take part year after year, a situation that is not being challenged through a rise in the involvement of younger or newer NGOs and individuals in the annual fora and working groups. Evidence suggests that newcomers do not always find it easy to navigate the BSF and to get the most out of its activities.

Key Finding #3 Stakeholders have high expectations of the BSF and have fairly well honed objectives in mind as to what they want to take away. Such specificity means that there is a high risk of disappointment.

Key Finding #4 The BSF doesn't have a strong enough strategy for membership renewal. The dearth of new and younger NGOs / CSO individuals getting involved in the BSF suggests that the organisation lacks a capacity for rejuvenation and for assuring its future sustainability and relevance for a successor generation of NGO workers.

Do Stakeholders Appreciate the BSF Format?

How relevant and useful do stakeholders find the BSF annual meeting? This question relates not just to topics and subjects covered, but also to the actual format of the event and how well it facilitates NGO's objectives, interests and practical needs. It also relates to how far the annual BSF event facilitates connections between NGOs and donors and helps capacity building. The previous review of the Black Sea NGO Forum strongly suggested that changes in the format of BSF events should be implemented with a view to creating more opportunities for interaction amongst stakeholders. The current evaluation also found that the focus and format of the annual BSF meeting should be continuously reappraised and that indeed space for exchange and interaction needs to be better ensured.

From the vantage point of 2017, the overall level of satisfaction amongst participants in the BSF is impressive, with most agreeing that it 'generally' met their expectations or met their expectations 'very much so', as illustrated in the diagramme below. Similarly, the evaluation showed that the vast majority of participants see the BSF as either 'relevant' or 'highly relevant' for their professional interests and the objectives of their NGO. As already mentioned, there is a large amount of positive will amongst stakeholders towards the BSF and FOND's role in particular. The evaluation found that this positive sentiment and high regard for the BSF translates into stakeholders having higher and ever more ambitious hopes and aspirations for the forum as they recognise its potential. The range of individual answers and additional comments from the evaluation pertaining to the theme of relevance, expectations and appreciation of the BSF was diverse, thus the following points aim to capture overall tendencies and perspectives:

- The ambition and scope of the BSF is a big 'plus', but at the same time annual BSF meetings try to cover too much ground and sometimes seem unfocused. This can mean that the end product or the outcome of an event is somewhat vague, nor do the results always seem policy relevant.

- Whilst mostly interesting, some panels were weak; speakers rather ill prepared and lacking in dynamism. More importantly, there is sometimes a sense of a lack of ‘innovation’, speakers are drawn from the list of ‘usual suspects’ and are not necessarily honing their speeches to the subject at hand.
- The presence of members of the policy community, whether that be at local, national, regional or EU level is vital and goes some way in keeping the BSF relevant. Though not enough is made of their presence, which is a missed opportunity for assuring relevance.
- The chance to interact and learn from other NGOs and relevant stakeholders is a key attraction of the BSF; stakeholders seek an ambiance for sustained interaction – before, during and after the event.
- The chance to interact directly with donors at the BSF is a further value-added aspect. A two-way street is required, thus enabling NGOs to feed into and actually help define funding strategies and priorities, but also for NGOs to pass on their success stories in the form of ‘positive story telling’.
- The BSF is seen in a more favourable light for most NGOs consulted than the Eastern Partnership’s Civil Society facility. The reasons brought up for this stem from the fact that the BSF’s membership is broader and more inclusive, and also that it does not have a political agenda unlike the EaP variant.

Figure No. 4 – ‘Relevance of the BSF Annual Forum’

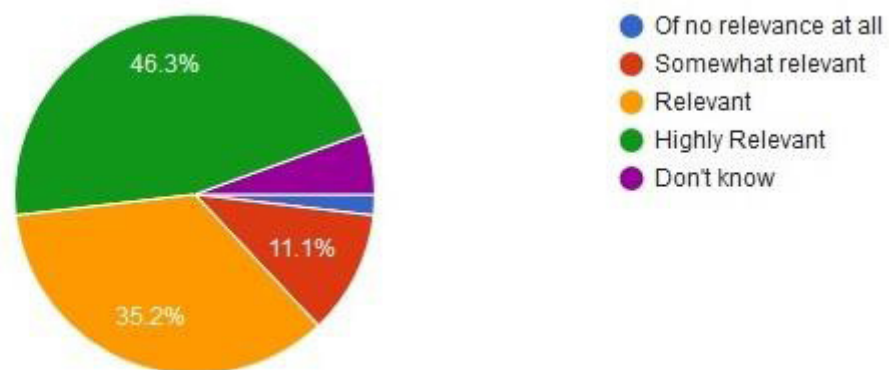
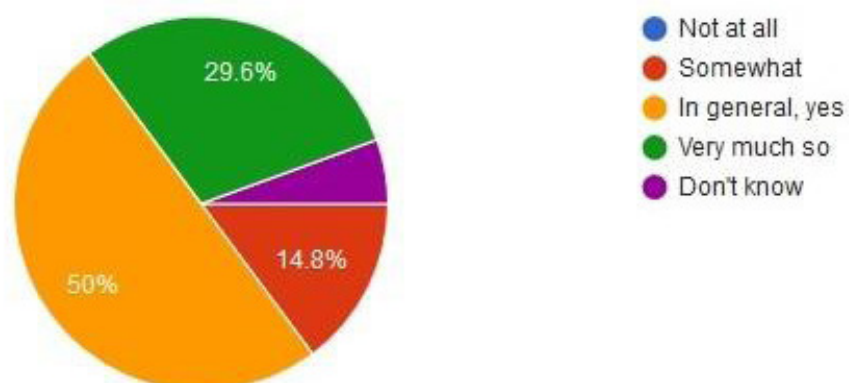


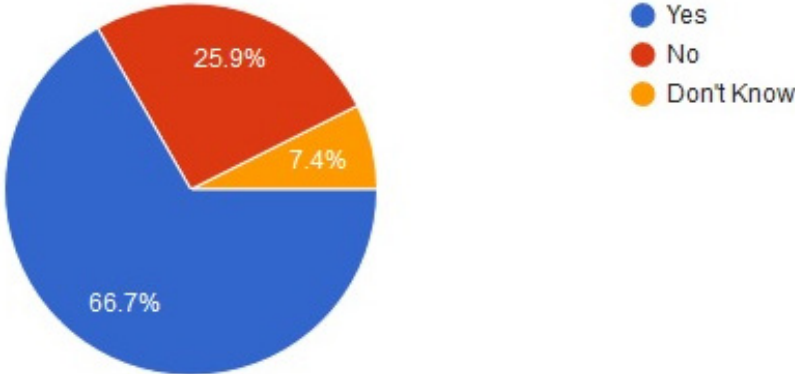
Figure No. 5 – ‘Meeting Stakeholder Expectations’



As already noted, the format of the annual BSF meeting is not optimal, in spite of on going efforts to render it more user-friendly, in line with stakeholder expectations and able to fulfil the BSF’s priorities. Essentially, according to the results of the evaluation, the current format of the annual BSF event is not advancing the thematic priorities adequately, facilitating policy relevance, nor is it serving as a means to create sustainable networks and quality regional projects. Indeed, consultations suggested that the current format, especially with its large plenaries is actually regarded by many participants as a barrier to getting some ‘take-home’ benefits. Stakeholders saw that the plenary sessions were often the least useful elements of the BSF in terms of delivering added-value and practical assistance for NGOs, especially if there were more than three speakers on a panel and papers lacked relevance, topicality or failed to give fresh evidence or information, suggesting that some speakers were ill-prepared. Of course, it is not an easy task to re-work the format of such a large event, which takes place at a different location each year, with such a diversity of participants. To address this challenge the BSF needs to be organised according to mixture of methods and styles with an emphasis upon ensuring interactions, establishing channels of communication for reporting back and well-honed plenary sessions that also facilitate two-way discussion and learning. Such a format also needs to be capable of enticing and involving new and younger NGOs and especially individual CSO workers.

Equally, respondents saw that practical assistance and advice on funding matters is a missing element in the forum at a time when NGO’s really need to perfect and professionalise their capacities for fundraising, including developing knowhow for project applications and funding diversification. An important objective of the BSF is to enhance the capacity of NGOs to be able to influence policy at different levels. This necessitates a range of ever more sophisticated skills, attributes and knowledge that NGOs need to assume if they are to be effective in this area.

Figure No. 6 – ‘The BSF as a Source of Skills and Training’



The evaluation suggests that the BSF is meeting this objective, but only to a limited extent and that crucially, when probed, stakeholders would like the forum to play a far larger role in this area. As already mentioned, many respondents pointed to the need for tailor

made training in project management, application writing and so on and to this end would welcome the offer of small workshops and peer to peer learning and mentoring.

Key Finding #5 The BSF annual forum is an important meeting point in the civil society calendar. The format, often described as ‘old school’ remains a block to the BSF realising its potential. The current format is particularly off-putting to individual civil society workers.

Key Finding #6 There are not enough ‘signs of life’ and follow up and momentum after each BSF annual meeting, which partly results from problems to do with communication and FOND’s physical capacities to do more than it already accomplishes (which will be detailed below). Moreover the lack of a well-publicised final end of forum ‘statement’ or ‘declaration’ reduces the BSF’s impact and capacity to contribute its voice to policy debates and advocacy.

Key Finding #7 Stakeholders are demanding and wants more ‘take homes’. They want to see more interaction; to learn and gain skills in their area of specialisation, but also to acquire broader knowledge and develop new capacities. Consequently, participants want more quality control over who speaks at events and to ensure that speakers really deliver added value.

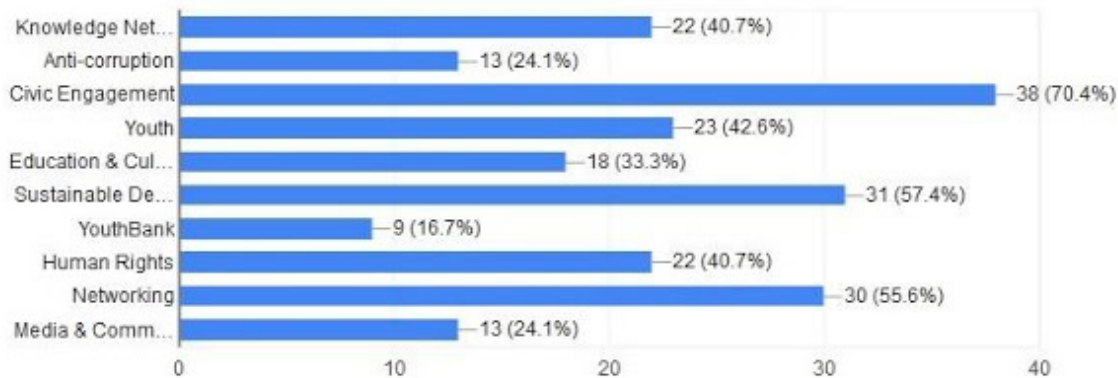
Are Stakeholders Engaging with BSF Thematic Priorities and Working Groups?

The thematic priorities (TPs) and working groups (WG) provide NGOs with footholds to further their interests and for the BSF as a whole to heighten its voice and impact and to meet its core objectives. Both initiatives are relatively new and are still in a process of being embedded and implemented. TPs and WGs are viewed by respondents as mostly relevant and have potential as ‘starting blocks’ for collaborative projects in a way that the annual BSF meeting cannot by itself deliver. However, the evaluation shows a rather mixed picture and suggests that some re-thinking needs to be done to optimise the thematic priorities and WG methods to meet their full potential. For example, a large number of respondents were not aware of the existence of working groups.

The thematic priorities reflect the wide diversity of the BSF’s membership and form the bases of the BSF working groups (WGs) – which meet at various points between the annual fora. In this sense, the role of the thematic priorities is to provide the BSF with identity and coherence both internally and externally. The evaluation shows that of those who participated in WG meetings appreciation levels were high in that participants saw that the thematic priorities and activities of the WGs furthered the objectives of their NGOs. The evaluation also confirmed that the convening of WGs with concrete agendas, objectives and a common methodology were essential underpinnings for nurturing sustainable projects and keeping dialogue and communications going between groups

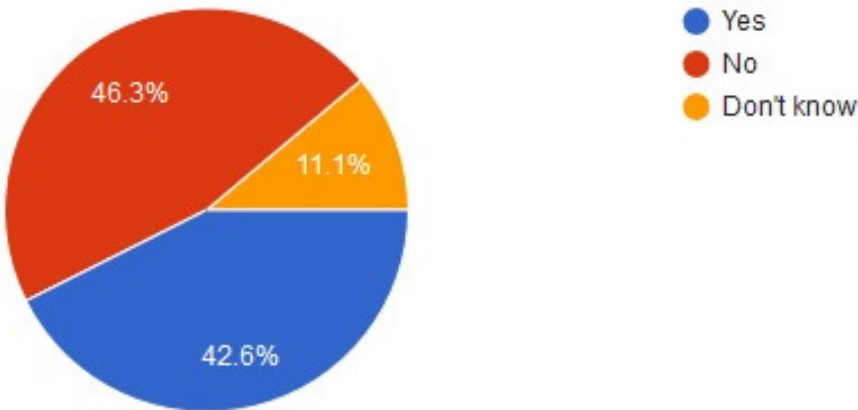
and individuals. In brief, unless leadership, resources, clear agenda setting and shared working methods are in place working groups are unlikely to flourish, even if NGOs say that they are interested in the subject.

Figure No. 7 – ‘Relevance of Thematic Priorities for Stakeholders’



Even if NGOs declare an interest in the subjects of TPs and WGs it does not necessarily translate into a desire to actually participate in meetings. The evaluation found that so far many NGOs were not engaging with meetings or were not even aware of the thematic priorities or working groups. The ‘trigger’ to get involved in a working group is obviously whether a theme correlates closely with the interests of an NGO, whether there are clear aims and objectives in place with an actual work programme – ‘what is the WG for and how will it help me’. Essentially, NGOs are not attracted to mere ‘talking shops’ led by the usual suspects with no clear objectives and steered by ‘personalities’ with their own interests.

Figure No. 8 – ‘Participation in Working Groups’



Importantly, of those NGOs that participated in Working Group meeting the vast majority felt that it met or exceeded their expectations and furthered the interests of their organisation, which is good news.

On the theme of refinement and optimisation of the WGs the evaluation suggests that some of the thematic priorities have yet to take root and inspire collaborative projects, this is evident in the reality that in some cases activities are patchy, stunted and have negligible or vague outcomes. This brings into focus the question of whether all of the thematic priorities are still valid, are they perhaps too numerous and do they reflect the interests of members and therefore whether there is a large enough body of committed NGOs willing to take the lead to elaborate the priorities further. The evaluation noted that from the perspective of many stakeholders some of the thematic priorities are ill defined; some are too broad in scope and others very specific and niche. Moreover, some NGOs felt that they had not been informed about or included in relevant WGs, that the BSF's thematic priorities had not been drawn up in a fully logical manner and the remit of WGs were not always clear, which resulted in some groups lacking a 'sense of belonging' or the will to get involved.

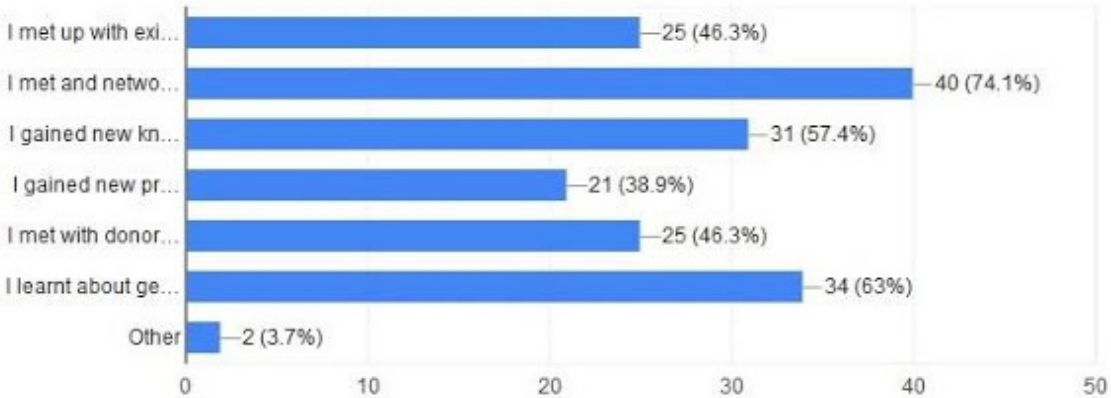
Key Finding #8 More time needs to pass before a full evaluation of the TPs and WGs can take place. As for now it is evident that stakeholders are starting to engage with these initiatives and that the TPs are providing 'poles' or focal points around which NGOs can orient themselves, should they choose to. This being said, it is clear that some of the TPs are ill-defined; some are 'concepts', some are policies and some are themes.

Key Finding #9 Establishing thematic priorities and working groups is not enough to move the BSF's objectives forwards alone. The evaluation suggests that TPs need on-going refinement to ensure relevance and the working groups need concrete support to be able flourish, gather members and to be able to form the basis of collaborative projects. Working groups should avoid becoming 'talking shops'.

The BSF as a Facilitator for Creating and Sustaining Networks and Projects

Another important part of the BSF's remit is to facilitate regional dialogue and to stimulate and nurture projects amongst NGOs. The main observation from the evaluation is that the BSF has made an impact in this regard and is viewed by stakeholders as a valuable space to find partners and gain knowledge of how to create networks and carry out multilateral projects – to an extent. As already mentioned, one of the key reasons that people come to the annual BSF is to meet prospective new partners with a view to initiate new projects. Evidence gathered in the survey and consultations suggests that NGOs gain a variety of things from participating, but it is not entirely evident how far newly found partners and fresh ideas translate into actual sustainable projects and networks.

Figure No. 9 – ‘What do NGO’s gain from the BSF?’



Closer inspection shows that that over 20% of the respondents of the survey have successfully set up projects as a direct result of participating in the BSF and a further 15% had projects in the pipeline – this seems to confirm the notion that the BSF provides a ‘starting block’ for collaborative projects but then it is down to individual members to carry things forwards and that the BSF is not yet able to play the role of facilitator or monitor. At the same this suggests that most participants have not used the BSF as leverage to get collaborative projects going, do not want to or have seen their efforts fail or stagger.

A key observation drawn from the evaluation is that there are actually more projects and initiatives nurtured by the BSF than is actually being reported. The well-known success stories of Child Pact, Anti-corruption and Youth Networks are at the pinnacle of a range of other smaller-scale initiatives that also owe their existence to the BSF and that should also be showcased, especially to donors and policy stakeholders as positive examples of regional cooperation. The evaluation suggests that a number of bi- and trilateral relationships were forged, project applications made or events held in the area of Youthbanks, advocacy, citizenship and democracy. However, the BSF’s tools for communication and reporting are not yet taking account of such ‘spin-off’ projects nor are NGOs reporting back to FOND about their activities.

Whilst not discounting success stories – existing and still in progress – another of the chief findings of the evaluation is that there is still a sizable gap between expectations and realities in this important area and that optimal tools are not yet in place to support sustainable collaboration and to monitor it. Moreover, very few NGOs have been able to gather new funding for their projects (more than 80% of those that instigated new projects did not get new funding), according to the evaluation and as such they might just wither and die at the stage of an idea. Aside from a lack of funding, NGOs point to other reasons to explain the lack of collaborative projects emerging from the BSF. In this context the following were mentioned as salient: not enough chances to physically meet, lack of an online platform to find partners, lack of developmental capacities of NGOs and lack of leadership.

Key Finding #10 The lack of ‘momentum’ between annual fora, support and communication mechanisms and the still rather nascent nature of the working groups implies that possible projects and ideas can get ‘lost in the time’ between meetings.

Key Finding #11 Funding conditions are not conducive to start-up projects in the region and donor methodologies are sometimes not suited to local realities. More specifically it is the lack of development or small seed-corn funding that presents a palpable barrier to getting an idea off the ground. NGOs do not necessarily want large projects that require extensive administration, monitoring and reporting. Instead, what interests them are small-medium sized grants of a six-month duration with light-administrative requirements that gives them an opportunity to set up a project with three-four partners and to deliver relevant results in a reasonable time frame.

Key Finding #12 There are a dearth of regional ‘champions’ or leaders with the requisite skills, know-how, time and experience to drive regional cooperative initiatives forwards; the successes of Child Pact and Anti-Corruption network are testimony to the importance of leadership. Overall, both national as well as regional leaders are lacking.

An interesting final point to reemphasise is that according to the evidence gathered during the evaluation there have been a number of BSF-inspired projects which have not been related back to the BSF for whatever reason, nor have they used BSF mailing lists or other forms of intra-BSF communication for their endeavours. This brings into focus, once again, the effectiveness and attractiveness of the BSF’s communication strategy, its visibility and capacity to act as a facilitator from the perspective of some stakeholders.

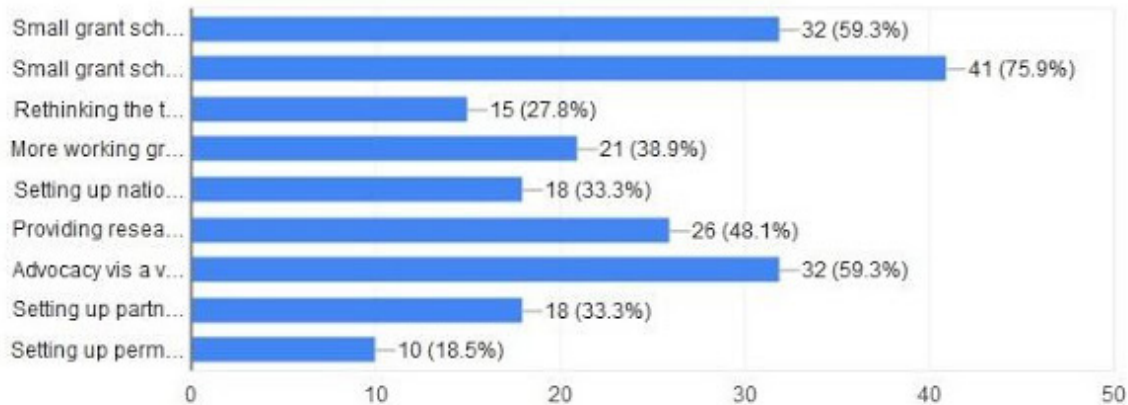
The Future of the Black Sea NGO Forum – Stakeholder Perspectives

One of the most significant findings arising out of the evaluation is that stakeholders take the view that the BSF has significant unfulfilled potential and that the organisation should have an augmented mandate.

It was mentioned at the start of this report that members of the BSF hold high expectations of the forum and have increasingly specific ideas and desires for what they want to get from it. The emphasis is upon getting ‘take-aways’ in terms of knowledge, practical skills and attributes and ultimately to create collaborative projects. In addition, members would like (a) the BSF to ensure more momentum between annual fora (b) a re-granting scheme administered by the BSF (c) support for mobility amongst NGOs (especially for younger workers) (d) more of an advocacy role – especially in confronting the shrinking space for civil society (e) a more detailed and updated database of contacts to use as basis for partner searches.

In terms of structure, BSF members do not look at the EaP CSF as a model to emulate. The EaP CSF is more formalised than the BSF and has a far more overt political agenda, for example the working groups correlate to the EaP’s overall thematic multilateral priorities. To repeat the point made earlier, the attraction of the BSF to its members is that it is an organisation ‘of and for civil society’ with a wide regional membership and by its very character and structure inspires confidence.

Figure No. 10 – ‘The Future of the BSF’



Key Finding #13 Members look to the BSF to deliver significant added-value at a regional level. They wish to see the BSF mandated with more ambition and with a firmer funding base so that it can support the expectations of members to build concrete and quality projects.

Key Finding #14 Stakeholders do not wish to see the BSF develop a formalised institutional structure.

BSF Successes and What to Learn From Them

The successes and sustainability of Child Pact and the Anti-Corruption network, both of which have been facilitated by the BSF are well known. Distinguished by their clear remits and objectives, both initiatives have gathered broad regional participation and have a discernible voice in advocacy and a place in broader regional and global networks. In both cases, the BSF was an enabler for further development and a platform for bringing in more members from the region. Child Pact and the Anti-Corruption network provide useful focal points to consider the development of the BSF and in particular its role as a regional facilitator for dialogue and cooperation, as well as advocacy and influencing policies. What these two initiatives suggest is that regional cooperation and sustainable projects amongst Black Sea NGOs should aim at the following ingredients for success:

- Having a shared and common methodology and vision

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- Establishing effective communication channels and a way of working
 - Establishing a management structure that emphasises shared ownership, but also allows the project to speak with one voice
 - Having a leadership team with time and expertise to drive things forwards
 - Be built on solid 'national' foundations first and foremost (Child Pact had Romania and Anti-Corruption had Moldova)
 - Communicate with BSF/FOND on subject and administrative matters; feed back into the BSF's narrative

SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS: CONSIDERATA AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following sections aim to bring together and synthesise the range of findings gathered during the evaluation and to sketch out some considerata and recommendations to help inform the development of the Black Sea NGO Forum. The recommendations revolve around the themes of sustainability, relevance, effectiveness and added value. Moreover, they try to bear in mind the idea of rejuvenation at both internal and external levels, as mentioned near the start of this report. Crucially, they propose some substantial changes in some domains and in other areas rather discrete changes and realignments.

First, however, is the question as to whether the BSF is meeting its core objectives?

Q. Is the BSF fostering and supporting dialogue and cooperation amongst NGOs?

A. Yes, as evidenced in the fact that it has endured, grown in size and scope and responded to the needs and interests to its stakeholders. But indeed, some areas for improvement are apparent in this domain.

Q. Is the BSF strengthening NGO's capacities to interact with and influence policies at national and regional levels?

A. Yes, to a certain extent. The diversity of the BSF membership and its character as a 'network' means that care and attention needs to be paid to avoiding controversies or taking sides on certain policy issues – a view that members fully subscribe to. Nevertheless, the BSF needs to think more creatively about interacting with and influencing policies – as foreseen by a large number of stakeholders that are interested in advocacy. The voice and relevance of the BSF is quite weak within the Brussels bubble.

Q. Is the BSF increasing the number of quality regional projects and partnerships in the NGO sector?

A. Yes, to a certain extent. Follow-on projects occur, but there are not enough high profile projects and partnerships emerging from the BSF. One needs to recall, however that this also has to do with the communication capacity of the BSF, which is still under development and its website that requires renewal and a more interactive function. Equally, it is evident that NGOs are not necessarily informing the BSF / FOND about their activities that stem out of the fora, nor are they helping keep up the momentum.

Recommendations for the Future Development of the Black Sea NGO Forum

The evaluation suggests that the BSF has proven credentials and despite its small staff and particular budgetary arrangement, which is based on a short-term arrangement, much has been achieved and aspirations run high. The BSF is basically in good shape; FOND and its staff should be commended for accomplishing a great deal.

The BSF has a place in the region and a role to play. Evidence gathered by the evaluation points to the following recommendations as the most pertinent to the future of the BSF. Crucially, what the recommendations aim at is a renewal or rejuvenation of the BSF in terms of its internal and external profile to enable it to continue to meet its objectives and fulfil the evolving interests and needs of stakeholders during challenging times in the Black Sea region.

Institutional Issues

The BSF should remain configured as a network and not move to an overly formal institutionalised setting; a network approach enhances common ownership and thus helps it fulfil its objectives.

An ‘expert group’ should be established comprising members preferably from all member states; such a group can help FOND establish the themes of each annual fora, oversee the evolution thematic priorities, monitor working groups and also steward any research activities that the BSF might want to carry out. Members of the expert group can also act as ambassadors for the BSF. Such an expert group would introduce a much-needed extra layer to ‘steer’ the BSF.

Configuring a Better Forum Format that Delivers and Innovates

Plenary sessions should be minimised and certainly curtailed at three speakers, each with a maximum of ten minutes to speak – a strong discussant should always be used to facilitate Q and A. Plenaries are good, but they should not dominate or steal time away from interactive sessions, including working groups – which require chances to talk and plan. Urgent consideration needs to be given to how other large-scale events are run, what models are being used to optimise interactions and to ensure ‘take aways’ for participants. BSF members can be canvassed for this. New formats take time to implement, thus new ideas should be gradually introduced as ‘piloted’ for feasibility.

The first panel at the annual event should be composed of speakers from the NGO sector. This would set the tone of the forum and effectively empower the voice of civil society.

The importance of having donors at the BSF is obvious, but to make their presence more useful the BSF should be more demanding. Specifically designed presentations (led by the optimal person from a donor organisation) geared to meet the needs of civil society that will also allow NGOs to ‘tell and sell’ their own stories to enable them to feed into donor’s emerging strategies needs to be the objective here. Café-style formats and informal dinners might have a role to play here.

Ways to bring in newer and younger NGO workers, especially individuals need to be created urgently, a ‘new faces’ panel or a BSF-orientation session should be implemented as part of a strategy of rejuvenating and updating the BSF’s membership. BSF could seek advice from the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) on how to reach to younger NGOs.

The effectiveness, relevance and impact of the BSF annual forum can be greatly enhanced by an end of conference statement, aligned with the BSF’s cross cutting priority.

More use needs to be made of the ‘roving’ nature of the BSF; being based in a different country each year should provide an opportunity to learn something about local NGO conditions, politics, success stories and so on.

Monitoring and Optimising Thematic Priorities and Working Groups

Working groups based on thematic priorities are new to the BSF, thus no fundamental changes should be made. Equally, the strategic framework provides a solid base for the time being. Thematic priorities should also be given time to embed and be tested. What needs to be done is to establish better communication about the working groups to the rest of the BSF via the website. As mentioned above, an expert group should have the job of devising ways to optimise working groups and evaluating the thematic priorities.

Creating an enabling environment for CSOs needs to be raised more prominently as one of the BSF’s core priorities. The most appropriate methodology being continued regular reporting via high quality research-based reports, annual post-forum statements and more information and insights into this topic placed on the BSF website.

Ensuring Visibility, Voice and Communication at Internal and External Levels

The BSF website needs a revamp. To meet the objectives of the BSF and the expectations of current and future members the website has to show more signs of life. As well as regular updates about the BSF the website needs to actively facilitate cooperation amongst members and to draw in new members. This entails a partner search facility and sections presenting existing collaborative projects. This objective relies on FOND,

but also on members to contribute to keeping the momentum of the BSF going.

The BSF's voice in Brussels is not as strong as it could be and an amount of 'eclipsing' took place when the EaP CSF was set up. To address this the BSF needs to track and engage with the implementation of the EU's Global Strategy and more importantly with any re-launching of the Black Sea Synergy as an example of successful region building. This can serve as a way of the BSF engaging with policy and advocating the voice of civil society.

The BSF should also position itself within networks outside of the traditional civil society world. Security Fora around Europe that bring together traditional security and defence elites talk a lot about resilience, societies and governance issues. The BSF, through its expert group, could move into such domains and in so doing enhance the debate and relevance and impact of NGOs in the policy making process.

Stimuli and incentive structures should be set up to encourage NGOs within individual states to talk and find common ground. This will not only help galvanise civil society at home, but also aid the BSF's objectives of strengthening civil society and developing regional cross-border linkages from a firmer base. Due consideration needs to be given to setting up 'soft' National Contact Points (NCPs) to be bridges or facilitators between FOND/BSF and members in Black Sea states. This can also serve as a way of improving communication channels.

Building Capacity and Strengthening NGOs

Capacities amongst smaller NGOs to prosper and fulfil their objectives are low. The BSF can deliver significant added value by putting a renewed focus on finding out what capacities are lacking and then responding with bespoke practical training. Establishing mentoring arrangements within the BSF should be a priority in this regard.

The question regarding establishing the BSF as a 're-granting' organisation needs serious consideration. A capacity to provide seed-corn funding for NGO development and collaborative projects, if well managed and based upon clear criteria, holds immense potential to move the BSF's objectives in a positive direction.

The BSF's Added Value – New Issues on the Agenda

In the context of BSF members having rising expectations, combined with the regional resource crunch FOND/BSF should launch a dialogue on fund diversification and especially how to tackle the question of private funding.

The BSF is ripe for renewal; the recommendations listed above are ways in which relevance, effectiveness and added value can be assured. Sustainability of the BSF is also important and crucially, the further development of the BSF and its capacity to bolster civil society is dependent to a large extent on there being a longer term funding strategy in place and one that goes beyond a year by year basis. Such an arrangement will facilitate the internal and external development of the BSF and in turn contribute to region building and ultimately security and prosperity across the region.

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