



MOLDOVA

Civil Society

Report



Courtesy photo. Occupy Goguta, Chisinau. October 2018
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Authors: Tomas Komm, Elena Terzi, Anna Zamejc

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Introduction

This assessment has been produced within the scope of the European Union (EU)-funded project “Civil Society Actors as Drivers of Change in the South Caucasus and Moldova”, implemented by People in Need.

The project aims to strengthen the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) as legitimate, inclusive and trusted actors advancing good governance and the democratization processes in target countries. It is rooted in a broad and inclusive definition of civil society, understood as “the set of intermediate associations which are neither the state nor extended family¹,” and specifically targets new actors on the scene, such as social moments, grassroots civil society initiatives and emerging CSOs¹.

The assessment study was conducted in two stages: during the onset of the project between January and March of 2020 and nearly a year later, between January and April of 2021, during the active implementation phase.

It is based on both a desk review of existing research and nearly a hundred semi-structured interviews/consultations with representatives of well-established non-governmental organizations (NGOs), key local experts and researchers in the field, as well as representatives of new and emerging CSOs and grassroots initiatives in the target countries.

Beyond providing insights on the overall challenges faced by the third sector amidst the global pandemic, this assessment aims to shine more light on the status, role, and needs of the emerging civil society across Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova as well as their informal grassroots initiatives and social movements.

Based on a sample of voices from across the region, the study seeks to provide a snapshot of the factors that have shaped the sector’s complexity over the last three decades and facilitate the following:

- An up-to-date understanding of the civil society landscape, as well as its context and needs, with a specific focus on new actors, their thematic interests, organizational forms, geographic specifics, constituencies, aims and challenges.
- An understanding of interactions between the emerging and the more established actors, as well as between civil society and local authorities and the private sector
- A rapid review of the lessons learned from the previous efforts at civil society development and capacity building.
- An understanding of the priority needs of the sector, as well as of areas where well-intended aid could nonetheless do some harm, and how to mitigate such risks.
- Development of a network of potential project participants, as well as like-minded organizations, donors and mentors who can be relied on as a resource during the implementation of the project itself.
- A better design of project components, including the facilitation of strategy development, tailored capacity building, operational support, a grant scheme for civic engagement and advocacy initiatives, support for outreach, research, exchanges and partnerships.
- As the coronavirus crisis began during the interviewing period, this assessment also aims to provide a preliminary overview of civil society’s initial response.

¹ Oxford reference: <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095614189>

With the above-mentioned goals in mind, the final part of the study provides a set of concrete recommendations for private and governmental donors alike on how to strengthen their support to local civil society, improve their links to emerging groups, and help build a more resilient third sector.

Methodology

Two methods were used to conduct the assessment study: a desk review of existing research, and semi-structured interviews with representatives of well-established NGOs, civil society activists, researchers and experts from across the region.

To reflect the diversity of the local civil society, geographic and thematic areas, age, gender and organizational form were taken into consideration before contacting a sample of respondents in each country.

The interviews were conducted in the various local languages, English or Russian.

With years of programs in the field, PIN's own experience and knowledge also provided a valuable foundation for the study.

Political parties and religious institutions were outside the scope of this specific project and research. However, they are an integral part of civil society and were frequently referenced in our interviews.

In Moldova, during the first stage of the project, from February to April 2020, 16 interviews with representatives of existing and emerging CSO initiatives were conducted – both in the regions and the capital city of Chisinau. Roughly half of the conversations took place in person and the rest were conducted via secure platforms, such as ZOOM or Skype, and by phone. During the second phase of the project, additional research and two interviews were conducted online.

National Context

Even though some forms of the civic associations during the Soviet era (such as associations of women, labor unions, environmental groups and others) enjoyed certain amount of limited independence from the state and the communist party, the modern civil society in Moldova began to emerge after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the establishment of the independent Republic of Moldova.

The first NGOs established during the early 90s, supported predominantly by Western public and private donors, mainly focused on topics such as monitoring of fundamental freedoms and political processes or the economic transition. Most of them were concentrated in the capital and established by educated professionals who were able to speak foreign languages (primarily English).

Perhaps due to their access to financial resources and higher salaries during a time of widespread unemployment and economic hardship in the 90s, a negative perception of NGOs and their staff - who were sometimes seen as “elitist” or “out of touch” with the rest of the country - developed among some parts of the society. Despite significant efforts to change this, according to our respondents, this perception has remained among certain strata of the society up to the present.

Another important actor that reappeared on the scene in the 90s were religious organizations. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and state-backed atheism, the whole region has experienced a revival in religious identification and observance. As an institution with deeper roots, the Moldovan Orthodox Church enjoys the trust of 70% of Moldovans (in comparison, only 22% trust CSOs).² Virtually all Moldova's leading politicians have curried favor with the Church to some extent. However, despite its significance, religion remains less important to Moldovans' identity than in Georgia or Armenia³.

Since the 1992 conflict, there was a clear division between civil society development in the breakaway region of Transnistria and in the rest of the Republic of Moldova. The contacts between CSOs on the two banks of Dniester River were very limited, and the civil society sector in both environments have remained significantly different until today. For that reason, a separate section has been included that is dedicated to civil society in the Transnistrian region.

While the 90s were characterized by political pluralism and institutional weakness, the period from 2001 to 2009 was dominated by the Party of Communists, which consolidated political and economic power and controlled state institutions. During this period, Moldovan CSOs enjoyed relative freedom, even though the state approach to civil society was generally rather suspicious.

An important milestone affecting the CSO environment and mindset of many activists occurred in 2009, when widespread public protests against the election results led to a political crisis, during which the Party of Communists was replaced by a nominally pro-European coalition. The new direction raised the hopes of many, but they gradually turned into bitter disappointment and disillusion that culminated in the so called "theft of the century", a revealed money laundering scheme which cost the Moldovan banking system and taxpayers over one billion USD. As some of the politicians who benefitted from this and other corruption schemes declared themselves liberal and pro-European, this has significantly damaged public trust in these concepts.

Another important factor contributing to the overall image of CSOs was the fact that after 2009 some civil society representatives entered the government institutions.

"Many civil society representatives decided to join the government structures with the intention to change the institutions, however, the institutions changed them. And CSOs started to be seen as part of the political game by the wider society. Parties also started to create satellite NGOs echoing their narratives" – described one respondent.

The mentioned "satellite NGOs" are not only party-affiliated think tanks (that sometimes claim to "represent civil society"), but in some cases are also charities and foundations.⁴ According to a *Promo-LEX* study, four political parties used affiliated charitable foundations to improve their image - carrying out at least 131 public acts of charity in 2017.⁵

In recent years, some of Moldova's political leaders also attempted to limit the space for local civil society by proposing unfavorable legislative changes and launching verbal attacks against its leaders.⁶

The most recent attack came from the ruling Party of Socialists' MP Bogdan Tirdea, who published an 800-page book "Civil Society in the Republic of Moldova: Sponsors. NGOcracy. Cultural Wars". The author mixes real sources (publicly available financial reports of the most visible NGOs) with broad

2 Public Policy Institute (2021). Barometer of Public Opinion. Retrieved online from: <http://bop.ipp.md/>

3 Pew Research Center (2018). Eastern and Western Europeans Differ on Importance of Religion, Views of Minorities, and Key Social Issues. Retrieved online from: <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/10/29/eastern-and-western-europeans-differ-on-importance-of-religion-views-of-minorities-and-key-social-issues/>

4 Andrei Cebotari. OrheiLandromat: Political charities. Retrieved online from: <https://cpr.md/orheilandromat-caritate-politica/>

5 Promo-LEX (2018). Raport finantarea partidelor politice în Republica Moldova. Retrieved online from: https://promolex.md/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Raport_finantarea_partidelor_semestru-l-2018.-RO.pdf

6 CSO meter (2019). Assessing the Civil Society Environment in Eastern Partnership Countries. Moldova. Retrieved online from: https://csometer.info/sites/default/files/2020-11/CSO-Meter-Country-Report-Moldova-ENG_0.pdf

speculations to claim that NGOs are “instruments of control and influence of other states through their leaders who actually work for particular donors, very often against the national interests...”, “became an octopus that infiltrated into all the branches of power, the mass media and scientific sphere...” and “are all connected to a specific political party and candidate...”

Furthermore, some of Moldova’s top politicians are open about their affiliation with the so-called “illiberal civil society”. These socially conservative groups and popular movements in some ways mirror liberal NGOs and think tanks, but are oriented towards limiting rather than widening human rights and political pluralism.⁷ These groups became especially visible around EU-required legislation and reforms concerning gender equality and non-discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, such as the 2014 Anti-Discrimination Law.

Russia plays an essential role in this backlash by promoting a “traditional values” agenda through its political, religious and media institutions. However, illiberal attitudes have strong local roots on both sides of Moldova’s identity divide and are exploited by, rather than imported from Russia. There are other international actors, such as the U.S. religious right, that are also playing a similar role.⁸

Moldova is often defined by foreign observers as a divided society struggling to choose between a “pro-Russian” and a “pro-European” path. However, while the fault lines in Moldovan society are real and significant, they do not neatly fit this narrative. They are also often exaggerated and used by the ruling elites of both factions to preserve a political system that concentrates their hold on power and access to resources and ‘rents’.⁹

According to our respondents, established Moldovan NGOs struggle with the image of being a “player for one of the sides” in this game, rather than an independent force for change. This can perhaps be traced back to their role in the disastrous governing performance by the nominally pro-European coalitions after 2009. In addition, their funding sources, work to support Moldova’s European integration agenda and combat disinformation, liberal leanings on social and cultural issues make NGOs vulnerable to an illiberal backlash. Being perceived as either partisan or “foreign agents” (a term used in Russia and by pro-Russian politicians to stigmatize and restrict civil society activity) has limited the appeal of NGOs to the less enthusiastically pro-Western part of the population and their ability to contribute to Moldova’s shared civic identity and solidarity.

The matter of identity sets Moldova apart from the other countries covered in this report. It has neither experienced the process of nation-forming in the 19th century, nor yet developed a supranational civic identity. In Moldova’s past are centuries of political dependence on the Turkish Empire (from the 16th century to 1812), the Russian Empire (1812-1918) and the Soviet Union (1940-1991), only briefly interrupted by the 22 years when it was part of the Romanian state.

While its lands, excluding Transnistria, were historically part of the Principality of Moldova, its people did not fully experience the state- and nation-forming processes that shaped today’s Romania.

Since gaining independence, the people of Moldova remain torn between a Romanian identity (which is problematic for Moldova’s ethnic minorities, constituting nearly 20% of the population) and the idea of Moldovenism (which was promoted by the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, and is still used by Moscow to justify its influence in the country).¹⁰

A modern civic identity based on citizenship rather than ethnicity has not yet taken root. While Moldova’s struggles with mass emigration, weak social capital, polarizing and self-interested political

7 The Foreign Policy Centre (2018). The rise of illiberal civil society in the former Soviet Union? Retrieved online from: <https://fpc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/The-rise-of-illiberal-civil-society-in-the-former-Soviet-Union.pdf>

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Kamil Catus (2016). The Unfinished state, 25 years of independent Moldova. Retrieved online from: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/76842669.pdf>

leadership are not unique in the region, many consider the identity issue to be a contributing factor.¹¹

Additional important factors affecting the overall civil society environment are poverty and migration. Despite some progress in recent years, according to the World Bank, there are still some 23% of Moldovans that live below the poverty line.¹² The struggle to ensure their own and their families' livelihoods significantly affects their ability to dedicate time to community issues or to public problems. This is especially pronounced in rural areas, as the time people can devote to activism or volunteer work is limited and social trust outside of family and traditional networks is low. The connected issue of mass exodus for jobs may affect as many as 40% of working-age Moldovans; it is among the countries with the highest rate of population decline globally. For many Moldovans, the sense of attachment to the young state is nebulous and emigration presents a more tangible path to a better life than getting involved in civic and political activity.¹³

Emerging Civil Society

One source of optimism for a thriving civil society space in Moldova is the emergence of new civil society actors, such as various grassroots initiatives, social movements and informal groups of activists. On the surface, such initiatives are sparked by very specific local issues, for example, public spaces being taken over, often illegally, by private interests.

At the same time, some observers see these civic initiatives as “an expression of anger of many ordinary citizens towards the prevailing corruption, economic inequality, oligarchic capitalism, the lack of the rule of law and the absence of accountability, transparency and participation in decision making”¹⁴.

One activist expresses this frustration in this way: “*Of all the components of a full democracy - social democracy (which ensures the rights and social protection of citizens), participatory democracy (in which citizens participate in the decision-making process), liberal democracy (in which individual and collective rights are guaranteed equally, not as a function of proximity to power) or popular one (in which the people, not self-appointed groups such as technocrats or oligarchs, hold and exercise power in the political community) - the Moldovan political system has retained and implements, in its own strange way, only one - electoral democracy.*”¹⁵ On a practical level, grassroots civil society responds to issues that affect people across identity and geopolitical divides. In Chisinau, the most visible themes of grassroots activism are public spaces, illegal constructions and demolitions, transparency of local budgeting and decision making, public transport, consumer rights, school meals, waste management, public procurement or the response to COVID-19. This work has allowed activists across Moldova's social divides to temporarily put their differences aside and to focus on a stronger set of shared interest and values.

Grassroots movements have the potential to mobilize ordinary Moldovans and apply in practice, rather than just declare, the principles of participatory democracy, solidarity, holding those in power

11 Institute for European Policies and Reforms, Institut für Europäische Politik, Institute for Strategic Initiatives (2018). Strengthening Social Cohesion and a Common Identity in the Republic of Moldova. Retrieved online from: <http://iep-berlin.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Social-Cohesion-and-Common-Identity-EN.pdf>

12 World Bank. Poverty headcount ratio at national poverty lines (% of population). Moldova. Retrieved online from: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.NAHC?locations=MD>

13 Kamil Căţuş (2016). The Unfinished state, 25 years of independent Moldova. Retrieved online from: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/76842669.pdf>

14 Ishkanian, A. (2014) Engineered Civil Society: the impact of 20 years of democracy promotion on civil society development in the former Soviet countries. London School of Economics.

15 Platzforma (2021). Democrația "noastră" și democrația "voastră" măsurate cu aceeași riglă. Retrived online from: <https://www.platzforma.md/archive/389735>

accountable, and defending citizens' rights from abuses by corrupt institutions and oligarchs through direct action. This could complement decades of work by established NGOs to advocate for necessary legislation and institutions, give them real meaning at the local level, and bring about tangible change.

In Chisinau, this is already happening. An individual forms of activism began emerging in early 2000s and coalescing into movements in the 2010s.¹⁶ Early activists (for example, those around Hyde Park and Curaj. tv) were loud, confrontational, and attracted attention of the media and public to issues that were familiar to many, but not talked about. They had little to no funding, were often detained by police for protesting or filming civil rights violations, and had almost nothing in common with "established" civil society.

As the "pioneers" matured, a new generation of activists joined the scene in the early 2010s. They proved to be more tech-savvy and more strategic – rather than just responding to ad hoc calls and messages about rights violations, they began the systematic monitoring of actions by public authorities (for example, the destruction of protected historical buildings and sales of public land), developed more professional approaches, and began attracting additional people and resources.

At this stage, several promising initiatives failed due to a lack of practical experience of working as a team and a lack of stable resources.

While the first two waves of urban activism had few people working on multiple topics, the third generation focused on very specific, clearly defined issues, studying them in great depth, explaining them in clear language, and attracting more supporters and allies via social media and live meetings.

Many of these younger activists had an NGO background and either quit their jobs or took on grassroots causes in their free time. While for some, the NGO experience was too limiting, they maintained contact and made effective use of this experience and the relationships they formed. Since the mid-2010s cooperation, coalitions and platforms became more prominent, and more established CSOs started getting involved. One example of this is the Urban Civic Network, a horizontal network of urban activists, initiatives and CSOs that emerged in 2015.

Leveraging their professional skills, support from ordinary citizens, networks and coalitions, urban activists were able to get several issues added to the public agenda in advance of the 2018 mayoral elections in Chisinau. Both mayoral candidates who reached the second round signed the declaration proposed by activists, with commitments related to transparent public procurement and expenditure, free access to city hall, access to information, and a permanent platform for an open dialogue between the authorities, civil society and the private sector, as well as a code of ethics for elections.

The election results were overturned by the courts in a controversial ruling, sparking a wave of protests. Occupy Guguta, Chisinau's best known grassroots movement, emerged during this period. It was named after the former Guguta café, a historic building in Chisinau's central park that one Moldova's oligarch had been trying to replace with a high-rise hotel, and activists have been trying to save it for nearly a decade. For a period of time, it became the site of a permanent protest for democracy and human rights, where people met to discuss hot topics, prepare creative protest actions, practice drumming and draw passersby into their circle.

A great deal has changed in Moldova since 2018. The issues that originally sparked the movement are in the past, new ones have emerged. The sustainability of a movement is different from that of an NGO - it rests in the power of its ideas and the empowerment of the individuals engaged in it. The movement itself can go dormant, splinter and re-emerge, spin off into new CSOs, media outlets, social businesses or political parties. Movements can dissolve into all sectors of society and influence them, and do not have to necessarily exist as long-term organizations. As the ideas behind them are quite durable, they can re-ignite new generations of activists as a source of inspiration.

While the Chisinau-based movements are the most visible, grassroots initiatives for democracy and human rights are also present throughout the regions. Our respondents described such initiatives as usually driven by an enthusiastic leader or group of leaders who are supported by a group of volunteers. Such

16 Ibid.

strong dependence on leaders represents a certain amount of risk for these initiatives, as their leaders might lose enthusiasm and energy, change focus (active people are often engaged in many issues), or decide to leave the country. A new type of actor - initiatives without leaders, with a horizontal structure, where decisions depend on mutual agreement – were noted as well. Both types of initiatives enjoy good relations with communities (as well as with local authorities, as sometimes activists took part and did well in local elections, becoming local authorities themselves) and are active and highly visible on social media.

Legal Environment and Funding

Freedom of association in “other socio-political organizations” (the term used by the Moldovan Constitution) is guaranteed by the Moldovan Constitution. The Civil Code further differentiates between 3 types of organizations: associations, private institutions and foundations.

The vast majority of CSOs exist in the form of an association.¹⁷ According to the CSO meter, there are 12,000 civil society organizations in Moldova¹⁸ and about half of them are active.¹⁹ The most frequent areas of CSO work are education, culture and work with youth. CSO activity is mainly concentrated in the capital, as over 60% of CSOs are located in Chisinau.²⁰

The CSO sector in Moldova is highly dependent on foreign funding.²¹ The largest international donor is the European Union, followed by USAID, the United Nations Development Program and other UN agencies.²² According to CSO Meter, 75 percent of surveyed organizations reported that they received foreign funding in 2017-2018. Other reported sources of income included donations from individuals (36 percent), 2% income tax designation mechanism (41 percent), membership fees (30 percent), state funding (20 percent), corporate support (20 percent), and economic activities (21 percent).²³

In recent years there were, on the one hand, proposed legislative changes (a draft law restricting foreign funding of CSOs) which would, if accepted, diminish the space for civil society. On the other hand, there have been generally positive improvements in the CSOs environment, such as the adoption of the “2 % law” (allowing citizens to direct 2 % of their income tax to CSOs), a law on social entrepreneurship, as well as changes in the legal framework of volunteering. However, the 2% law has not brought about significant change so far, as it favors organizations with a large membership, and its utility for smaller CSOs is limited. A large proportion of this funding tends to flow to organizations with direct links to state authorities or large private companies, so it seems employers have been able to influence their employees to direct 2 percent of their taxes to their affiliated CSOs.²⁴

17 USAID (2016). CSO Sustainability Index for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia, Chapter on Moldova.

18 Ibid.

19 EU Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society in republic of Moldova 2018-2020.

20 Ibid.

21 USAID, Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance, Center of Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights and Governance (2020). 2019 Civil society organisation sustainability index. Moldova. Retrieved online from: <https://management.md/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/CSO-Sustainability-Index-2019.pdf>

22 Neicovcen, S., Vidaicu, D., Cioaric V. (2016). Fundraising by Moldovan Civil Society Organizations from Domestic Sources: Opportunities and Perspectives. Retrieved online from: https://ecnl.org/sites/default/files/files/R69-Studiu-Colectare-de-fonduri-final_ENG_FL-NAL.pdf

23 CSO meter (2019). Republica Moldova. Retrieved online from: <https://csometer.info/sites/default/files/2020-11/CSO-Meter-Country-Report-Moldova-ROM.pdf>

24 USAID, Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance, Center of Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights and Gov-

The new Law on non-commercial organizations was adopted in 2020. According to a Promo-LEX analysis, „it simplifies the registration procedure, eliminates association restrictions for public servants, foreign citizens and business entities, and eliminates registration fees. It introduces a flexible system of internal organization, the possibility to design its own structure and management bodies, sets fair play rules for state funding of CSOs and includes new provisions regarding the status of public utility”²⁵. The adoption of the law was accompanied by polarizing and unsubstantiated claims by some politicians that it “would allow CSOs supported by external funding to get involved in political activity, and thus undermine national interests”²⁶.

Key Limitations

The following assessment of limitation faced by the civil society in Moldova is based on desk research and 18 interviews with civil society actors conducted from February to April 2020 (16 interviews) and in February 2021 (2 interviews).

Donor dependency

As mentioned earlier, Moldovan CSOs are increasingly searching for a way to diversify their funding sources, but still remain dependent on donors for the bulk of their funding.²⁷ The effects of donor dependency were described by one of our respondents: *“Many CSOs from the right bank (of the Dniester River) just try to take advantage of funding and do business... For them it is important just to apply for grants, not to change anything. Most people, organizations are active only if they have grants”*.

The origins of this dependency were described by another respondent: *“When donors initially started coming to Moldova, they came to an environment in which civic actors had the initiative, had the will to do the work but they did not have any idea how to build a civil society in a developing country, how to build reforms. As the result, the donors built the agenda themselves. NGOs got addicted to this donor-driven scheme.”*

Donor dependency also affects the accountability of CSOs. Even though many donor programs support engagement and representation of constituents as the primary purpose of CSOs’ work, this funding model implies primary accountability to donors rather than to communities. The reason for this is clear: donor funding is ultimately provided by foreign taxpayers, who need reassurance that it is being used transparently, efficiently and effectively. However, the time, energy and resources of CSO staff are limited and often consumed by the extensive funding requirements, so little is left for community building and/or deepening relations with their constituents. It also leads to CSOs speaking in “project language” and targeting their communication to donor audiences. As a result, CSOs are often seen as disconnected from communities, their reality and needs, which further contributes to the overall low level of trust in the CSO sector.

ernance (2020). 2019 Civil society organisation sustainability index. Moldova. Retrieved online from: <https://management.md/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/CSO-Sustainability-Index-2019.pdf>

25 CSO meter (2020). Republic of Moldova country update. Retrieved online from: <https://csometer.info/sites/default/files/2021-01/Moldova%20Report%20CSO%20Meter%202020%20EN%20final.pdf>

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

A related feature of this dependency is that small grants accessible to smaller local CSOs are usually intended for specific projects and do not sufficiently cover CSO operations or allow them to invest in their organizational development. Short-term project-based interventions do not provide organizations with the necessary stability which would enable them to make long term plans, grow their expertise and develop their community base. The scarcity of core funding was also mentioned as a limiting factor by the respondents representing more established, capital based CSOs.

However, the situation is slowly changing and according to the CSO Sustainability Index, the financial viability of Moldovan CSOs gradually improved between 2016 and 2019.²⁸ Some donors are supporting CSO efforts to develop crowdfunding campaigns, social enterprises and private sector outreach. The effects of COVID-19 crisis on the situation in 2020 remain to be seen, but our respondents noted increasing uncertainty on the one hand, but also the success of grassroots actions in response to the pandemic and opportunities for community-based groups to attract new members and supporters, on the other.

Limited support to emerging actors

The overall amount of funding available for emerging civil society actors is limited, as existing funding mechanisms are not flexible enough and do not match these groups' unique capacities, strengths and weaknesses. *"The donor community do not have mechanisms to channel funds directly to such groups as movements, non-formal or grassroots initiatives. They operate program based and less needs based,"* said one of our respondents.

The funding for emerging civil society actors is further constrained by the fact that they are often not officially registered, and Moldova's legislation does not offer low-tax or tax-exempt modalities for transferring funds to individuals (rather than legal entities) to realize non-profit, public interest projects. For crowdfunding, many resort to using foreign platforms and bank accounts. In order to receive institutional funding, informal initiatives either have to find a trusted NGOs that will handle the funds for them or register as an NGO themselves.

The decision to register is not an easy one, as it comes with government mandated reporting obligations that might be burdensome for volunteer-based groups with no paid staff or regular income to cover the services of an accountant. Almost by default, groups that receive donor funding need to quickly professionalize. As a result, it may be difficult for them to stay true to their (grass)roots and core strengths: being seen as independent actors and thus being able to mobilize the community, engage with the authorities both critically and constructively (depending on the situation), and quickly respond to needs, opportunities and threats as they arise. Instead, their energy has to shift to securing enough funds to maintain a professional team and fulfill the necessary government and donor requirements. The focus of their work may shift away from their original purpose to become more aligned with the donor priorities.

Respondents also shared a perception that available funding does not allow grassroots initiatives to grow – to focus on planning, organizational development or sustainable fundraising, which is connected with the low limits set for "operational costs" in projects.

Or if it does, it is often "pushing" them to become NGOs, which might not be the path they would like to choose. Projects are often very short term (several months) which leaves organizations and their members/staff often with "blank" periods without funding or income.

Some donors require excessive bureaucracy and the support is focused on the capital, while funding opportunities outside Chisinau remain scarce. While donors increasingly try to prioritize work in the regions, they are still rarely willing to modify their application, reporting and grant administration requirements

28 USAID, Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance, Center of Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights and Governance (2020). 2019 Civil society organisation sustainability index. Moldova. Retrieved online from: <https://management.md/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/CSO-Sustainability-Index-2019.pdf>

that are intended to reduce the donor's risk and are geared towards more established NGOs. On the other hand, respondents mentioned several flexible donors who understand the grassroots groups' potential and needs, and offer more flexible, less burdensome funding focused on supporting core functions and innovative solutions.

Regional differences

The majority of Moldovan CSOs are registered and operate in Chisinau. Capital-based organizations also tend to be much bigger than their regional counterparts. While there are well established CSOs operating in regional centers (Balti, Cahul, Comrat), many rural CSOs are one-person organizations.

According to several respondents, earlier attempts by donors and larger CSOs to support civil society in the regions tended to offer active people and groups a standard set of trainings based on a generic capacity development framework. It paid a lot of attention to financial sustainability, the ability to apply for grants, manage projects, retain staff, and thus enable local CSOs to survive and work on longer-term goals. While this was well-intended, one of the effects is that many smaller local CSOs tend to use identical phrases to describe their work, have very similar organizational structures, statutes and thematic focus.

CSOs in the regions tend to work closely with local public authorities and focus on issues such as local development, economic empowerment, youth, women and social services. They may be viewed positively by the community for their ability to bring resources into regions and areas that are insufficiently funded by the public budget. However, their project-based funding is quite limited and short-term in nature. They have a limited ability to act as independent watchdogs, take critical positions towards the authorities, and/or push for systemic changes that would challenge local vested interests and benefit the community.

Due to the tight-knit nature of local, mostly rural communities and pressure to conform, it is also more difficult for local CSOs to raise new issues that might trigger a backlash from traditional authorities, such as the rights of marginalized groups and feminist topics. Some organizations and activists do it, but it often takes a powerful personal story, empowering experiences (often outside the community), and considerable courage to do so.

Donors' attention to the regions has grown in recent years and more diverse funding opportunities are available. Due to complexity of donor requirements, there is often a CSO from Chisinau or one of the regional centers serving as an intermediary for sub-granting and capacity development programs for smaller local CSOs.²⁹ While the wording of these programs emphasizes tailored and participatory approaches, several of our respondents claim that "this is not always sincere", and that a one-size-fits-all, top-down approach is still more common in reality.

Chisinau-based groups are more diverse, more independent, and tackle a much broader array of issues, but some of the above limitations apply to them as well. One of our respondents referred to capital-based NGOs working with smaller CSOs or rural communities as appearing "arrogant" and "out of touch", reflecting Moldova's urban-rural divide and the weak level of trust across it.

Another major limitation for local CSOs is the failure of decentralization reform, which has been shelved for years. Moldovan local authorities have limited financial autonomy and public services (social, environmental, educational, investment in local developments) are highly centralized, which limits the potential impact of any grassroots groups or NGOs in the regions on financial flows and local policies that matter. Political leaders of all colors have been reluctant to let go of the centralized administrative resource that can be mobilized at election time with promises of more funds to regions that vote "the right way", and threats to public sector employees (over a third of Moldova's labor force) that vote "the wrong way".

29 Examples: <https://www.eu4civilsociety.md/>, <https://www.dezvolt.md/despre-proiect>.

Thus, prospects for this crucial reform remain dim.

Skills and competencies

The donor dependency scheme is also affecting the capacities of organizations in the CSO sector. Due to the fact that CSOs often do not have strong relations with communities, they are not able – or they are even not motivated enough – to identify problems communities are facing, analyze them and come up with their own solutions. *“The civic actors did not have the capacity for identifying problems they could be solving or the capacity to identify the solutions they could be bringing around. Instead, they were driven by the donor’s demand”* one respondent put it.

Interviews, however, indicated, that is not just capacity building that is needed in response. As another respondent mentioned: *“Donors indeed were successful in giving some actors good skills: in advocating, managing projects, fundraising, proposal writing. Those skills are in place.”* It is rather a different approach to building up the capacity that is needed: *“But they (CSOs) do not need just skills. But when we speak about competences we speak about a combination of knowledge, skills and behavior, or attitude...We do not just (need to) teach them how to fish. But when we do competence development, we teach them how to analyze where the river goes, where it is better to fish.”*

Low level of trust

According to the CSO meter 2020, 29% of Moldovans trust CSOs. It is significantly lower number than for example trust in church (65%), however slightly more than in political parties (21%). The low level of trust for CSOs might have several causes: the donor dependency and the fact the whole sector was built after Moldovan independence with the help of foreign donors, the low level of attention CSOs are paying to community engagement or the entanglement of some CSOs into politics during recent years. However, also another possible cause was described by respondents *“the topics are adopted by CSOs from abroad, however, they are not adapted to the local context”* which further supports the image of CSOs as *“agents of European civilization”*. It is also mostly Chisinau-based CSOs who are communicating to people in the regions, who are not always able to take into account local characteristics and needs.

Civil society and Gender

The Situation of Women

In Moldova, 2 out of 3 members of the civil society sector are women.³⁰ According to the interviews, women are also more involved in volunteering. However, this has not always meant that local women’s authentic voices and issues were prominent in the CSO agenda.

30 Eastern Partnership Civil Society Facility (2018). Statistical Analysis on the Civil Society Sector in the Republics of Moldova: Infographics. Retrieved online from: <https://eapcivilsociety.eu/news/project-news/statistical-analysis-on-the-civil-society-sector-in-the-republic-of-moldova-infographics.html>

Initially, civil society work in the area of women's rights was guided by foreign donors and informed by the vision and experiences of Western women's movements, on which the local level research and advocacy were based. However, the experience, position and struggles of women during communism were very different from those of their Western counterparts. This led to a disconnection between how the donors saw Moldovan women and how these women saw themselves. In some ways, civil society's first attempts to promote women's rights were a new take on the Soviet era's top-down approach to women's issues.

Civil society advocacy did have tangible effects – for example, it played a role in the adoption of the Law on Ensuring Equality in 2012 and the establishment of The Council for Preventing and Eliminating Discrimination and Ensuring Equality. The Council now plays an important role in shaping institutional practice and public debate on equality and gender related issues.

In the 2010s, Moldova had some overall improvements such as advanced legislation (a significant achievement of established civil society) and various programs targeting the effects of gender inequality, such as domestic violence, scarcity of economic opportunities, or weak political representation. However, there was no movement for women's rights rooted in society, a rift between legislation and the reality on the ground, and few attempts to address the root causes of inequality, such as sexist stereotypes and restrictive gender roles.

The first post-independence grassroots feminist initiative emerged in Chisinau in 2015. Several of its founders studied social sciences abroad and were able to draw on and critique both the Western and Eastern European traditions.

They found that “most people were wary of the word ‘feminism’ and associated the word with importing ‘Western values’ into the Eastern European context”.³¹ The Feminist Initiatives Group created spaces where local women's voices could be heard and feminist topics could be discussed as meaningful, locally relevant concepts that reflect everyday life. It organized discussion groups, book and film clubs, public lectures and debates. It also brought those voices out into public spaces, through Women's rights marches, performances, intense social media discussions, and eventually a TV show moderated by the group's leaders. Its members and allies were a diverse group of activists, independent artists, researchers and journalists, and their initiatives and struggles often intersected with those of the LGBT community. It never applied for any grants and was largely self-funded, but did rely on support from human rights CSOs for space, equipment and materials.

Initially, the group was shunned by established civil society – women's rights NGOs did not join the first March 8th marches and distanced themselves from the word “feminism”. Over time, the group earned prominence through a combination of factual debates rooted in modern social sciences, creative protests and their ability to provide a sharp critique. It influenced public discourse and the way liberal media, influencers, civil society, and even some politicians approach gender.

Six years on, many of the original leaders have since left Moldova or withdrawn from activism due to fatigue, the Facebook group “Feminism Moldova” remains active with daily community posts and debates. The Women's Rights March has become quite mainstream and is well attended by activists, donors and even some politicians.

The Situation of LGBTI

The Rainbow map of ILGA Europe measuring the human rights situation of LGBTI community ranks Moldova at the 38th position among 49 European countries.³² Despite progress in tackling discrimination

31 Brusa F. (2017). Between institutions and movements, the challenges of Moldovan feminism. <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Moldova/Between-institutions-and-movements-the-challenges-of-Moldovan-feminism-177614>

32 ILGA Europe, Rainbow Map, 2020. Retrieved online from: <https://rainbow-europe.org/#8648/0/0>

in recent years, in very traditional elements of Moldovan society, the LGBTI community remains the least accepted of all minorities.³³ Even though this community enjoys some legal protection against discrimination, the public perceptions remains negative and the Genderdoc-M, one of the most important and oldest NGOs focusing on LGBTI rights, reports various cases of violence, harassment or hate speech against the LGBTI community.³⁴

Due to its community roots and the precarious nature of its activism, Genderdoc-M has been one of the first established CSOs to support Chisinau's grassroots initiatives and movements. Its prominent campaigns, such as the 2016 Fără Frică (Without Fear) campaign, emphasized local ownership of human rights activism, of its ideas, language, issues, messages and proposals.

The campaign did not begin by addressing LGBTI issues right away, but instead kicked things off with a series of videos featuring well-known artists and media personalities, and later also LGBTI people speaking about their personal fears and what they would be able to do if the fear disappeared. It offered the audience a common interaction context with LGBTI people, and aimed to change perceptions by speaking of things that unite us, that are felt and experienced by all. The campaign was quite memorable for its visual imagery. It also marked the first time LGBTI allies became visible in the public space and combined with other actions led to significant changes in the way the liberal media, influencers, civil society, and even some politicians approach LGBTI issues.

The Impact of COVID 19

During the first wave of the COVID 19 pandemic, many CSO initiatives were involved in the crisis response.

“Civil society took over most of the state's functions in managing the pandemic and its effects. Initiatives and groups were quickly created that acted immediately, unconditionally and voluntarily to provide an immediate response to a need.”

As was the case in other countries in the region, the coronavirus crisis in Moldova led to the mobilization of local communities. Many people who had not been previously involved in civic initiatives decided to join the efforts to bring the crisis under control.

A survey conducted in Moldova by People in Need in February 2021 among 46 CSOs showed that one third of them was affected strongly, and the remaining two thirds moderately. Similarly, one third of CSOs had to lay off employees due to the pandemic. Apart from constraints such as the disruption of activities and various difficulties in helping their beneficiaries and abovementioned layoff of human capital, CSOs also reported decreased salaries, increased levels of stress or increased amounts of work.

Respondents' answers (both conducted in 2020 and in early 2021) indicated that there might be a longer-term impact for NGOs which are dependent on foreign funding, as there are concerns it might be curbed as a result of economic slowdown in donor countries. In case of serious limitations of funding, it might represent even an existential threat for some NGOs. On the other hand, respondents were of the opinion that activism and the emerging civil society actors will not be that much affected as the topics

33 Council for Preventing and Eliminating Discrimination and Ensuring Equality, European Union, European Council, UNDP (2018). Studiu. Privind percepțiile și atitudinile față de egalitate în Republica Moldova. Retrieved online from: <http://egalitate.md/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Studiu-privind-percep-iile.pdf>

34 GENDERDOC-M. (2019). Report on the Situation of LGBT people's rights in the Republic of Moldova. Retrieved online from: <https://www.gdm.md/en/content/report-lgbt-peoples-rights-moldova>

they are focusing on will remain and in some cases might be even exacerbated, or new needs, topics or gaps in government policies might appear. As the crisis already created a wave of solidarity among people, some respondents thought it might mean a turning point for the whole CSO sector. “It could be a turning point that donors’ priorities will be revised and they will offer more funding to grassroots initiatives that work directly with communities and neighborhoods”. It could be as well opportunity to stimulate the cooperation between NGOs and emerging civil society actors: “(it could be) an opportunity to find common ground, to involve more people and to prove the real meaning of civic engagement and grassroots initiatives.”

SPOTLIGHT ON THE TRANSNISTRIAN REGION

General Background

Transnistria, a narrow stretch of land situated mostly on the East bank of the Dniester river, functions as a de-facto independent state though it is internationally recognized as part of the Republic of Moldova³⁵.

The conflict over the territory dates back to the end of the Soviet Union when the creation of an independent Moldovan state led to a military conflict between pro-Russian local separatists in the Transnistrian region and Moldovan security forces. In 1992, with the help of Moscow, a negotiated ceasefire ended the clashes, but cemented the split between the two sides. The separatists established a quasi-independent structure which has continued to function until today. With a population of some 500.000 people, the de-facto republic is not recognized by any state, including Russia – though it remains firmly under the influence of the Kremlin.

Unlike the conflicts in South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Nagorno-Karabakh, the Transnistria dispute is largely frozen. However, the relations between Moldova and the local de-facto authorities remain tense and Chisinau has no judicial and political control over Tiraspol. Diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict have continued over the last years, but without any significant progress.

The first independent³⁶ organizations in Transnistria started emerging during the early and mid-nineties, bringing to the region novel concepts and ideas. One of these organizations was OSORT, which is dedicated to providing support and services to disabled children. Another one, Pillgrim, was among the first groups to introduce informal education, youth exchanges with Russia and Ukraine, workshops and trainings. It quickly started attracting students and helped new leaders and organizations to emerge that, at a later stage, would establish their own groups.

Pillgrim’s success, however, soon turned against it: in 2001, it came under increased pressure and physical attacks by security forces, resulting in its leaders being forced to flee abroad and the organization shutting down.

During the late 90s and early 2000s, the newly founded CSOs grew due to an influx of donor money and increasingly added human rights issues, legal analysis, and more study visits to their agendas. Their popularity, especially among students, quickly attracted the attention of local security services.

Meanwhile, despite the increasingly tight system of control and ever-present security services, civil

35 Disclaimer: While referring to the Transnistrian authorities, ministries or any local institutions, we mean it as de-facto authorities, ministries, institutions etc. The breakaway territory is not recognized as an independent state.

36 Independent from the de-facto authorities, organically grown

society started consolidating and professionalizing their activities. However, there was a hefty price to pay: most of them had to co-operate with the de-facto authorities in order to be allowed to continue their operations. In the mid and late 2000s, each organization tried to find their niche (sometimes, in accordance with their donors' priority issues), defined goals and vision. Also, new topics were on the rise: in addition to engaging in issues such as health-care issues, informal education initiatives, and promoting ecology, Transnistrian organizations started increasingly looking into the complex issue of human trafficking and domestic violence.

The spread of the Internet also played an important role for boosting the potential of the local civil society sector. Amidst the restrictive political system, digital connectivity helped locals to break through the information blockade, search for new trends, and establish new partnerships.

However, most independent organizations still struggle with how to navigate within the hostile environment of Transnistria. In the local Ministry of Security, there is even a special section devoted to controlling the work of non-governmental organizations.

Furthermore, the ongoing threats and harassment of civil society activists by the de-facto authorities, along with the increasingly restrictive legislation that they need to abide by, remains some of the biggest obstacles to the development of the sector.

The Complex Nature of Transnistria's Civil Society Sector

Although, at the first glance, Transnistria's civil society sector may seem quite vibrant and functioning (despite the restrictive legislation that is explained in the next sub-chapter), it is worth noting that many of the currently active NGOs in the breakaway republic are not independent.

Most of them work in close cooperation with the de-facto authorities and perceive the informal sector more as a mechanism for receiving foreign grants rather than one for performing monitoring and watchdog functions. They are supported by the de-facto authorities themselves who encourage the flow of foreign funding to the region – as a type of development assistance. At the same time, the work of organizations and activists involved in politically sensitive topics, like freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, is extremely limited.

As a result of such an environment, there is little public control over the actions of the de-facto authorities and limited information on ongoing rights violations, leading to a greater level of impunity. The situation is only further aggravated by the complete lack of independent media in the region.

Legal Status of NGOs

Registration of NGOs in Transnistria is carried out by the State Registration and Notary Service, which is governed by the de-facto Constitution, laws, and by-laws of the Transnistrian Moldavian Republic.

Although there are no legal restrictions on registration, representatives of independent civil society complain that it has become increasingly difficult to receive a formal status.

Furthermore, cooperation between NGOs, the government and government-funded structures (including kindergartens, schools, universities, and even hospitals) in the implementation of project activities financed from abroad is possible only under the condition that the project is recognized as a “program of technical assistance” by the Technical and Humanitarian Assistance Coordinating Council (hereinafter the Coordinating Council).

If such a status is granted, the NGO and its project fall under the control of the government and the appropriate security forces. In practice, it means that a specific government office gets immediately assigned as responsible for overseeing the project’s implementation. It creates a paradoxical situation: on the one hand, the office will “assist” in the implementation of the project, and, on the other hand, it will expect the NGO to submit a report on its implementation. In practice, it means that nothing that includes a human-rights component or touches upon a sensitive topic will be given a green light for implementation.

NGO Legislation

One key factor that limits civil society space in Transnistria is the local law governing the activities of NGOs.

Adopted in 2018, the de-facto NGO legislation in Transnistria copies Russia’s notorious “foreign agent” law. In practice, however, it is even more restrictive as it forbids local non-profit organizations that receive foreign donations to engage in “political activity” under the threat of liquidation.

Ever since its introduction, Transnistrian de-facto authorities have used it as an instrument to exercise pressure on local CSOs and to further curb the freedom of speech and freedom of peaceful assembly in the region. Under the legislation, any public debate, discussion or advocacy action touching upon social issues can be interpreted as political activity and become a motive for shutting down the CSO organizing such an event.

One of the organizations targeted for violating the new rules was Apriori, Transnistria’s only human-rights NGO, which was officially accused of “engaging in political activities with foreign funding.”

In fact, all Apriori was “guilty” of was organizing an exhibition on local media and holding an open lecture about Transnistria’s political system. Being on the verge of the shutdown, the NGO eventually came out of it largely unscathed, mainly due to active behind-the-scenes engagement from European embassies and international organizations. The case also illustrated how important it is for international actors to stand up for local civil society when they come under pressure.

On the other hand, there is no guarantee that Apriori will continue to be safe in the future. A reoccurrence of the “violation” within the next six months, according to the legislation, could potentially result in penalties and/or a complete shutdown of the NGO in question.

Therefore, the legislation is a useful tool in the hands of the de-facto authorities to “discipline” those who are seen as “too independent,” while sending a warning signal to other organizations.

Key Limitations for CSOs

NGO Legislation

Among the main challenges facing CSOs working in Transnistria is the NGO legislation which was adopted in 2018. On top of endangering any local NGO receiving foreign funding, it also encourages a suspicious attitude towards European and American donors and, as a result, is hindering the civil society's development potential and progress on goals.

The new regulations also add to an overall sense of uncertainty, as an NGO can be – as of now - suddenly shut down.

Lack of Independent Courts

The court system in Transnistria is not independent, resulting in the absence of an effective means of protection of the rights and freedoms in Transnistria, which also has an impact on NGOs and their work. Apriori currently advocates for the creation of a mechanism that would guarantee all the inhabitants of the region, regardless of what passport they hold, access to an internationally recognized court system as such as the European Court of Human Rights

Availability of Funding and Donors' requirements

Few resources are available to organizations registered in Transnistria or initiative groups based in the region. Local fundraising exists in a basic and limited form, mainly through social media. The breakaway republic is a relatively poor region and this is one of the reasons public fundraising cannot really work. The main lifeline to local community organizations are therefore grant-support projects.

However, the technicalities of receiving assistance from abroad only add to the problem: most projects require an approval from a special government commission.

When it comes to support from foreign donors, application and reporting procedures are often times too complicated for newer organizations – and the majority of Transnistrian civil society groups consists of less experienced stakeholders.

It contributes to the lack of opportunities to receive institutional funding that would allow organizations to enter into a period of stability necessary for institutional development and to keep full-time staff. Consequently, very few organizations have a long-term strategy and a clear understanding of their goals.

Pressure from Local Security Services

When it comes to choosing topics to work on, many activists try to focus on low-key issues so that they don't attract the attention of security services or the government. Matters that could be seen as largely political are avoided out of fear for repercussions from the side of the de-facto authorities.

Migration

More and more civil society activists have decided to leave Transnistria – either for economic reasons or because of the increasing pressure from the side of the de-facto authorities. Many decide to stay silent – even while staying in a third country – out of fear that government officials may target the family members that they left behind.

Low quality of the available capacity-building programs

The lack of effective capacity-building trainings for local civil society activists also constitutes a serious challenge. Training content offered by donors may duplicate and prove repetitive over time and may not be well-matched to the needs of the local civil society. Programs are largely tailored to counterparts from Moldova rather than adjusted for local, more difficult conditions faced by Transnistrian activists.

Overall, for strengthening the civil society sector in Transnistria, there is a strong need for donors to identify some organizations to work with long-term – by providing them with mentorship, tailoring capacity-building to their needs, and putting an ample focus on institutional development.

Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected Moldova as a whole, but it has had a particularly negative impact across the breakaway republic. In March 2020, for the first time since the ceasefire of 1992, the de-facto border of Transnistria was shut down (officially as part of the pandemic response policy) and the restrictions to enter or exit the region have remained in place throughout early spring.

The unilateral decision has had some serious implications for ordinary people, but in particular, local civil society, as it left few ways of escaping the region in case there was a danger or threat – not an uncommon need for human rights defenders or journalists engaged in sensitive work.

Furthermore, the border closure has increased the impunity of the de-facto authorities. During the lockdown, security services have also paid increased attention to the activities of the NGO sector and many people involved in civil society work were summoned for lengthy interrogations about their cooperation with foreign institutions, sources of funding, and links to prosecuted activists.

What worsened the situation of local civil society, in particular, was the adoption in March the “2020-2026 Strategy for Combating Extremism”, which was followed with a series of detentions and acts of persecution against activists. Modelled after Russia’s anti-extremism law, the strategy became a useful tool for the de-facto authorities to target their critics.

In one of the most revealing cases, officials accused Larisa Calic, an activist in her early twenties, who had earlier published a book containing interviews with former Transnistria de-facto army conscripts, with charges of public incitement to extremism. She was forced to flee the region in order to avoid detention. The de-facto authorities threatened the entire staff of three other CSOs in connection with Larisa’s case and summoned them for interrogation. Moreover, the activist’s lawyer never got access to the official files in her case.

The strategy was also used against two other political activists who were accused of promoting extremism on social media and attempts to organize a demonstration. One of those, Alexandr Samonii, was

forced into exile, and the other, Genadii Chorba, is being held by security services in detention.

Furthermore, criminal charges for insulting the “authorities” were even pressed against some ordinary people who criticized the leadership on social media.

Finally, many human rights violations are likely to go unnoticed during the pandemic. People who were illegally detained and arrested have had less of a chance of receiving help or any kind of attention from relevant local and international actors due to the restriction of freedom of movement and the pre-occupation with the effects of the pandemic.

However, there is also one positive implication of the COVID-19 crisis that is worth mentioning. The pandemic gave rise to a new volunteer movement – though mostly controlled by the de-facto authorities, it filled an important niche in the sector. Though, the respondents pointed out that some institutional and financial support will surely be needed in the future to preserve it.

Last but not least, due to the growing uncertainty and disinformation about the virus, the COVID-19 pandemic also showed the appetite among local population for reliable, independent media, where people could find trustworthy information.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For donors:

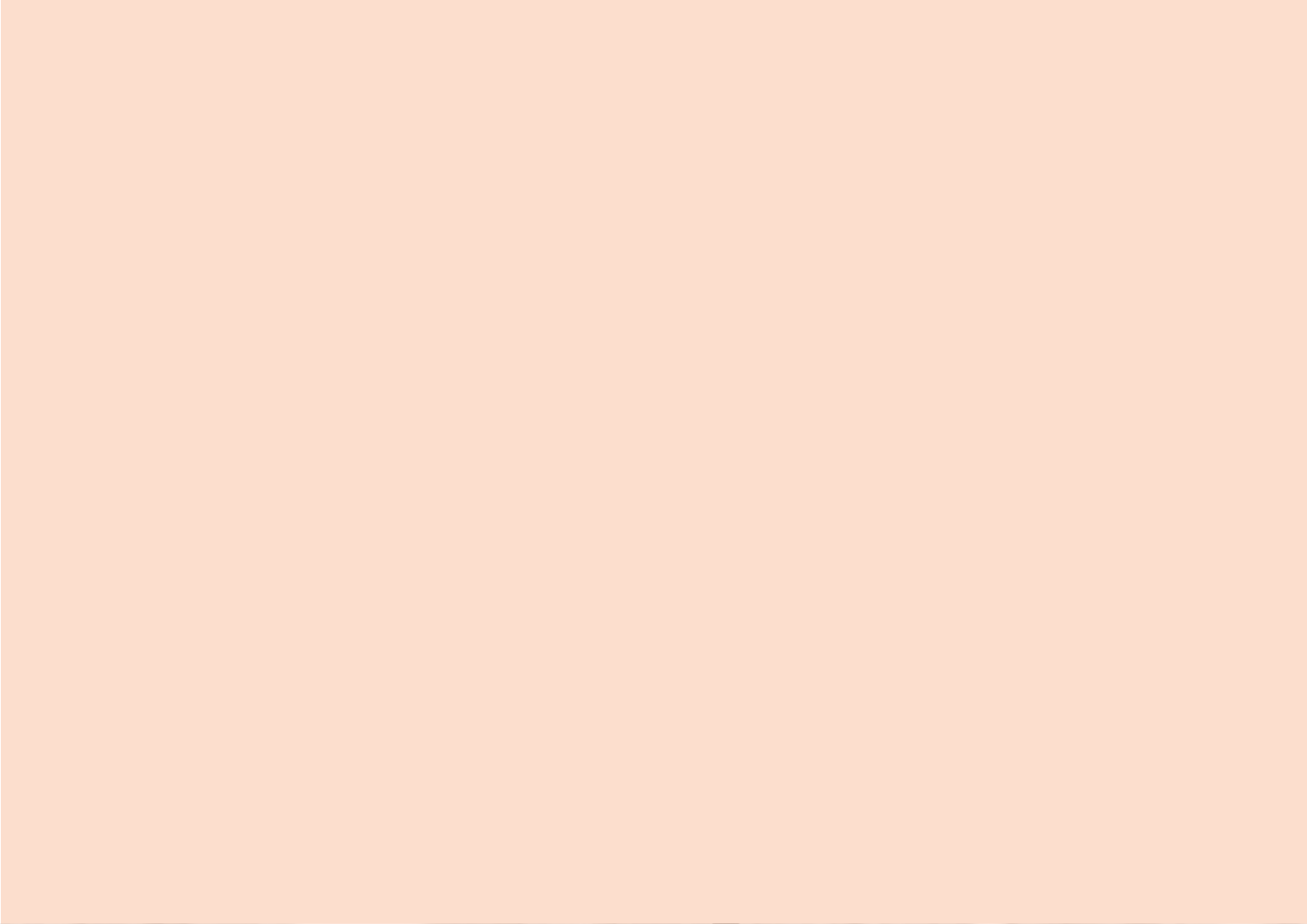
- Step out of your bubble: To help create a vibrant and diversified civil society, lower the barriers of entry and support local CSOs in regions away from the capital cities and new, emerging civil society actors. A diversification of the pool of stakeholders can help bring about a fresh stream of ideas and programs. Therefore donors are advised to launch calls that would also give a chance to less known and recognized groups.
- Recognize that real social impact might require several attempts and failures before reaching a result. Do not give up on cooperation with principled, engaged and proactive local actors if they are not successful on their first attempt. This will help foster an environment that allows for social innovation alongside tried and tested methods.
- Maintain a dialogue with CSOs and emerging civil society actors and offer them enough space to communicate their own locally-driven needs assessments. Diversify the range of civil society actors with whom you can consult.
- In order to evaluate the state of and conditions for civil society, look beyond registration numbers and official statistics and focus on operational space. Monitor the limitations to independent work and the amount of pressure exerted by state structures and officials against local activists, civic movements, and organizations.
- Consider establishing different funding tiers that would correspond to the size and amount of experience of local organizations. For grassroots and emerging movements, consider flexible funding mechanisms with smaller grant amounts, simplified administration, and focus on their development and learning. For larger and more experienced NGOs, offer bigger grants where standard eligibility, grant administration and reporting mechanisms can be applied.
- Effective support of new civil society actors requires a tailored approach. We urge donors to lower the entry requirements (years of experience and previously managed projects), to use local languages while announcing grant opportunities, and maintain close communication with

beneficiaries during the project implementation. When applicable and safe, use social media channels to advertise grant calls.

- To help to develop sustainable CSO environment, pay a reasonable level of attention to organisational development of CSOs and focus on providing longer-term (more than one-year) funding. Consider core funding mechanisms.
- Ensure there is a space in your funding mechanisms for justified costs related to organisational development (including the salaries of key staff and qualified experts).
- Allow sufficient budget flexibility so that the CSOs you fund can better meet evolving needs and adapt to a changing context.
- Consider allocating a sufficient budget to support CSOs with needs assessment activities and building relationships with local communities.
- Consider adjusting reporting requirements to focus more on impact rather than on implementing projects strictly in line with the initial budget and planned activities.
- Maintain a balance of funding between supporting advocacy, the service provision and community development activities.
- In order to improve the level of trust within the society towards CSOs and to build the overall resilience of the sector, prioritize supporting CSOs in improving their community engagement and strategic communication.
- Support locally driven capacity building programmes tailored to the needs of local civil society and concrete organisations (comprising of long-term mentorships), rather than employing a one-size-fits-all approach. (Select trainers who are from the region or have a deep, up-to-date knowledge of the realities of the region).

For CSOs:

- As established NGOs, focus on engagement with grassroots activists and emerging civil society actors and consider joint advocacy campaigns.
- Advocate for the creation of more local funding opportunities.
- Consider different funding alternatives to ensure financial sustainability (including available local sources, crowdfunding, and social entrepreneurship)
- Invest in your teams, include more people from the team in decision making, focus on nurturing a perception that CSO is a team of motivated people as well as an institution.
- Be proactive in sharing your analysis of local issues with donors as well as with peer organizations within the sector.
- Maintain a spirit of willingness to learn. Constant change, complexity and uncertainty are becoming a global norm – a culture of learning, continuous adaptation to change and innovative solutions are no longer a luxury, but a basic condition of successful operations for CSOs.
- Embrace and promote the use of crowdfunding platforms by your beneficiaries. Beyond constituting an important addition to their budgets, it can serve as a trust-building mechanism between activists and the society at large.
- Today's civil society in many countries is rapidly aging. While building on the experience and ideas of senior staff, consider policies to promote engagement with young people within local organizations and movements. Younger activists help to drive innovation and bring fresh ideas into the sector. Mentorship programs could potentially support transfer of institutional memory and experience between generations of activists and build continuity between them.



Authors: Tomas Komm, Elena Terzi, Anna Zamejc
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