

The EU's role in countering closing civil space

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11 October 2016

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Civil society in the European Union

Civil society organizations (CSOs) across Europe play an important role in upholding the basic democratic values of the EU and contribute to implementing its policies; from decreasing disparities through safeguarding freedoms to protecting the environment.



In order to fulfill this role efficiently, in times of shrinking civil space, CSOs need the support of the EU, on several levels.

Need for EU support to CEE civil society

European institutions and leaders should

- > **publicly acknowledge the importance of CSOs and systematically stress the essential need to enable them to operate without restrictions**
- > **broaden and fully implement the mechanisms of civic participation, including the European Citizens' Initiative**
- > **extend the financial support programs to assist the strategic development of civil society as a whole and to improve the accessibility of existing programs to broader range of CSOs**

Obstacles

CSOs often experience difficulties in accessing European financial support due to a variety of reasons:

- limited financial resources prevent access to funding which require high levels of pre- and co-financing;
- limited administrative and institutional capacities, the lack of expertise on specialized fields which are essential to implement large-scale projects;
- funding resources cannot react in time to rapid changes - also making project planning difficult;
- lack of regular, stable income which could be the basis upon which they can plan ahead and implement projects;
- language barriers hinder the forming of international consortia which would be eligible to apply.

Tailor-made support to enhance civil society development

Decrease the distance between donor and recipient:

- > Horizontal cooperation vs hierarchy
- > Open dialogue vs one-way information
- > Result orientation vs pure paperwork
- > Genuine interest vs administrative burden
- > Qualitative impacts vs quantitative indicators
- > Flexibility and simplification



Create a partnership based on trust and honesty, making success to achieve impact a common objective

Accompany financial support with capacity development measures (e.g. coalition building)

Space for innovation

Most existing European funding programs treat CSOs as service providers performing specific, pre-defined tasks.

CSOs can be agents of innovation for the public good, by searching new solutions to old problems; are also well positioned to reveal and address unanswered needs and social problems (especially in times of crisis).



To tap this resource, funding programs should

- > provide smaller seed funding with the potential for upscaling and mainstreaming if successful;
- > support a broad diversity of initiatives (instead of a few monolithic projects);
- > have for longer timeframes (several years);

be less risk-averse, allowing for experimentation.

Good practices

Involvement of independent intermediaries (or grantmakers):

- Rooted in and closely working with civil society
- Smaller organizations with flat structure - can be fast, flexible, yet efficient
- Transparent and accountable
- Proactive and reflective - continuously improving its processes
- Able to provide capacity building support (mentoring, training, networking)

Conclusion

With more CSO-friendly support mechanisms can civic initiatives fully use their potential to contribute to achieving social change and to mobilize the inner resources of their constituencies, both human and financial. Thus, every € spent on CSO support will generate another 2-3 for the same objective.

A potential working solution to this end is to out-source the management of funding programs to proven local intermediaries.

Thank you for your attention

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