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**Support to the promotion of
Civil Society regional actions
in the Western Balkans**



CSO Governance Community of Practice Regional Meeting Western Balkans Fund

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WBF VISION



The Western Balkans Fund mission is to promote reconciliation and the development of closer cooperation and strengthening of ties between the Western Balkans Contracting Parties.

- WBF shares the same vision of enhanced regional cooperation and the overall objective of the European Union which remains strengthening participatory democracies and the EU integration and approximation process in the Western Balkans, through a strengthened contribution by civil society and media.
- An active civil society is a critical component of democratic systems and an important player in reform processes taking place in the Western Balkans. An empowered and active civil society is an essential component of any democracy.



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VIEW ON CSO IN WB REGION



The Western Balkan region has seen a range of experiences with civil society organization (CSO) governance, both positive and negative, as it has sought to build democratic institutions and processes.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) contribute to address many societal challenges, by engaging in policy debates, proposing innovative, sustainable and inclusive solutions and monitoring the results of reform processes at beneficiary, regional and local level.

Activities led by CSOs are one of the key features of democracy and are essential for the promotion and respect for human rights and building the rule of law; also help the process of achieving increased political accountability as well as promoting public discussion of important political, economic and social issues which to improve the quality of reforms in these areas.

Even though there is a reported advancement of the capacity and positions of the Civil Society, its impact continues to remain weak especially in influencing decision making processes.



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WBF DIRECT CONTRIBUTION ON DEVELOPMENT



For WBF, CSOs play a crucial role in promoting democratic values, advocating for human rights, and providing essential services to marginalized communities and the governance of CSOs remains as an important issue, particularly in the context of the Regional Cooperation.

To this end, WBF has contributed to the regional cooperation:

- Support to CSO capacities and engagement opportunities in policy- and decision making across various thematic areas;
- Capacity-building of CSOs' in crosscutting and thematic areas; and a People-to-People links allowing CSOs in the region to expand their cooperation and knowledge about the regional cooperation, and an opportunity to network internationally and regionally;
- Support for improved cooperation between civil society and local authorities, in particular enhancing transparency and impact of local level funding for CSOs;
- Support to Media and support for media initiatives, grass-roots and community based organisations, activists and emerging actors in the region



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BEST PRACTICES, CHALLENGES, AND TRANSFORMING APPROACHES



Here are some of the best practices, challenges, and transforming approaches that have emerged from the EU and regional experiences in the region



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BEST PRACTICES



- a) Transparency and accountability, CSOs should continue being transparent in their decision-making processes, financial management, and activities also accountable to their members, donors, and beneficiaries.
- b) A clear and supportive legal framework should exist for CSOs to operate freely and independently. The Western Balkan region should ensure that laws and regulations do not hinder the ability of CSOs to carry out their work.
- c) CSOs should be involved in decision-making processes at all levels of governance, including regional, national. The Western Balkan region should consult with CSOs and involve them in policy-making and implementation.
- d) CSOs need support to develop their organizational and operational capacities, including governance structures, strategic planning, and financial management
- e) Dialogue and partnership - Effective CSO governance depends on partnerships and dialogue between CSOs, government, and other stakeholders. Regular meetings and consultations can build trust and create opportunities for joint initiatives.
- f) Advocacy and lobbying - CSOs can play a critical role in advocating for policies and reforms that promote good governance, transparency, and accountability. This requires a clear understanding of the policy landscape and effective communication strategies.
- g) Networking and information sharing - CSOs can learn from each other and collaborate through networks and alliances. This can also help them to coordinate their efforts and avoid duplication of work.



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CHALLENGES



- a) Funding - CSOs around the Western Balkan region rely on external funding sources, which can be unpredictable and unsustainable. The WBF including other regional mechanisms should ensure that CSOs have access to stable and long-term funding.
- b) Civic space - The civic space for CSOs is under threat in the Western Balkan region, with increasing restrictions on freedom of assembly, expression, and association. The WB region should protect and promote the civic space for CSOs.
- c) Fragmentation - There are many CSOs in the WB region and they often work in silos. The WB region should encourage collaboration and coordination among CSOs to
- d) Political interference - CSOs face challenges from governments that view them as a threat to their power or legitimacy. In some cases, governments have used legal and administrative measures to restrict the activities of CSOs, limit their funding, or impose burdensome reporting requirements.
- e) Lack of funding - Many CSOs struggle to secure funding for their activities, particularly in countries where philanthropy and corporate social responsibility are not well-established. This can limit their ability to carry out their work effectively.
- f) Capacity gaps - Despite the importance of capacity building, many CSOs lack the resources or expertise to develop their organizational and operational capacities. This can undermine their effectiveness and sustainability.



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TRANSFORMING APPROACHES



- a) Empowering grassroots CSOs - Supporting grassroots CSOs can help to build a more vibrant and diverse civil society, and promote greater citizen engagement in governance. This requires a focus on developing the capacities of small and medium-sized CSOs, particularly those working in marginalized communities.
- b) Digital transformation - Digital technologies can offer new opportunities for CSOs to engage with citizens, collect and analyze data, and mobilize support for their causes. This requires investment in digital infrastructure and skills, as well as strategies to address issues of digital exclusion and privacy.
- c) Strengthening regional cooperation - The Western Balkans region faces many common challenges related to governance, rule of law, and democratic reform. Strengthening regional cooperation among CSOs can help to create a more coordinated and effective civil society sector, and support joint advocacy and lobbying efforts. This requires investments in cross-border networks and platforms, as well as strategies to address language and cultural barriers.



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OVERAL CONCLUSION



CSOs in the Western Balkan region require support in multiple areas to be able to operate effectively and contribute to the development of their societies.

Some of the key support that CSOs need in the region include:

- ✓ Funding - CSOs in the Western Balkans often face financial constraints that limit their ability to operate effectively. Therefore, they need support in the form of grants, donations, and other forms of financial assistance to sustain their operations.
- ✓ Capacity Building - CSOs need support to enhance their skills and abilities to manage their organizations effectively, including strategic planning, project management, financial management, and fundraising.
- ✓ Technical Support - CSOs require technical support to enhance their operations, including technology infrastructure, communications, and information management.



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