



# Community Engagement

The OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina works with communities across the country to encourage their sustained engagement with local authorities and to build genuinely inclusive democracy at the local level.

Through its *Local First Initiative*, the Mission works to develop genuinely inclusive and responsive local democracy. Particular attention is placed on increasing the level of participation in local affairs of youth, rural populations, national minority groups and those living at the socio-economic margins of society and on building their capacity to hold elected officials accountable for delivering vital services.

The Community Engagement programme focuses on developing effective and sustainable mechanisms for citizens to be consulted and made part of the decision making process at the local level. Special attention is given to the following:

- reviving local communities (*mjesne zajednice*) and other existing mechanisms of grassroots democracy;
- fostering youth participation in local affairs through the development of youth policies and capacity building of youth organizations and youth councils;
- promoting the social inclusion of vulnerable groups (especially rural women, national minorities, returnees, numeric minorities and persons with disabilities) by providing support and expert advice to their associations, networks and political representatives, as well as through the organization of projects aimed at improving their access to economic opportunities; and
- increasing citizens' capacities to hold officials accountable through support to "watchdog" initiatives.

## Local Communities (MZs)

The OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina works with local communities (known as MZs - *mjesne zajednice*) to build their skills and foster their ability to represent citizens' interests and lobby for local civic demands in partnership with municipal authorities. These community level institutions located within municipalities were established under the former Yugoslav socialist system as a means to enable greater civic engagement and public forums.

Since the end of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), MZs have either remained or have been recently re-established in over 90 per cent of the country's municipalities. Although the vast majority of municipalities today provide some financial support to such a system of local communities, the skills, resources and capacities of MZs vary significantly across the country. Through community engagement activities, the Mission works in 26 municipalities to empower MZs to better organize themselves and communicate more efficiently with the municipal authorities. Special attention is also given to community cohesiveness and the representation of MZ boards through initiatives aimed at improving election procedures and MZ statutes, as well as awareness raising campaigns.



## Youth Participation

The Mission works extensively with youth within the *Local First Initiative*, paying particular attention to the local level of governance and working to develop the appropriate mechanisms for youth to become more active in municipal affairs. To best represent the interests of young people, especially those living in rural areas, and to increase their ability to lobby for their interests, the Mission encourages the formation of youth organizations and youth councils, and builds their capacities via various trainings. The Mission supports the development of local youth policies or strategies as well as the appointment and, via workshops and trainings, the empowerment of youth commissions, youth administrators and youth advisory boards. The Mission also works with government bodies at the entity and state level to ensure that the appropriate legislation and regulations are in place and implemented to enable greater youth engagement in community affairs. Special emphasis is also placed on creating clear and transparent criteria and procedures for funding youth projects.

## Social Inclusion

Within its targeted activities, the Mission also works to increase the visibility and leverage of vulnerable groups, which are currently poorly organized or not organized at all and, as a consequence, have very little influence on public affairs in the places where they live. The Mission supports groups such as national or numerical minorities, rural women and persons with disabilities

to establish associations and develop their capacities for civic engagement including lobbying and advocacy skills. The creation of network organizations which give vulnerable groups a stronger voice to advocate for their needs is also facilitated. The Mission supports the greater economic participation of vulnerable groups by providing trainings and empowering individuals to make use of available opportunities. Within all Community Engagement activities, the Mission strives to mainstream the integration of rural communities and other marginalized groups.

## Watchdog Initiative

In 2011, the Mission began work to increase the capacity of citizens to hold governments accountable and lobby for improvements through its Watchdog Initiative. Youth groups, human rights organizations, associations of vulnerable groups as well as expert associations throughout the country are trained to monitor selected areas, from environment and women's rights to the ethics of officials and the transparency of decision-making at the local level. They are encouraged to report on their findings, develop policy recommendations and lobby for their adoption, using both public pressure and dialogue with local and higher level governments. Through this initiative, the Mission seeks to transfer the watchdog role, still predominantly led by the international community, to local civil society actors and develop citizen activism.

The OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina assists BiH in meeting its OSCE commitments and in progressing towards its stated goal of Euro-Atlantic integration by strengthening security and stability through completion of peace-building within the Dayton framework and developing inclusive political discourse and democratically accountable institutions that respect diversity, promote consensus and respect the rule of law. The Mission takes a comprehensive and integrated approach through its field presence, reflecting an emphasis on developing cohesive communities and on the timely identification of obstacles to progress.