

CIVIL SOCIETY SUPPORT

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other civic entities in a society act as a counterbalance to governmental activity. Their role is to observe the

work of governmental bodies and intervene as needed to advocate and ensure that the interests of common people or specific social groups are promoted or protected.

From 1999 to 2003, in parallel to helping establish the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government, the OSCE Mission in Kosovo was also nurturing new NGOs and civic initiatives, as well as supporting those already active. For the last two years this has shifted to encouraging and advising established civic entities that hold potential and willingness to take an active part in Kosovo's social life.

"Our core activities are geared towards elevating capabilities of civic actors to influence public policy and decision making processes at both the central and local government levels." Bujar Maxhuni, the Mission's Assistant Democratization Programme Officer, further said that inter-ethnic reconciliation and gender equality principles are integrated in all these activities.

Special programmes were designed to encourage the re-integration of minority communities into mainstream society and give them an opportunity to have an equitable say as governments formulate policies which affect the public. A Kosovo-wide network of NGO Resource Centres and Community Centres was established to facilitate the development of an active civil society and to stimulate citizens and community participation in public life and the decision-making process across ethnic lines.

Furthermore, the Mission supports dialogue between active civic groups within Kosovo and with neighbouring societies, including Serbian, Montenegrin, and Macedonian, who share similar goals and challenges.

Civic Dialogue

Political discussions are often held in secret or away from the public eye. Nonetheless, agreements reached most certainly affect common people's lives.

For a long time there was no public dialogue going on between Pristina and Belgrade. More recently, such dialogue is finally getting its official face. However, dialogue between common people from Serbian and Kosovan civil societies began developing and taking form much earlier.



"We strongly believe that time has come for us to integrate in the Kosovo society," said Mileva Pešić, primary school teacher from Janjevë/Janjevo, Kosovo Serb. People like her are a reason more to continue Civic Dialogue activities.



Young people are an important part of civil society. The OSCE places great emphasis on their constructive mobilization in social processes.

Dealing specifically with youth, the Mission initiated the creation of municipal Youth Assemblies that work to ensure that young people have a say in decision-making processes at municipal and central levels of government.

In 2005 and beyond, the OSCE continues to support the non-governmental sector as it will have a crucial role in ensuring normalisation of relations between Kosovo's ethnic groups, facilitate the inclusion of minorities in mainstream society, advocate for transparent and responsive governments, and finally in improving the quality of dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade.

In mid-2002, the OSCE Mission in Kosovo, in co-operation with the Mother Theresa Society from Prishtinë/Priština and the Centre for Regionalism from Novi Sad, established a non-partisan, multi-ethnic initiative of non-governmental organizations named Civic Dialogue. The aim was to re-establish and strengthen links between the two civil societies and help ease feelings of anxiety created by violent conflicts in the former Yugoslavia. "The Civic Dialogue initiative is a complex and delicate but, above all, a challenging process that requires commitment and energy," said Don Lush Gjergji, well known Kosovan religious figure and biographer of Mother Theresa, who also serves as a co-president of the board of Civic Dialogue.

Since its beginning, Civic Dialogue has engaged more than 700 individuals and around 250 NGO's from the region (primarily Kosovo and Serbia proper) working mainly on youth, gender and media issues.

Their project, like the ones named "Women in Business", "Youth and Peace" and "Journalists can do it" are all geared towards finding common ground for co-operation and resolution of similar problems such as discouragement of women and youth participation in political and commercial life or fighting stereotypes through mass communication media.

“I am truly amazed by the meetings held under the umbrella of Civic Dialogue. For the first time after the conflict, I can see youngsters from Kosovo and Serbia talking and planning joint projects. They know what they need and how to address common issues of concern,” said Jovan Komsic, professor of sociology at the University of Novi Sad, who attended several of these events.

Initially, through public discussions, international conferences and regional meetings, and later on through small grant project funded by other external donors, Civic Dialogue has developed grass-roots co-operation and partnerships between non-governmental sectors in Kosovo and Serbia proper and between different ethnic communities within Kosovo.

Over the last 4 years, Civic Dialogue’s activities have drawn the attention and gained support of a larger number of external organizations and foundations engaged in the democratization processes. In the future, Civic Dialogue is looking to support most innovative NGO projects that would deal with freedom of the media, youth participation in public life and women’s rights as well as inter-ethnic reconciliation.



Developing appreciation for cultural diversity helps accelerate inter-ethnic reconciliation.

Civic Bridge

The young municipal and central level governments in Kosovo are gradually moving towards establishing themselves as mature political bodies.

Mature governments in developed countries invest a lot of energy in maintaining communication with citizens and knowing what they think. They conduct surveys to find out how the public feels about government policies, such as taxation and health care, or hold local meetings to discuss issues of particular concern, such as local infrastructure and utilities.

Pre-1999 policy and decision-making in Kosovo tended to be centrally driven and did not foster a culture of proactive interaction between governments and citizens. The influence citizens could exercise was often limited to the initiatives taken by labor unions. Other initiatives were mostly disregarded.

As a result, notions such as advocacy, participatory planning or public consultation are still new concepts.

Acting as a catalyst in establishing a working relationship between the municipal governments and its local population, the OSCE Mission in Kosovo in October 2004 began the “Civic Bridge” project.

“Civic Bridge aims to increase interaction between people and local officials as well as to improve transparency and quality of services provided by the municipal governments,” said Jaime Valles, Democratization Team Leader at the OSCE Office in Pejë/Peć.

First implemented in Deçan/Dečani municipality, the project was soon replicated in two more municipalities in the region, Pejë/Peć and Istog/Istok. Three local NGOs from these municipalities are engaged in the project and take the lead as implementing partners.

“The goal of the Civic Bridge is to establish a mechanism that would ensure effective practice of democratic principles and allow the citizens to influence municipal decision-making processes,” said Adem Lushaj of the Association of Independent Intellectuals from Deçan/Dečani – the local NGO involved in development of the project.

Under the project, Civic Bridge Steering Groups were established in each of the three municipalities. Comprised of up to eleven members - prominent figures from non-governmental sector and local educational, media, and governmental institutions - these groups identify and address issues of concern at municipal level, such as quality of health care, primary and secondary education, or collection of property taxes.

Their work is aided by Civic Bridge Working Groups comprised of young activists who bring extra energy and enthusiasm to the project. They examine issues from three different aspects: adherence to municipal legislation, quality of services provided by the local authority, and transparency in decision-making and execution. The groups then produce analytical reports which are then reviewed and used to formulate recommendations to the respective Municipal Assembly. They also lobby for the carrying out of their recommendations using media and public as advocacy tools.



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According to Lushaj, implementing NGOs cater for the meetings of the Steering Groups and support the conduct of researches. The OSCE Mission, on the

other hand, mainly provides financial support and advice.

As a result, municipal officials learn about the benefits of participatory policy-making while citizens develop their capacity to act as watchdogs and advisors to government. Moreover, both parties became much more aware on the issues raised by the analytical reports.

Most importantly, local officials started taking action. Following up on a recommendation in Deçan/Dečani, for example, municipal health institutions improved their approach to providing services,

their compliance with working hours, as well as the procedures for budget planning and approval and oversight of expenditures in clinics and ambulances.

Furthermore, recommendations issued by the Civic Bridge Steering Groups are often referred to during Municipal Assembly sessions, as well as by people who are requesting services from the municipalities. According to Mehmet Bojkaj, a member of the Deçan/Dečani Municipal Assembly, authorities should perceive the Steering Group recommendations as a constructive aid tool rather than as criticisms. He further added: "Civic Bridge in Deçan should not be just a project but a permanent running body."

Thanks to the Civic Bridge, citizen participation and advocacy are no longer unknown concepts in these municipalities. In 2006 the OSCE Mission will support the implementation of the Civic Bridge project in a number of municipalities Kosovo-wide.



HAREJA helps build womens' self-confidence by providing them with educational opportunities.

Multi-ethnic Women's Network

HAREJA – a women's organization from Rahovec/Orahovac that was re-established in 1999 – has developed into a strong advocate for women's empowerment and the participation of all communities in all fields of social life. It is active in the education and health sectors, implementing small income generation and agricultural development projects for vulnerable women and their families. It also offers capacity building trainings to women and girls from the municipality's urban and rural areas.

In 2003, HAREJA approached the OSCE Mission with an idea to establish a multi-ethnic local women's network. A viable project concept was developed in close co-operation and co-ordination; and the network consisting of two Kosovo Serb, one Kosovo Albanian and one Kosovo Roma women's organizations was founded.

The Local Women's Network soon raised funds necessary to build a new centre for women, offering a variety of informal education activities for women and children, a kindergarten and gynaecological and family health service. "Women from all ethnic communities in the region use the centre's services and attend events we organize," said Judith Brand of the German NGO AMICA, a member organization of the women's network that has helped re-establish HAREJA.

In addition to a number of NGOs from Kosovo, HAREJA also networks at a regional level and has good co-operation with NGOs from the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

To raise awareness among women about their rights and to contribute to strengthening their position in Kosovo society, in 2004 HAREJA and the OSCE Mission implemented a Women's Voices project. A series of radio shows presented both prominent local and international women holding responsible positions in municipal administration. The shows covered topics such as the role of women in the local community and municipal administration.

Currently the Mission is supporting HAREJA with the implementation of a project that aims to raise awareness among rural women from different ethnic communities about how municipal institutions function and their rights and responsibilities as citizens. The project also includes municipal authorities and raises their awareness about the needs and concerns of local population and the need for officials to interact with rural population, women in particular.

This project, scheduled to end in December 2005, includes seven workshops organized for women from rural areas in the Rahovec/Orahovac region. "The workshops will be followed with a roundtable that will provide women with an opportunity to discuss their common concerns identified through the workshops with the municipal officials," said Annett Gerber, Democratization Officer from the OSCE Office Rahovec/Orahovac. "They will also have an opportunity to propose concrete steps to address those concerns," she added.

"Supporting the work of a committed, independent and responsible civic society partner yields constant results. I am privileged to have worked with HAREJA and I am certain that they will bring about a lot more positive changes," Gerber concluded.

Democratic Education Programme

Currently, more than half Kosovo's population is under the age of 26 and more than 70 percent is under the age of 35. Overall, Kosovo is a very "young" society where youth hold a great potential to define the environment they want to live in.

Education, nonetheless, has a crucial role in young people's development. In addition to morals and values young people inherit from their families, much more is gained by attending schools and other educational institutions.

The OSCE Mission, the Institution and Democracy Building Pillar of the UN's Interim Administration in Kosovo, therefore strives to instil democratic values with young people by assisting educational institutions in delivering quality democratic education programmes.

That, however, may not be sufficient since the lack of awareness and prejudice that members of different ethnic communities have about each other result in segregation and discrimination. This has a particularly negative effect on youth and communities that constitute minorities in different regions of Kosovo (mostly Kosovo Serbs and Roma but also Kosovo Albanians).

The Mission, therefore, addresses the issue of education from several angles and is trying to get all stakeholders involved - starting from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST) and Parents and Teachers Associations to school teachers and professors and, most importantly, the youth themselves.

"Our Democratic Education Programme is designed to counter discrimination, promote tolerance and ensure equitable access to the education system for all Kosovo's communities," said Mohamed Sagdati, a Mission Democratization Officer who manages the Programme.

The Programme is also looking to solicit active involvement of parents and teachers and turn them into an implementing partner. The pilot phase commenced in Prizren, in early March 2005. Some 40 high-school students, professors, parents and school managers

were provided with a number of trainings on tolerance building, European models of democratic society, youth involvement in politics, and advocacy skills. Activities were organized to facilitate socialising among youth from Kosovo's Albanian, Serbian, Roma and Bosniak communities.

The next step was organizing a meeting between youth from Prizren and Ferizaj/Uroševac, both multi-ethnic areas, later that month. The OSCE, MEST and Ferizaj/Uroševac Parents and Teachers Association organized a visit by a group of Prizren students to a secondary school in Ferizaj/Uroševac. "The purpose of the visit was to strengthen the intercultural bridge between pupils of different backgrounds, to establish new relationships and friendships and promote tolerance," said Mustafe Beqiri, President of the Association.

Since early 2004, the OSCE has been advising and assisting the Ferizaj/Uroševac Parents and Teachers Association in their effort to enhance co-operation between schools in Kosovo.

The programme extended to more areas in Ferizaj/Uroševac and Kaçanik/Kaçanik municipalities, and from November 2004 to April 2005 the Supplementary Democratic Education Curricula was introduced to eight secondary schools. The target audience were ninth grade students, some 600 of them, who thus far have not received adequate civic education. To enable the effective introduction of the curriculum, separate workshops and trainings for teachers and parents were organized in each of the eight schools.

The broad intention is not to implement a democratic education initiative in the Ferizaj/Uroševac and Kaçanik/Kaçanik municipalities alone, but to support MEST in introducing "good practices" learned from the first eight, passing these to other secondary schools in Kosovo for the long term benefit of today's and tomorrow's youth.

MEST, the partner in this SDE Programme from its initial phases, will be a key player in ensuring that democratic education is brought to all secondary school students in Kosovo.



Parents and teachers are key partners in implementing OSCE's Democratic Education Programme that benefits young people from all ethnic communities.