

CSO Governance Community of Practice
Learning brief – mapping CSO governance issues
May 2023



INTRODUCTION

Effective CSO governance is considered to one of the key factors on which public support and trust in the civil society sector is based. Similarly, the performance of civil society organisations is strongly influenced by their governance. Enabling and improving CSO governance is therefore critical for a stronger CSO sector.

This learning brief is produced as an outcome of the CSO Governance Community of Practice workshop organised by the EU TACSO 3 team in May 2023, in Belgrade, Serbia. The workshop aimed to bring together practitioners who have experience in working as part of a governing board or working closely with governing boards. The aim of the workshop was to provide a wide-ranging overview of the issues that are faced by boards in their attempts to effectively govern civil society organisations, and to outline some directions for improvement.

That CSO governance is an issue in itself was flagged by the Baseline Assessment 2021 against the revised DG NEAR Guidelines for EU Support to Civil Society 2021 – 2027. This study showed some challenges for independence, conflicts of interest and transparency of CSOs. Forty five percent of respondents to a wide-ranging survey indicated that the executive director or another paid staff member of their organisation was a voting member of their governing body. Similarly, only 15% of CSOs reported that they checked for potential conflicts of interest with regard to the



political, economic and personal relationships of the members of their governing body. And fewer than a third, 30%, reported that they published their statutes, governance structures and organisational policies on their website, most reported having a functioning website.

More detailed information on the Baseline Assessment 2021 against the revised DG NEAR Guidelines for EU Support to Civil Society 2021 - 2027 results can be found [here](#).

The CSO Governance Community of Practice was initiated by the EU TACSO 3 project in order to explore these issues with regard to independence, conflict of interest and transparency in more depth, and to understand more about the causes and effects of governance challenges.

The event gathered 59 representatives of CSOs and CSO networks from the EU, Western Balkans and Türkiye, plus the EU TACSO 3 team; in total, 32 women and 17 men.

KEY FINDINGS

- The legal framework is similar all over the region as regards the regulation of CSOs and defining the governing and management structures. Most CSOs are required to have annual assemblies but are not always required to have a governing board. The legal framework strongly influences the current governing structures and practices of CSOs in the region.
- The performance of good governance is therefore not only about the way in which individual CSOs are established, but it is also strongly influenced by the regulatory environment. Similarly, peer influence and recognised good practice also affect governance practice.

- There is an important distinction between the governance of individual CSOs and the governance of CSO networks. Stakeholders and representation of individual CSOs are determined by their missions, while CSO networks are typically governed by representatives of their members. In this respect, there are some crucial differences in their governance challenges.
- Regardless of whether governance relates to individual CSOs or CSO networks, the governance task is common: maintaining the mission, ensuring relevance, setting the rules for management practice, and ensuring organisational accountability and transparency. These are some of the main concepts and principles which define 'good' CSO governance.
- A common challenge is how effectively to involve members and stakeholders in decision-making mechanisms. Processes need to take account of power dynamics, building trust, and ensuring pluralism and diversity. At the same time, decision-making needs to be rapid and efficient in order to respond to challenges.
- Not all members of governing bodies are equally skilled and experienced. A critical challenge is how to strengthen the capacities of the members, who can take on this task, and what are the most appropriate methods.



- Vulnerability of the CSOs in the region due to shrinking space for CSOs is noted as a serious challenge for CSO members and governing board members. In some cases, governing board members are reluctant to be publicly presented for fear of the consequences. This has the additional effect of deterring potential qualified board members – shrinking the pool of available people.

Establishing gender-sensitive governance remains a challenge. Understanding of the concepts and commitment to the goals of being gender sensitive is a pre-requisite for board members.

- There are no common CSO standards of governance at the EU level. This includes CSO networks as well.
- CSO networks have relatively underdeveloped standards of accountability and governance. Rarely do networks have a Code of Conduct, although some networks have found ways to effectively self-regulate.
- One of the key challenges relating to accountability of the CSO networks relates to the lack of connection among secretariats managing the networks and member organisations.
- CSO networks in the workshop provided examples of good practice in policy development. They showed how to build their policies through cooperation with network members and the mutual exchange of examples of operational policies and documents.
- CSOs and CSO networks that are reliant on project funding often do not have the allocations of resources that can be used for developing effective governance. Good governance is critical for sustainability and public support; however, project funds mostly do not recognise this.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are proposals put forward by workshop participants following the intensive discussion and debate on the governance challenges.

Minimum standards and definitions of good practice

- Sets of common standards, rules and procedures should be diversified and should be applicable according to the size and scope of the local, national and regional CSOs.
- It would be helpful to have a common platform where good practices and sources regarding good governance are available for all CSOs.
- The minimum standards in terms of accountability and transparency in CSOs should take into consideration the particular political environment in the respective countries where basic freedoms and rights might be restricted by the governments, and transparency requirements can be misused. Transparency requirements should carefully balance the need for openness, with the need for the safety of the organisation and its members.

Governing boards

- Further capacity building of governing board members is needed in the following areas:
 - The role of governing bodies, composition, how they operate and the importance of CSO accountability and transparency;
 - Human resources development, and ensuring the adequate performance of staff and volunteers;
 - Sound financial management and oversight.
- Further promotion of successful (EU, regional, etc.) practices and case studies are needed to contribute to the overall raising of knowledge about the importance of the governing boards.
- An ongoing discussion relates to whether governing board members should be paid or not.

Gender-sensitive governance

- Building gender-sensitivity in governance is seen as a continuous process, starting with team development and awareness raising, applying learning by doing approach and gradually developing organisational policies, structures and approaches. A useful starting point is the creation of a charter with written principles including equality among women and men. Since the working environment is constantly changing, there is a need for continuing change and adapting to the environment in terms of policies, structure, and continued transformation. For example, how governance includes and reflects on, for example, LGBT members and employees.
- Gender equality is not about men or women but it's about power imbalance in society. Therefore, further awareness raising, education and application of gender equality principles and policies is needed.

CSO networks

- For CSO networks, the secretariats, where they exist, play an essential role in ensuring the good governance of the network. This includes both organising governing board and assembly meetings, as well as supporting the roll-out of policy and the monitoring of policy implementation.
- Network secretariats support network members to implement new policies and approaches.
- Regular organisation of capacity building for network members is supporting further advancement of the network as such. Capacity building can include a variety of topics including those related to organisational development, gender mainstreaming, and human rights-based approach to particular topics in relation to the scope of the network members (area of work).
- For the network support to be available, effective and sustainable, network secretariats need sufficient resources, both financial and in terms of people and skills.



Community of Practice (CoP)

- The idea of setting up a Community of Practice was welcomed by the participants. It was recommended to organise the CoP in the form of an online “resource hub”, allowing for communication, experience and resource sharing, access to webinars and capacity development tools and sharing funding opportunities.
- The online resource hub might also be combined with physical meetings on certain topics.
- Regarding the topics to be covered, it was recommended to identify separate topics, such as board management, transparency and accountability, legal framework regarding CSO governance in different countries etc.