

Danube Strategy and Civil Society Participation

Establishing a structure for Civil Society Dialogue in the Danube Basin

Adopted at the NGO key-actors meeting, Esterházy Castle, Eisenstadt 28 June 2010

The **Danube Basin NGO Network Project** is a network of more than 100 NGOs, and NGO Networks throughout the Danube Basin. The NGO Network project was formed by Foster Europe and partners in Hungary and Romania in February 2010 in order to promote the idea of a Danube Civil Forum as a pillar of civil society participation in the Danube Strategy.

The Danube Basin NGO Network Project offers the long standing experience of its members within the field of Civil Society — state dialogue as well as cross-border and trans-national CSO networking to build up a Danube Civil Forum in close cooperation with the EU Commission.

Following our active approach within the sequence of EU Danube Strategy conferences along the Danube, our earlier communication as part of the call for participation, our meeting with Director General Mr. Dirk Ahner and his team in Brussels, as well as our constant discussions with other DG Regio staff members, we take the freedom to submit a focused position paper of the Danube Basin NGO Network Project on the civil society participation in the Danube Strategy.

In the following:

- we will look at existing good practices of Civil Society (CS) participation in related areas of the EU policies in the region;
- we present key necessities for an active and structured participation of CS in the Danube strategy;
- we suggest a wording for the Action Plan and provide an adequate concept for a Danube Civil Society Forum.

The present paper is a reflection of the fruitful discussion of the Danube Strategy with non-state stakeholders and dialogue with public authorities on national and EU level. The issue of strengthened civil society participation and the provision of adequate structures to facilitate civil society participation has come increasingly to the attention of actors on the local, regional, national and EU level.

1. Experiences and good praxis of a structured dialogue with Civil Society organisations (CSO)

The close collaboration and exchange of ideas and perspectives between civil society (CS) and the EU commission is a long standing good practice.

We have excellent examples of cooperation with civil society even in the Danube region.

- 1.1. **DG Environment** launched an **NGO Forum** 2005 as a follow-up to the earlier NGO Dialogue. Its purpose was to bring together selected NGOs from the candidate countries and potential candidates with NGOs from Romania and Bulgaria and EU policy makers. Ended in December 2008, the NGO Forum was transformed into the **Environment Forum** started operating in July 2009, as a successor of the NGO Forum. Under this new initiative, more attention is paid to the national dimension of the process, enabling more NGOs to be involved and also instituting a constructive dialogue with national administrations.
- 1.2. **DG Relex** established an **Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum** to promote contacts among CSOs and facilitate their dialogue with public authorities. The Commission invited explicitly the European Economic and Social Committee to participate in the Civil Society Forum. During its first meeting held 16 -17 November 2009 in Brussels, convening more than 145 NGOs, the Civil Society Forum lays the foundation for continued work in the mid-term future. A steering committee will take over to underline the self-organized character of the forum.
- 1.3. **DG Enlargement** held a special conference for Civil Society from the candidate countries and potential candidate countries in South Eastern Europe in Brussels 17-18 April 2008. It was agreed that permanent dialogue between the Commission and CSOs from the enlargement countries should be established through regular meetings. In addition to these meetings, it is envisaged to establish a platform for CSOs from the candidates and potential candidates and the EU, to enhance dialogue, exchange good practices, search for partners and eventually develop specific projects.

2. Civil Society in the Danube Region

We have learned over the past month of intense discussion of stakeholders of the Danube Strategy that **Civil Society in the Danube basin** differs significantly from CS in the Baltic area. So the experience from the Baltic Sea region only partly applies in the Danube region. CS in the Danube basin is much more heterogeneous, civil society organizations (CSO) often are still in the process of formation and learning to articulate and upload their agenda into the process within the respective national frameworks and the EU.

The national states and societies often have not developed a **culture of dialogue** with CSO that is comparable to CSO-state dialogue in Sweden, Finland, Austria, Germany and others, or the dialogue between EU-Commission and CSOs.

2.1. Developing Civil Society participation in the region

Responsibility for strengthening the role and influence of civil society in the countries affected by the Danube Strategy lies primarily with the countries themselves. However, the European Commission (DG Regio) should step up its own support for civil society development in these countries along the Danube. A strong, open, and effective dialogue with CSOs will **foster the horizontal macro-regional dimension** and cooperation under the new Danube strategy and give a good example for national states (member states and non- member states) to do their part in involving CSO in the Danube strategy.

Civil society and non-governmental organisations have a crucial role to play in cross border and horizontal cooperation as well as in their national societies. They provide policy input, new initiatives and hold governments (local, regional, national) accountable. They can be active actors in promoting

democratic and market-oriented reforms based on shared values, i.e. respect for democracy and human rights, the rule of law, good governance, principles of market economy and sustainable development. These are also the values and objectives of the Danube Strategy.

2.2. Democracy, good governance and stability

While their individual political status and setting differs, participating countries face similar challenges with disenchantment with politics and democratic institutions, effective state structures at the service of their citizens. Non EU member states are challenged by their efforts in complying with commitments stemming from their possible accession of the EU. Their ongoing reforms also require stronger participation of civil society to enhance oversight of public services and strengthen public confidence in them. Multilateral activities could thus include governance peer reviews and exchanges of best practices to address issues such as environmental standards, developing infrastructure or combating corruption.

3. The 3 Necessities for CSO participation in the Danube Basin

3.1. The instrument

In order to structure the processes of networking, interaction, contribution, and participation relevant to the political processes of the Danube Strategy, we need clear, transparent and open instruments. The instruments should serve 3 goals:

- Enable CSOs in the area to **meet, exchange and cooperate** on a macro- regional level and to create a meeting point and a space for dialogue for Danube civil society stakeholders and their thematic, regional and/or sub-regional networks;
- Open a **clearly defined space for civil society participation and contribution to the implementation of the Danube strategy** and to have instruments to structure and channel a bottom-up dimension in the Danube region and dialogue and exchange between governmental institutions, the EU Commission and civil society;
- **Support CSOs to improve and horizontalize social capital** in the Danube Basin and the transforming societies, and to build up capacity within CSOs to play their active role within the framework of the Danube strategy.

The Danube Strategy needs a Danube Civil Society Forum as this would be a truly horizontal body sui generis to cope and cover the wide dimensions of thematic issues and thematic inter-connection of the Danube Strategy. The **Danube Civil Society Forum** should meet regularly (at least every two years), have a small-scale administration and flat hierarchy (steering committee, working groups, general assembly, secretariat possibly provided by a larger NGO). A Danube Civil Society Forum should be a self-organized body and work in close contact with the Commission and national states.

3.2. A Medium-Term Perspective

The formation of civil society in a Danube Forum and the development of NGO dialogue and networking will take time. As we have seen earlier, the culture of inclusion of CSOs in national dialogues have to be developed in a number of countries along the Danube. CSOs have to build up additional capacities in order to cooperate best in the framework of the Danube Strategy.

The launch of a Danube Civil Society Forum has to take the time dimension into account. It has to be ensured that a civil forum is not a single event. Civil society in the Danube basin, as anywhere else

needs a clear perspective for the medium-term future that enables them to plan, structure and organize their work.

3.3. Resources

The distribution of social capital is as diverse as the distribution of wealth in the Danube region. Cooperation of CSOs is very much confined within national boundaries and thinning out as we come to the bordering regions and cross-border cooperation.

In order to promote coordination and networking, CSOs need to travel, to meet, to discuss and build capacity in order to act as responsible, competent and fully-fledged partners for development in the Danube Basin.

Taking into account the fact that civil society organisations generally lack necessary resources, additional financial assistance will be needed to meet the new tasks within the Danube Strategy and to establish and maintain the necessary processes and structures.

4. Suggested wording for the Danube Strategy Action Plan

In order to safeguard a proper process and structure of CS participation within the framework of the new Danube Strategy, the call for a structure to involve Civil Society Organisations in a dialogue should be part of the action plan.

We suggest the following wording:

Particular attention is to be paid to the involvement of civil society. The Commission proposes to support the further development of Civil Society Organisations, their participation in the Danube Strategy, and to establish a Danube Civil Society Forum (DCSF) to promote contacts among CSOs and facilitate their dialogue with public authorities on national and EU level as well as to contribute to the implementation and revision of the Danube Strategy.

Civil society and non-governmental organizations play a crucial role, within the Danube basin, in providing policy input, following new initiatives and in holding governments accountable. They are active actors in promoting democratic societies and market-oriented reforms based on shared values, i.e. respect for democracy and human rights, the rule of law, good governance, protection of the environment, principles of market economy and sustainable social and ecological development. These are also the values and objectives of the European Union Danube Strategy.

5. Concept of a Danube Civil Society Forum

How can a DCSF contribute to the Danube Strategy?

The DCSF contributes to the objectives of the Danube Strategy by:

- enriching the Danube Strategy by providing a civil society perspective, notably through the regular provision of recommendations (input/evaluation/monitoring of the work within the Strategy), including input in the work of ministerial meetings and multilateral platforms;
- promoting dialogue between CSOs, networking and exchange of experience & best practices with other groupings (European Economic and Social Committee, social partners, NGOs networks, think tanks etc.), working on the issues of common interest linked to the goals of the Danube Strategy;
- providing policy transfer in sharing experience in the European integration processes in Danube basin and facilitating relations between civil society organisations and the Danube Civil Society Forum with the EU institutions and advising the annual revision and evaluation of the Danube Strategy;
- building confidence by promoting the macro-regional component of the Danube Strategy, including post-conflict management and confidence building measures in the region;
- building capacity of civil society organisations in the Danube basin and supporting new initiatives by intensified trans-regional cooperation and consultation;
- building ownership by providing an open channel for permanent inclusion of civil society in the Danube Strategy;
- contributing to the strengthening of national civil societies and CSOs dialogues with authorities in the Danube basin;

How should the DCSF be institutionalized?

The European Commission, together with the EU Presidency, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions, participating countries and CSO representatives will organise the launch of the DCSF in first half 2011.

In the future, the CSOs themselves will share responsibility for the work of the DCSF and the EC should encourage the Danube Civil Society Forum to become a self-organised structure.

A “steering committee” for the launch of the DCSF should be set up and involve in its works the EC, the EU Presidency, the European Economic and Social Committee and recognised independent personalities from CSOs.

This steering committee would be responsible for the swift and transparent selection process of the DCSF participants and facilitate the work during the launching conference of the Danube Civil Society Forum.

Who should be part of the DCSF?

Membership in the Danube Civil Society Forum is open to non-profit, non-partisan civil society organisations i.e. grass roots organisations, trade unions, NGOs, religious groups, minority groups, think tanks, non-profit foundations, national and international CSOs/networks, academia, and other relevant Civil Society actors from the Danube basin. The EESC and its equivalents in partner countries should play a key role, especially regarding business, employment, labour and social issues.

Relevant criteria of DCSF membership:

The DCSF participants should come from the CSOs from the Danube basin. Their number per country should be balanced. CSOs from third countries may also be invited (*Regional/Geographical criteria*).

Participants should represent all variety of civil society actors. DCSF should be able to contribute to all thematic aspects of the Danube Strategy (*Diversity & Competence*). Participants should be selected taking into account past and current activities in the Danube region (*Experience*).

While applying the criteria listed above the specificity of each of the EU Member States and partner countries in the selection process should be taken into account.

The participating organisations should be motivated by and willing to contribute to the objectives of the Danube Strategy.

How should the DCSF in future look like?

The DCSF will finally decide itself on its structures and activities during the launch conference.

Danube Civil Society Forum will hold plenary sessions/conferences at regular intervals, at least once every second year.

Thematic working groups will be established reflecting the priorities of the Danube Strategy, the expertise of participating CSOs as well as the need to reflect crosscutting issues.

These working groups may appoint their coordinators, for a fixed period of time. They would in the future lead the preparations of the DCSF plenary sessions/conferences and will co-chair the DCSF meetings. They will also act as focal points, structuring and organising the work of the DCSF between the meetings.

It is recommended that the DCSF coordinators be invited (not exclusively) as ad hoc participants in the meetings of the Danube Strategy multilateral platforms, where they would report on the DCSF activities and present its recommendations. They could also be invited to Danube Strategy ministerial meetings and Danube Strategy summits. The coordinators elect one of their group as a “spokesperson” for the DCSF.

With time the role of the EC, EU Member States, and partner states should diminish to a minimum:

- Provision of financial, logistic and technical support to forum meetings and activities (including i.a. provision of expertise, guidance on planned policies, etc.);
- Coordination between DCSF and DS activities, notably by providing relevant information;
- Political support to DCSF activities (dialogue with member states and local authorities, promotion of the DCSF as an essential component of the Danube Strategy).

Next steps

The Danube Basin Network Project will form, in cooperation with the EU a steering committee.

The steering committee will prepare the funding assembly of the Danube Civil Society Forum.

The elected bodies of the Danube Civil Society Forum will draft the necessary bylaws and regulations for the DCSF and its bodies.

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