

Measuring the impact of international cooperation on CSO support in Western Balkans:

The experience of TACSO

Richard Allen (RA) is team leader of the Technical Assistance for Civil Society Organizations project (EU [TACSO 3](#)) for the Western Balkans and Turkey - Phase 3. EU TACSO 3 is a regional project funded by the European Union (EU) that seeks to strengthen the enabling environment for civil society and the effectiveness of the civil society organizations (CSOs). In this interview, he shared with us TACSO's efforts towards measuring the impact of international funding and assistance provided to CSOs in the Enlargement region, with a focus on CSO governance and accountability. He also identified some lessons learned and future areas for improvement regarding CSO effectiveness in the region.



GS: *To what extent is CSO accountability addressed by the DG NEAR Guidelines on EU support to civil society in the Western Balkans and Turkey? How and why is CSO accountability addressed as part of the EU results framework?*

RA: Being one of the main funders of civil society in the region, the EU was eager to understand the extent of the impact of the support provided. For this, a results framework with a set of indicators was adopted and we are currently monitoring progress against them. As part of our [Guidelines](#), the DG NEAR's results framework covers three key outcomes in terms of changes concerning: a) the enabling environment for civil society; b) government – civil society cooperation and c) CSO capacity and resilience. The standards and objectives which the indicators measure are rooted in international and European law, institutions and agreements to which countries and CSOs have signed up. The Guidelines have not created any new standards or expectations. As such, they are a useful reference guide on international obligations with regard to civil society in the region, as well as providing a way to measure changes over time.

One of the main challenges for measuring change is the diversity of civil society (which encompasses social enterprises, advocacy organizations, service provider NGOs, self-help groups, etc.). How to find common and meaningful measures for change across such a diverse sector is difficult. In this regard, the [Global Standard for CSO Accountability](#) works as a proxy for

measuring progress and change in the sector regarding outcome #3 on CSO capacity and resilience of our results framework. The way the Global Standard has been articulated provides us with a good set of measures which can be applied across all civil society organizations, while at the same time recognizing that smaller organizations are not expected to meet all 12 standards. That is, as a reference tool, and by looking to a large number of civil society organizations, the Global Standard can help us get a sense of whether the civil society sector in Western Balkans and Turkey is moving in the right direction. This, in turn, can help us develop an understanding of change over time. In addition, the buy-in of the Global Standard for CSO Accountability within the region - where the Balkan Civil Society Development Network ([BCSDN](#)) is a founding member of the Global Standard - made it easier for us to adopt it in order to measure outcome# 3.

GS: Can you share the initial findings of the 2021 EU TACSO 3 baseline assessment, particularly in terms of the outcome #3 on reinforced CSO capacity and resilience? Have any areas for improvement been identified? How does TACSO plan to provide assistance in this regard?

RA: Concerning the DG NEAR results framework outcome #3, particularly for those indicators captured through numerical values, the ones with the highest scores were around CSO communications and use of evidence through, for instance, research and evaluation. It is worth clarifying that TACSO did not look into the quality of evidence or whether CSOs conducted professional external evaluation. These results are based on CSO self-reporting, mainly through a survey conducted by TACSO with 766 valid responses in 2022. While respondents' understanding of some of the survey questions might differ, all the questions were translated into local languages in order to prevent misinterpretation. In addition, from my own lessons from self-reporting in the past, quite often scoring tends to go down once organizations or people become more familiar and rigorous with the set of indicators. So, initially, some scores from the baseline assessment can be high, and as people then learn about monitoring and evaluation (M&E), they start scoring lower some of the indicators later on. This is a bit tricky as it might reflect as there is no progress despite the work undertaken by a program. Another indicator which scored high was on the "Proportion of CSOs whose work was informed through consultation with people who have a stake in current or future work", yet TACSO had no opportunity to go deeper by examining the quality of CSO engagement or consultation with their primary constituents reported by the respondents of the survey. More qualitative research is needed in order to unpack these initial results.

However, areas for improvement were also identified around CSO governance and accountability. For instance, more than half of the respondents indicated that their chief executive also served as a voting member of the CSO board of directors. This shows significant potential for conflicts of interest. This can be partly explained due to the difficulty of getting commitments from individuals who are able to take upon the role of board members in order to hold charismatic CSO executive directors to account. For us, this issue goes beyond the existence of potential conflicts of interest, and it is an indication of a deeper and wider problem regarding the understanding of effective CSO governance, the perceptions of what governance means and what it is for. In this regard, TACSO will be bringing CSO board members together in the autumn to explore some of these issues and identify potential solutions.

This relates to another of the indicators from the DG NEAR results framework, that is, public trust in the civil society sector - which we hope to measure in our report for next year. In Southeast Europe, where governments' narratives towards the civil society sector are not always positive, the general public tends to distrust civil society. Therefore, individuals may not be interested in serving as board members of an organization. So, the pool of people from which a CSO can select

board members is rather limited. In sum, in order to build trust, better governance is needed, while more trust is needed to widen the pool of potential board members.

3.1.a	Proportion of CSOs that have an independent and effective governing body with clear terms of reference to oversee the organisation's strategic goals, impact, management, legal compliance, and accountability	3	3	3	3	2	3	2
3.1.b	Proportion of CSOs that regularly check potential conflicts of interest with regard to the political, economic and personal relationships of their governing body	1	1	2	2	2	1	1
3.1.c	Proportion of CSOs that share relevant information on their organisation using means and channels that are accessible to all stakeholders	2	2	2	2	2	1	3
3.1.d	Proportion of CSOs that have an organisational gender equality policy	3	2	3	2	2	3	3
3.1.e	Proportion of CSOs that have an organisational strategy, including vision, mission, and goals	4	3	4	3	4	3	3
3.2.a	Proportion of CSOs that have at least one on-line channel of communication	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
3.3.a	Proportion of CSOs that publish their annual reports and financial statements	2	3	2	4	3	3	3
3.3.b	Proportion of CSOs that publish information on their sources of funding and amounts received in the previous year	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
3.4.a	Proportion of CSOs that have carried out an evaluation of their work in the last year	4	4	3	4	4	5	4
3.5.a	Proportion of CSOs whose work is based on evidence generated through research	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
3.5.b	Proportion of CSOs whose work is informed through consultation with people who have a stake in their current or future work	5	5	4	5	5	5	5
3.7.a	Proportion of CSOs whose sources of donor income are diversified	4	4	3	3	3	3	4
3.7.b	Proportion of CSOs raising funds from sources other than donors e.g. membership fees, corporate/ individual giving and income generating activities	4	4	4	3	5	4	5
3.8.b	Proportion of CSOs that have organisational human resources policies	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
3.8.e	Proportion of CSOs whose staff and volunteers have attended a training course in the past year	4	4	4	5	5	5	4

Table of Indicators Awarded Numerical Values
 DG NEAR Guidelines for EU Support to Civil Society 2021-2027 | Baseline Assessment Report 2021
<https://tacso.eu/eu-civil-society-guidelines/>

GS: Can you share any lessons learned from applying this type of results and indicators for CSO effectiveness in order to provide international assistance to civil society?

RA: As a project, given the numbers of CSOs and the size of our project, our impact is rather limited in regard to working with individual CSOs. So, we believe that TACSO's comparative advantage is trying to promote changes around systems and behaviors; for instance, by engaging with governments and other stakeholders in developing professional skills of the nonprofit sector, in particular through national qualifications frameworks required by EU and EU Accession countries. In this regard, one possibility would be to work with education providers, who can - in turn - engage with the education authorities in order to underline the relevance of the nonprofit sector, and that it can be better if there is an investment and recognition of the skills required to manage this sector. Similarly, as we work with governments from the region around their organizational structures for cooperation with civil society, we can explore how they can embrace the DG NEAR Guidelines and the extent to which the latter can be embedded into their own government strategies concerning support to civil society in order to push the monitoring of these indicators further. In this way, the Guidelines' objectives and indicators could be connected to governments' strategies.

In addition, we will be tracking expenditure grants through the EU Civil Society Facility which, together with the EU TACSO 3 project, falls within the mandate of the DG NEAR. With approx.

200 million euros, this EU Civil Society Facility is a significant source of funding for civil society organizations from the region. By tracking them, we hope that the issues for which funding gets allocated are better targeted and funds get better distributed among organizations.

GS: *How is TACSO engaging with the larger international cooperation community supporting civil society in the Western Balkans and Turkey in terms of M&E on CSO governance and capacity?*

RA: Last year, during our visits to the various countries covered by TACSO, I held meetings with in-country donors where the DG NEAR guidelines were widely shared. And we encouraged other donors and governments to look at the guidelines, in particular the results framework and indicators, when planning their support for civil society. Hopefully, with the release of our 2021 baseline assessment report and the annual assessments to be conducted in the future, it will get other donors' attention and contribute to a dialogue among donors on how to measure effectiveness of support to CSOs, including improvements in CSO governance and accountability. The EU delegations in the countries where TACSO operates are facilitating these conversations in each country, both with donors and governments.



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