Seminar Report

Advancing the implementation of Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development through multi-stakeholder engagement: Key moments under the Romanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union

5th of March 2019, Brussels, Belgium

The event was organized by the Romanian NGDO Platform (FOND), in partnership with the Permanent Representation of Romania to the European Union, as part of the EU Presidency Project, with the financial support of the European Commission.
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Concept of the Seminar:

After the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the commitment of the 193 countries to end poverty, to leave no one behind, to protect the planet and ensure prosperity for all, the most important step is to take action and put into practice these commitments made in 2015. The key priority actions that will ensure a successful implementation of the new agenda should be focusing on: creating effective multi-stakeholder partnerships, ensuring full engagement and enabling environment for all relevant actors to be included in this process, as well as investing in children and young people.

In this context, the Romanian NGDO Platform (FOND) organised with the support of the Permanent Representation of Romania to the European Union, the Seminar “Advancing in the implementation of the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development through multi-stakeholder engagement: a key moment under the Romanian Presidency of the EU Council”. This event was part of the project “Towards open, fair and sustainable Europe in the world – EU Presidency Project 2019-2021 (First phase: Romania, Finland and Croatia January 2019 – June 2020)”, funded by the European Union and implemented by the Finish NGO platform for development Fingo (in its quality of main applicant), in partnership with the Romanian NGDO platform - FOND, the Croatian Platform for International Citizen Solidarity - CROSOL and the European NGO Confederation for relief and development - CONCORD.

The event represented an opportunity to facilitate a constructive dialogue and reflection around the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, to discuss how various key stakeholders can work together through effective multi-stakeholder partnerships, at both national and European level, in particular, and how to deepen the focus on participation of children and youth in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Through plenary sessions and debates, the seminar aimed to:

- provide an open space for networking, exchange of practices, experiences and challenges and to reflect on the progress and challenges encountered in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at national and European level;
- discuss the EU position regarding the 2030 Agenda in the context of the upcoming High Level Political Forum and this year’s United Nations General Assembly;
- draw the attention on the priority issues of the civil society, including resilience and enabling environment for CSOs.

The event brought together representatives of European institutions, non-governmental organizations based in Romania, the Black Sea region and other countries from the EU, and representatives from the Working Parties on Agenda 2030, Development Cooperation and Youth, part of the Council of the European Union.
Welcome Remarks

Open, fair, sustainable – a trio to work for

Moderator: Mr. Ștefan Cibian, President of the board, FOND Romania

Speakers:
H.E. Călin Stoica, Permanent Representative of the Politics and Security Committee to the European Union
Mr. Jussi Kanner, Expert, Sustainable Development, Finish Development Organizations – Fingo
Mr. Toni Vidan, President of the Board, Croatian Platform for International Citizens Solidarity – CROSOL

The Seminar started with a special Welcome Remarks session, gathering the representatives of the national platforms FOND Romania, Fingo and CROSOL, that are implementing in partnership with CONCORD Europe the first joint European project on development cooperation within the context of the current trio of Presidency at the EU Council. The moderator of the discussion, Mr. Ștefan Cibian, (FOND President, CONCORD Board Member/ Treasurer), welcomed the audience and emphasized that the Seminar is meant to be a framework of communication and reflection for identifying the most efficient solutions to support the implementation of the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development through encouraging and involving relevant actors, and especially young people, in the belief that they are important agents of change. As our host and special guest, His Excellency, Ambassador Călin Stoica, Permanent Representative of the European Union’s Political and Security Committee (COPS), included the Seminar among the key moments in the Romanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Finally, the event offers an opportunity to highlight the political visibility of the Agenda 2030, and reconfirm its role in defining the future of Europe.
After briefly introducing the project to the audience, the consortium of the EU Presidency project emphasized that strengthening the collaboration between civil society and representatives of the rotating Presidencies of the Member States at the Council of the European Union, as well as raising awareness of the European Union policymaking, especially in regards to its global role as a Sustainable Development engine are the main objectives of this joint project: “We want to influence the European policies, so that they will become more open, more fair and more sustainable in the future and this is why our project is called "Towards open, fair and sustainable Europe". And this event, today, is a very good example of what work on sustainable development means”, added Mr. Jussi Kanner (Expert on sustainable development, Fingo).

For Finland, which will take over its third Presidency of the Council of EU on the 1st of July 2019, this opportunity will allow to raise the issue of real growth and human development. This concept is looking beyond GDP (Gross Domestic Product), and what could be the alternative measures/indicators to be used, so that European policymaking - especially from the global perspective - would aim at ensuring human well-being within planetary boundaries and not only following economic growth as the main model of policy. On this topic, also called "Genuine Measures of Progress", Fingo announced they will organize an International Conference in the end of October 2019, in Helsinki.

For Croatia, the 1st of January 2020 marks the first Presidency to the Council of EU. Both NGOs and the Government are excited and there is a sense of exceptionality and enthusiasm. “For us, this Presidency project is an opportunity to bring back on the Croatian political agenda basic values, and to remind our politicians and our society that there are agreed values which we subscribed on by joining the EU, and that they should be respected”, says Mr. Toni Vidan (CROSOL President). Another subject gaining momentum for the platform is the debate on development and environment, emerging in one big crisis due to the extractive industries promoted nowadays in Croatia.

Both Fingo and CROSOL will continue to pursue a similar multi-stakeholder engagement on their side, especially around the topic of Agenda 2030 and what the EU can do better in implementing it. We, as NGOs, should try to push our presidencies in facilitating policymaking at the EU level, not only to achieve the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, but to achieve them in a strategic way which would pull us closer in achieving our ultimate targets: human rights, sustainable development, inclusive policies and a strengthened civil society.
Session 1
Multi-stakeholder approach in implementing the Agenda 2030

Moderator: Mr. Ștefan Cibian, President of the board, FOND Romania
Speakers:
Mr. Lucian Pârvulescu, Policy Officer, Natural Resources, Energy Union and Sustainability Unit, Secretariat-General of the European Commission
Mr. Radu Butum, Vice-Chair Working Party Agenda 2030, Permanent Representation of Romania to the European Union
Ms. Lonne Poissonnier, Acting Head of Policy, CONCORD Europe
Mr. Justin Kilcullen, European Representative, CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness – CPDE
Ms. Alba Gonzalez, Member of the IDDC EU Task Group/CBM Policy Officer, International Disability and Development Consortium

The first Session was diverse in terms of representation, aiming at ensuring a place at the table for EU institutions, relevant actors of Romania’s Presidency to the Council of the European Union and civil society working on different levels (EU policy advocacy, development effectiveness or disability and development). The discussions emerged around the goals set by Romania during the EU Presidency mandate, regarding the Agenda 2030, the role of the Multi-stakeholder platform on SDGs and the crucial need for EU institutions to shoulder sustainability as an underlying principle that guides all of our actions.

Mr. Lucian Pârvulescu opened the panel on behalf of the Secretariat-General of the European Commission, emphasizing that there is a need for multi-stakeholder approach, as all the actors need to be involved in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda: the European Union, its member states, all of the partners need to take into account the interlinkages. Seizing the occasion, Mr. Pârvulescu announced that on the 8th of April the European Commission will organize a high level conference dedicated to Agenda 2030 and Sustainable Development. Another event that benefited from the support of the European Commission, at the proposal of the Multi-stakeholder platform on SDGs is the European Sustainability Award – 1st Edition – that will be announced in early April 2019. 35% of the total applications comprise Civil Society Organisations from and outside the EU and Youth Organisations.
The panel discussions moved forward with Mr. Radu Butum, having the role of Vice-Chair of the Working Party on Agenda 2030 on behalf of Romania, during the Presidency of the EU Council. He remarked that this is one of the positive situations where the stakeholders and the institutions start from the same core of the matter: introducing sustainability principles as a norm in all the actions of EU (within and outside its borders).

His presentation tackled a series of sensitive topics and questions, relevant for the implementation of the Agenda 2030, and acknowledged the responsibility of the European Union to further improve its work in achieving SDG10 (reduce inequality within and among countries) but also brought to the audience’s attention the role assumed by Romania during this mandate: “The Romanian Presidency starts from clear and ambitious targets, aiming to set the road for a comprehensive SDG implementation strategy at the EU level. This is the reason why the Romanian Presidency focuses on 2 crosscutting subjects: 1) partnerships – and this conference serves the purpose of our activity, we encourage means to facilitate involvement of different stakeholders; 2) youth – from the perspective of the role they can play in the implementation of Agenda 2030.

Furthermore, Ms. Lonne Poissonnier, Acting Head of Policy from CONCORD, the European NGO Confederation which is actively engaged in the Multi-stakeholder platform on SDGs, structured her intervention around the added values and limitations of the entity. Set up in 2017 at the initiative of the European Commission, the platform aims at supporting and advising the implementation of the SDGs at EU level, and contributing to the Sustainable Europe 2030 Strategy (overarching framework, guiding the multi-annual European development coordination). The platform launched its contribution for the strategy at the
end of 2018, in the shape of a reflection paper, forwarded by its 30 members and First Vice-President of the European Commission, Frans Timmermans. The most important added value of the multi-stakeholder platform, as highlighted by Ms. Poissonnier, is helping the Commission to mainstream sustainable development and the fact that the platform creates the possibility to foster trust among the stakeholders. There are opposing views sometimes, but it is important that everyone in the room to be committed to move forward. On the other side, the platform will never be able to represent all stakeholders, as there are too many actors out there, and there are drawbacks in terms of representation (for example, the stakeholders from the Global South).

“We are happy with the fact that the European Commission dares to acknowledge honestly that we are not there yet and gives careful indications of where more needs to be done: fighting inequalities both within and outside Europe, making sure that we no longer consume more than our fair share or that companies pay taxes where they are due to allow governments to invest public funds in their countries’ sustainable development”, concludes Ms. Poissonnier.

Already having introduced the topic of multi-stakeholder engagement, the intervention of Mr. Justin Kilcullen, European Representative from the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness – CPDE, highlighted that CPDE is the only international body where CSOs have a place at the table (1/4 co-chairs). The platform was established after the Busan Agreement, in 2011, when it was recognized for the first time that CSOs are important actors for development. Nevertheless, civil society organisations in different countries still encounter challenges when it comes to freely advocating or expressing ideas, which raised questions such as: If we are going to talk about multi-stakeholder partnerships, and it doesn’t include CSOs, will it really work? The famous “leave no one behind”? Why are the CSOs the first to be put in jail?”. Mr. Kilcullen sharply pointed out that “there is a difference between multi-stakeholder dialogue and multi-stakeholder participation, the idea needs political support from politicians, and it needs to be done with serious efforts from both sides of the partnership. If this needs to be done properly, it needs an interlocutor, such as a body, or people who actually bring the stakeholders together and manage the whole process, ensuring that each party does what they need to do”. 
Further building on the upper mentioned motto of “leaving no one behind”, Ms. Alba Gonzalez, Member of the IDDC EU Task Group, representing the International Disability and Development Consortium, raised awareness on the topic of inclusive policies for the marginalised groups of the society, with focus on disability. She further stressed that in the reflection paper launched by EC in January, everything is focused on the economic growth, and we need to turn on human development, and re-think about the environmental footprints. As it turns out, the EU communication with the disability working organizations is not very accessible. As an expert on inclusiveness, Ms. Gonzalez pointed out that “the vision regarded education is job creation. But this is not the role of education entirely, is the fact that we need our children to have critical thinking, to become part of the society. Coming back to disability, we are encountering a lot of discrimination on entering the job market. EU built institutions outside of the society for children with disability. If we do not participate we can’t say what we need. We can’t tell how to support you on the SDGs implementation, there is only one person on DG DEVCO working on disability, to mainstream the subject in the EU policies. We need more people working in EU delegations for disability and marginalised groups.”

"The relation between EU and sustainability is a vocal one. We want it! Not only because we want to set up an example in the world, but also because this is the most certain path in ensuring the well-being of its citizens. This is why the stakeholders and the CSOs have a really important role to play!"

Mr. Radu Butum, Vice-Chair Working Party Agenda 2030, RPRO

"We cannot continue exclusively pursuing economic growth as a goal in itself. If we want Europe to become sustainable, we need EU leaders to have the courage to shift away from past mistakes, choosing an inclusive, just, green and fair transition of our economic model. This model will leave the EU’s current pursuit of increasing economic output (or GDP) behind and instead pursue wellbeing of all within the limits of our planet."

Ms. Lonne Poissonnier, Acting Head of Policy, CONCORD Europe

"We need the political will to make this work. We need to create a framework at national level, in each country, that recognizes the role of CSOs – to enable participation as a partner."

Mr. Justin Kilcullen, European Representative, CPDE

"The old models are not valid anymore. Let’s focus on human development and go for right to education, participation and opportunities!"

Ms. Alba Gonzalez, Member of the IDDC EU Task Group, IDDC
Session 2
Youth engagement and the Sustainable Development Goals

Moderator: Mr. Andrei Popescu, European Solidarity Corps and Communication Department Coordinator, ANPCDEFP, Romanian National Agency for Community Programmes in the Field of Education and Vocational Training
Speakers:
Mr. Lucian Mircescu, Youth and Sport Attaché, Permanent Representation of Romania to the European Union
Ms. Gayane Mkrtchyan, Eurasia Partnership Foundation - Armenia / Black Sea NGO Forum YouthBank Working Group
Ms. Ioana Dospinescu, President of the Board, UN Youth Association Romania

As the youth engagement in the implementation of the SDGs was already touched upon in the previous panel, Mr. Andrei Popescu, moderator of this Session, warmly welcomed the panelists and underlined that we have a very important youth goal, which is space and participation for all, and it can be reflected on every level. The session was interactive, being facilitated by Mr. Popescu.

The first intervention belonged to Mr. Lucian Mircescu, Youth and Sport Attaché within the Working Party on Youth on behalf of Romania, during the Presidency of the EU Council. He argued that the 2030 Agenda represents an opportunity to make young people more engaged and that to a certain extent, the issues that are being covered in the Youth Goals Agenda are being covered in the 2030 Agenda likewise. “We find it worthwhile to have youth policy more visible in shaping the agenda. We find it a very relevant topic, and I know the SDGs have been out there since 2015 but we have all seen young Greta in the news, calling at least for one particular SDG to be accomplished. We feel is our duty in the Council to see more youth policy reflected, and what EU does in order to achieve 2030 Agenda.”
After introducing the work of Youth Bank Armenia as a capacity building model, Ms. Gayane Mkrtchyan emphasized the role of the young people, or as she names them “the generation free of fear”, in the revolution Velvet Revolution from Armenia (April 2018). She argues that there have been many opportunities for young people for civic activity and they were educated in this spirit, reason for which the young people are able to do much more than adults in certain cases.

Ms. Mkrtchyan highlights the positive side by saying that “any sustainable development project that we take, includes literally hundreds examples of how young people work in reaching SDGs. All we should do is just collect the information from them, in the work they do, and we will already have a lot of indicators.” Nevertheless, she concludes with a recommendation for the higher level, arguing that donors are reluctant to give money for cooperation, and that the only platform that was set up to bring some interaction among the Youth Bank Groups was the Black Sea NGO Forum (starting with 2015).

Finally, as a young promoter of Agenda 2030, Ms. Ioana Dospinescu, President of the Board of the UN Youth Association from Romania, put forward the recent activities of the association and its engagement with the government structures from Romania that support the implementation of the Agenda 2030 at national level. She further advocates for the empowerment of young people and youth associations to participate in the implementation of the Agenda and in shaping the policies that will furthermore address the young generations.
After the presentations from the speakers, the audience was divided in 4 groups to discuss for 10 minutes what was the most important and relevant thing that was noticed in the panel, or how they can contribute to our topic as well:

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<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Idea</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st group</td>
<td>How the competency building for Sustainable Development needs to be formalized as part of schools, which at the moment is the main instrument we have for reaching all children and young people.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2nd group</td>
<td>Creating an open space for young people to learn outside of school, from each-other. We have a responsibility to enable them, to allow them to flourish. We need to empower young people to rise up to the occasion.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3rd group</td>
<td>Shrinking space of the civic society and civic activism. Young people are very easily targeted by corrupted governments. More people are encouraging youngsters to engage with policy makers, but depending on the context, it can be quite challenging.</td>
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<td>4th group</td>
<td>The ways of engaging are changing. What this means for funding, how can institutions fund activism when you can’t have a clear institutionalized NGO behind you? What if is just a group of individuals coming together with a great idea?</td>
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