Main Conclusions

Civil Society Forum Session

within the International Conference

Agenda 2030: Partnerships for Sustainable Development
Introduction

The Civil Society Forum Session was held in the framework of the International Conference "Agenda 2030: Partnerships for Sustainable Development", organised by the Department of Sustainable Development and the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Conference took place on the 16th of April 2019, at the Palace of the Parliament in Bucharest, Romania, and reunited over 250 representatives from the European Union, Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership and Central Asia, responsible of coordinating and implementing the United Nations’ Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development.

FOND Romania was involved in the organisation of this event by facilitating the Civil Society Forum Session, with the main purpose of bringing into spotlight the role of the civil society, in implementing and monitoring the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at both national and European level, by emphasizing the importance of partnerships for development and cooperation (reflected in the SDG no. 17). The format of the session was an interactive one, providing an open space for reflection, exchange of experiences, best practices and challenges on specific issues (discussed in 7 Parallel Thematic Working Groups), within the framework of the 2030 Agenda.

The final recommendations of the working groups were presented in the Closing Plenary Session of the conference by FOND Romania’s President, Ștefan Cibian.
#1: Civil society participation on the SDGs in Europe: what we need to improve?

Civil society participation has probably never been as strong as during the Rio+20 process. To succeed in putting the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda into reality what kind of structures and opportunities do we need for civil society to play an effective role? What can we learn from the national level to improve civil society participation at EU level?

For starters, we tried to look at the way in which governments involve Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) when it comes to implementing the 2030 Agenda. Sharing different practices from around European Union member states helped us to identify both good practices and what kind of support we would need furthermore, so we can fully get on board with the process. At the moment, there are not so many defined mechanisms for dialogue between decision-makers and CSOs. Some progress is being made, but the situations vary from country to country. The dialogue between decision-makers and civil society needs to be structural and regular, it needs to be institutionalized, representative and to have a concrete role in making sure that sustainable development principles are respected.

- Civil society needs to be proactive and aim to influence the high-level political direction;
- The enabling environment for civil society needs to be ensured by countering the trend of shrinking civil society space in Europe;
- Funding is needed for civil society, in order to conduct advocacy activities;
- Institutionalised mechanisms are needed to ensure constructive civil society engagement in policy processes. These mechanisms should respect the diversity of civil society and have clear mandates and roles;
- CSOs need to share experiences across Europe for succesful stories and best practices.

#2: Policy coherence for sustainable development (PCSD) and interlinkages

How can we make sure – at EU and national level – that both external and internal policies all serve sustainable development? What are the coordination measures needed to ensure that policies do not contradict but reinforce each other?

When talking about policy coherence for sustainable development (PCSD), we need to make the subject more accessible, to raise awareness by presenting the linkages between the Sustainable Development Goals, and not presenting them one by one. We should go beyond only noticing the connection between them and put in place proper mechanisms for synergies to be fostered, map all the relevant stakeholders, ensure local community involvement and develop monitoring systems.

- There is a need for building political commitment at the highest level and prioritize actions based on gap analysis, trade-offs and synergies.
- Pursuing a partnership approach with a shared responsibility across the government and all other sectors (including citizens’ organizations).
#3: SDG Monitoring and Review: Setting up robust systems

How can we set up a robust and participatory system to monitor and review our progress towards sustainable development? How do we choose the right indicators? What are best practices from civil society in Europe?

In 2018, Eurostat published its first report on monitoring progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals at European Union level. A number of 42 out of the 100 indicators drawn in the report are multipurpose, being used to monitor more than one SDG, on a quantitative basis. Starting from this point, the discussion focused on different stages of monitoring, types of reports and actors involved in the process. Several challenges were identified, such as the fact that more data literacy and transparency is needed, as well as more financing for CSOs, in order to keep going monitoring and reviewing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. In terms of reporting methodology, it would be better to have a combination of quantitative and qualitative data.

- It should be envisaged a participatory monitoring system across the process of indicators election and monitoring as well as qualitative reporting (eg. for externalities);
- Support greater transparency in monitoring and review at the EU level and state level;
- In order to achieve the upper mentioned, CSOs need capacity training, for enabling them to play a watchdog role.

#4: Designing an overarching Sustainable Europe 2030 Strategy: what needs to be addressed?

Building blocks for a Sustainable Europe 2030 strategy: the EU has not updated its Sustainable Development Strategy after the adoption of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda. Many actors – including the European Parliament, the Council of the EU and the Multi-Stakeholder Platform for the Implementation of the SDGs – have been calling for an overarching Sustainable Europe 2030 strategy to be the compass for all EU policies. What are the key elements of such a strategy? What does it have to cover? And what can we learn from Member States with strong sustainable development strategies?

A number of immediate components need to be addressed, starting with making sure that the strategy respects human rights and brings forward the needs of the most vulnerable groups, well-being instead of mere economic growth and clear responsibilities for all actors involved (national governments, EU level, civil society organisations). Furthermore, setting up priorities, distributing roles and establishing milestones is a precondition for reporting and monitoring to work. A European Union strategy for sustainable development can trigger member states to adopt their own strategies and link it to their national budgets (13 out of 27 member states have already done it or announced their intention to do so, according to a study released in 2019 by the Directorate-General for External Policies). By taking this into account, the overarching strategy should also be developed on the base of the existing strategies at the national level, as some member states moved faster.

- An overarching strategy with clear timelines and responsibilities, accountability mechanisms and an aligned budget. All of these should respect principles such as planetary boundaries, well-being of all, and leaving no one behind.
- Nonetheless, one important aspect is being overlooked: the overarching strategy refers to addressing Sustainable Development within the borders of EU, while the international component is not taken into account.
#5: SDGs in the EU and in neighbouring countries

How to strengthen the cooperation among CSOs on monitoring and implementing of the SDGs, considering the growing trend of shrinking civil society space? What are the expectations of CSOs from neighbouring countries in this context? How can we foster the exchange of good practices and lessons learnt between CSOs from the EU and neighbouring countries?

When referring to neighbouring countries, we talk about the Western Balkans and the Black Sea Region states, and it is useful to remember that in some regards we, as member states of the European Union, share very similar challenges with our non-EU neighbouring states when it comes to the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. In line with this thought, the discussions begun with a reflection on the trend of civil society shrinking space and actions that are being taken against CSOs in different parts of the region. In terms of cooperation, even though multi-stakeholder approaches are welcome, the capacities are very different at the level of civil society, governments, or ordinary citizens. There is a huge gap between grassroots CSOs and international organisations. Whilst the latter possess resources to position themselves as partners and attract specific funding, grassroots organisations have the expertise, but lack the means to implement.

Even though CSOs are contributing a lot for the achievement of SDGs, the enlargement policy is more of a priority for national governments (at least in Western Balkans), so more political engagement and public support for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda is needed.

- Build an effective mechanism for multi-stakeholder dialogue and cooperation for implementation of SDGs, allowing for genuine CSO participation in SDG strategy, implementation and monitoring;
- Build the capacity of all stakeholders involved to be engaged on the implementation of the SDGs, map our expertise and create opportunities for exchange of best practices and lessons learnt, allowing for inter-regional cooperation and the multiplication of regional best practices;
- Constantly invest in improving civic space and implement awareness raising campaigns on SDGs with tailored-made messages according to each type of stakeholder.

#6: The New Deal for Nature

The New Deal for Nature and People will be based on a strong declaration by Heads of State, by 2020, that leads to the strengthening of the UN Biodiversity Convention into a more powerful and relevant ‘Nature Convention’, to protect & restore nature by 2030, in support of the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement.

The fact that our planet is becoming increasingly unhealthy has a direct impact on humans life. Biodiversity is essential to our food and agriculture, and it is declining. Today besides fish stocks that are overfished we confront with key ecosystems that supply of freshwater, protection against hazards and provision of habitat for species which are declining rapidly. World Economic Forum identified the top three global risks for 2019 and those are extreme weather, climate policy failure and natural disasters. Top 10 also include risks as water shortages, accelerating biodiversity loss and large-scale displacement of people. The problem is that we do not have patterns of sustainable production and consumption. We have to deal with inequality, incresed resources use and all this together prevent us to track the achievement of environmental dimension of SDGs by 2030.
- There should be a higher level of biodiversity and climate integration for SDGs to be achieved;
- Increase the level of awareness on the importance of nature for our lives and livelihood;
- Governments need to have a stronger voice about country commitments on biodiversity, climate, and the SDGs.

#7: Sustainable Development through research and innovation

State of the art and pathways forward. Do we need the new policies to be committed to encouraging the partnerships between RDI & governance, RDI & society, RDI & economics / entrepreneurs?

Innovation is a key to solutions, and it can be supported through financing programs. In order to build a path to innovation solutions for development policies, there should be stronger synergies between ministries and research institutes. As a good practice, drafting a national strategy for sustainable development should also take into account sectorial needs.

- There is a need for stronger links between governments and research institutes through consultations and amendment proposals;
- Local communities should be involved in discussions in order to align sectorial needs to a national strategy for development;
- Further promote social economy and social entrepreneurship.

This publication was elaborated by the Romanian NGDO Platform (FOND), with the financial support of the European Union, as part of the series of events organized within the framework of the European project “Towards an open, fair and sustainable Europe in the world – EU Presidency Project 2019-2021”, in the context of the Romanian Presidency at the Council of the European Union. This event was co-funded as part of the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness - CPDE European Regional Work Plan 2018, by the Swedish Cooperation.

Its contents are the sole responsibility of the EU Presidency Project, implemented by FOND, Fingo, CROSOL and CONCORD, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.