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Evaluation of the Project

"For an Active Civil Society Together (ACT), phase I (2019-2023)"
implemented by Helvetas and Civic Initiatives

FINAL REPORT

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Annexes - only internal available

Abbreviations

ACT – Active Civil Society Together
BIRN – Balkan Investigative Research Network
BOS – Belgrade Open School
CRM – Client relation management
CBG – Community Boost Grantees/Grant Scheme
CI – Civic Initiatives
CSO – Civil society organization
CRTA – Center for Research Transparency and Accountability
EU – European Union
FGD – Focus group discussion
GIZ – German Development Agency
IG – Institutional Grantees/Grant Scheme
IP – Implementing partner
KII – Key informant interview
KoRSE – Koalicija za razvoj socijalne ekonomije/Coalition for Development of Solidary Economy
LAG – Local Advocacy Grantees/Grant Scheme
LAP – Local action plan
LFA – Logical framework approach
LGBT – Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual
LSG – Local self-government
MEL – Monitoring evaluation and learning
MZ – Mesna zajednica/local community (the smallest administrative unit of LSG)
MIS – Mladi istraživači Srbije/Young Researchers of Serbia
NAG – Network Advocacy Grantees/Grant Scheme
NKD – Nacionalna koalicija za decentralizaciju/National Coalition for Decentralization
OECD DAC – Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development – Development Assistance Committee
PG – Partnership Grantees/Grant Scheme
PMU – Project management unit
ToR – Terms of reference
SCO – Swiss Cooperation Office*
SCTM – Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities
SDC – Swiss Development Cooperation*
SIDA – Swedish International Development Agency
SIPRU – Social Inclusions and Poverty Reduction Team of the Republic of Serbia
SROI -Social Return of Investment
UNDP – United Nations Development Agency
USAID – United State Agency for International Development
USAID LWs – USAID Local Works program in Serbia
WHO – World Health Organization

*Both terms SCO and SDC are used in the report - SCO to denominate a key coordinator of the SDC support whereas SDC to denominate a key Swiss aid mechanism for international development and cooperation.

Executive Summary

In November 2022 the Swiss Cooperation Office commissioned an external evaluation of ACT to collect **lesson learned from the first three years of implementation** and bring sound decisions on **how best to continue assisting Serbian society with fostering inclusive democratic processes** in years to come.

The evaluation was conducted by a team of independent evaluators using **OECD DAC Evaluation Quality Standards** with a focus on **relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability**, and **questions developed in an evaluation matrix used to lead specific data collection processes**. The data were collected through desk research, in-depth interviews with key informants (KIIs) and focus group discussions with specific groups of key informants (FGDs). **Over 35 different sources were consulted during desk research while 41 KIIs and 5 FGDs helped evaluators reach 91 people, i.e. 76 actors** (36 grantees, 24 network members, 4 mentors, 3 donors & 2 state authorities, 4 strategic partners, 2 ACT partners/PMU, SCO). Data w synthesized and interpreted around the evaluation questions and presented in the form of key findings and recommendations.

The evaluation finds that:

- **ACT** has drawn from SDC's long-term experience in participative democracy and citizen's involvement in decision-making at local level and **has significant potential**. However, sustainability and impact are negatively affected by different contextual factors such as political pressures, shrinking global civic space and lack of resources. More **collaborative learning and flexibility** are needed to provide **agile solutions,** leveraging the constraints which are out of the projects' control.
- **ACT's achievements include raising the internal capacities of CSOs and policy related actions, but have focused less on constituency building**. Both grantees that received bigger financial and development support (IG, NAG, PG), and the small-scale grantees (LAG, CBG) managed to achieve similar effects while the latter demonstrated more engaged work with local communities and constituencies. Grantees have different understandings of their constituencies and use different approaches to engage them. More traditional CSOs establish constituency relations with different state and non-state actors and most often use meetings, round tables, and working groups to consult with. More activist oriented CSOs establish constituency relations with citizens and local communities in which they work and approach citizens through street actions, performances and social network campaigns. However, **the most significant missing link in work with constituencies is the absence of any systematic feedback on achievements**, neither CSOs nor decision makers keep people aware of progress made on policies submitted/adopted and what future steps would be.
- **ACT support to grantees has generally been rated positive**. This has included supporting them in a very difficult period of time (Covid) and the flexibility of the ACT team. Mentoring support was identified as particularly important for grantees. On the other hand, some constructive critiques were voiced in relation to the payment, reporting, planning, trainings, content and duration of support.
- **ACT ecosystem holds the social capital** (knowledge, weak and strong links with cross-sector actors, trust, brokerage capacities, etc.) **needed to leverage missing resources and manage constraints**. Although the capacities of other SDC projects ecosystems have not been in the focus of this evaluation, the assumption is that they may hold similar features and, if brought closer one to another, may create a better synergy since **inclusive democracy is a key driver/value of all SDC initiatives**. For the time being, grantees rather report on cooperation with other donors' initiatives.
- **Granting mechanisms (including capacity building) did contribute to ACT objectives**. However, granting could have been more open to micro and ad hoc initiatives while capacity building more tailor-made, innovative and less scattered among different knowledge providers.

- **The project mechanism worked well and the backstopping role of the national partner was valuable in initiating change**. However, if the national partner is to take on more responsibility in years to come in order to sustain SDC's investment, **building the leadership role of the national partner needs to be a priority**.
- Finally, in terms of sustainability, the evaluation finds that the majority of ACT grantees are micro, small and medium formal and informal CSOs, fragile and resilient, project dependent and with financial reserves of 3-12 months. **ACT institutional achievements are likely to last, however, long-term sustainability and impact are dependent on the culture of CSOs and LSGs having the (moral and financial) responsibility to follow them up**, as well as on the capacity of donor and civil society sectors to achieve consensus about how the process should be driven forward given the unfavourable context in which they operate.

The evaluation recommends that:

- ACT should bring sound strategic decision making to its future direction, carefully taking into account the **negative context in which the program operates** as well as the **effects of the program achieved so far**. The national partner, Civic initiatives, should use ACT as back-up support to initiate inter-sectoral and cross-sectoral debates on the future of civil society with a focus on building **trust with citizens**, while SCO/SDC should put additional effort into creating a **safer and more enabling environment for civil society** along with **other international development actors** operating in the country.
- ACT should provide space both for structure and culture related advocacy actions but **leave enough time for changes to happen and impact to be seen**. Work with constituencies is more effective when citizens gather around an issue that is important for them and their community and are led by a credible group of activists or CSO. So, the **support provided must be mission not goal driven**. ACT should try to influence this and a theory of change approach may be helpful here, as it provides a path for a less linear system of thinking and is more beneficial for adaptive, agile project management with quantitative but also qualitative indicators (SROI), generally more appropriate to this type of program.
- ACT should deconstruct the current grant schemes, **go with fewer granting schemes and fewer but bigger and longer grants**. Introduce institutional actions and rapid grant schemes. Partnership, networking and community boosting grants to be merged with the institutional and local action grants as a desirable model of work. Push for concrete systemic changes at national and local level but carefully select grantees and avoid organizations that have the traits of GONGOs and PONGOs. Give a chance to less polished proposals driven by original ideas and need.
- ACT should revise the capacity building mechanism, instead of building capacities, **develop grantees in a more holistic manner**, everything CSO's learn and do should serve their development. Networking is very important and ACT should invest more in this area.
- ACT should **adapt reporting mechanism** to the reality in which grantees operate. Ensure that all ACT grantee employees receive the **minimum wage** prescribed by the law. **Bring the ACT community together as often as possible** but in a **less expensive manner**. Continue upgrading and using the CRM system but crate a **MEL plan**. Use the **know-how and experience of national partners** more efficiently.
- ACT should invest more work in **developing the capacities of its national partner, Civic Initiatives**, using a **shared leadership style**. Experiment with **different forms of fundraising with grantees** to relax the project and donor dependence of CSOs**.** Consider **scale up** as many initiatives provide solutions that, with minor adaptations, can be relevant to other LSGs and CSOs. ACT could either allocate funds for multiplication and spin off or share it with other potentially interested donors.
- ACT should provide **media support to the work of grantees**. Use the already well established **SDC ecosystem of cross sector projects and actors to enhance synergy** and promote the significance of citizen engagement in public reform processes.

1. Introduction

This draft report is a result of the evaluation of the Project "For an Active Civil Society Together, phase I (2019-2023)" (ACT Project) conducted by independent team of evaluators. The evaluation was performed in the period November 7, 2022 – February 3, 2023 and it builds on what has been put forward in the ToR (*Annex 1*) and the Inception Report (*Annex 2*). The aim of the evaluation was to: a) gather the key lessons learned in relation to the three main areas in which the ACT Project worked and assess the capacity of the project to influence the whole system, and b) suggest what the focus of the next phase should be in fostering citizens' and civil society's active participation in inclusive democratic processes. This draft report is organized in five parts – the first and the second part provide a brief introduction and explanation of the methodology used; the third part encloses key findings of the evaluation from desk based and empirical research; the fourth part recommends key measures to be undertaken; the fifth part includes annexes with documents and sources that support the evaluation's findings and additional references on issues discussed.

2. Methodology

The evaluation approach was based on standard international practices based on the OECD DAC Evaluation Quality Standards (relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability with a focus to sustainability and effectiveness). Data was collected through (i) desk research; (ii) in-depth interviews with key informants (KIIs); and (iii) focus group discussions with specific groups (FGDs).

Desk research included a review of relevant organizational and project documentation; international reports, studies and practices; national laws, strategies and projects; and international development agencies' strategies and projects (*Annex 8*).

KIIs and FGDs were conducted with representatives of SCO, IPs, national partners, trainers and mentors, grantees and their networks including CSOs, national and local authorities, local communities' members and representatives of the donor community (*Annex 5*). As ACT involved different target groups and regions, a sample of informants were identified in close consultation with SCO and IPs (*Annex 3*). Non-random (i.e., purposive) sampling, widely used in qualitative research studies, was applied to identify respondents to ensure diversity of information and maximise learning. While it was initially hoped to interview up to 65 different actors via KIIs and FGDs. evaluators were able to organize 41 KIIs and 5 FGDs and reach 91 people, that is 76 actors (36 grantees, 24 network members, 4 mentors, 3 donors & 2 state authorities, 4 strategic partners, 2 ACT partners/PMU, SCO), optimising the exploration and triangulation of data (differentiations, generalizations and extrapolations). KIIs and FGDs were semi-structured, adapted to reflect respondent(s)' area of experience and knowledge. Questionnaires were defined in accordance with the questions in the evaluation matrix (*Annex 2*). Seven sets of questionnaires were developed, tailor made for each group of key informants: IPs, national partners, SCO, trainers and mentors, grantees, embers of grantees' networks (CSOs and LSGs), and international development agencies and national authorities (*Annex 4*). Data collection was organized both offline and online (via Zoom, MS Teams, and Google Meet). Average duration of KIIs was 1 hour while of FGDs it was 1.5 hours.

All data collected through the desk research and field work (interviews, meetings, focus groups) were categorized, analyzed, synthesized and interpreted according to the evaluation questions. Testimonials collected during interviews were systematized and integrated in the evaluation report to supplement the findings in the form of citations. Once the data were synthesized a debriefing was organized with SCO *(Annex 9)* to exchange views on findings, lessons learned and recommendations as well as expectations with regard to the definitive content and visual presentations of the draft and final reports.

There was only a couple of minor issues, related to poor participation of LSGs and network members in the FGDs but did not cause any undue constraints on the evaluation as a whole.

3. Findings

3.1 Relevance

ACT has drawn from SDC's long-term experience in participative democracy and citizen's involvement in decision-making at local level and the project has significant potential. However, sustainability and impact are negatively affected by external factors, i.e. political pressures, shrinking global civic space and lack of resources (*see Context analysis in Annex 6).*

ACT has focused on strengthening ties between CSOs and LSGs, with regard to existing and emerging priorities in reform processes and social, environmental and citizen participation issues. To enhance citizen's participation in public affairs, ACT has worked through three main pillars aimed at: a) fostering institutional and financial sustainability of CSOs to mobilize citizens' support and voice their interests in decision-making processes; b) increasing participation in networks and alliances to enhance influence on decision-making processes for the benefit of constituencies; and c) motivating CSOs and local authorities to apply joint initiatives on decision making and the provision of services. All aims have been supported by international literature and recommendations *(see Annex 7)*.

Overall, ACT is strongly relevant to the current context in Serbian civil society, where there is a push for sustainable development and inclusive growth, while fostering democratic processes and recognizing **the role of CSOs in strengthening ties between citizens to enhance citizen's participation in public affairs and ensure people's voices, especially those outside Belgrade, are heard**. This finding supports the intentions of the Swiss Cooperation Program (2022-2025) and reflects those of key international research reports and studies (*see particularly Hicks 2022 and Youngs 2020 in Annex 7, Descriptions of context in Annex 6 and List of documents and sources consulted as background to the evaluation in Annex 8*).

3.2 Effectiveness

Success in advocacy and citizen mobilization is found to be driven more by type of grantee than type of grant.

Institutional grants were mostly awarded to rights based, service providing CSOs with a strong advocacy background. These were different in size and years of experience, working with local initiatives, balancing between state and non-state actors, big think tanks and small CSOs. Institutional grants focused on the development of the institutional capacities of selected CSOs (strategic plans, advocacy plans, communication plans, branding strategy, fundraising plans, etc.) and provided support to less experienced but unique and important organizations in order ensure their survival during the Covid period (e.g. Polekol with network of 120 grassroot initiatives, Chance for Parenthood with base of 5000 people, Let it Know working with LGBT survivals of cases of hate crimes and discrimination, Patria wh provide mental health services voluntary, etc.). Support also enabled well-established CSOs to develop further: "*We have existed for 18 years and this is the first time to get such a grant, we have never had a possibility to work exclusively on our capacities".* Supporting local ownership, investing in leadership and providing financial support to diverse NGOs have been found important by international community *(see DAC guidelines in Millican 2022, Annex 7).*

Network grantees were both formally registered legal entities and informal groups of organizations. For some networks, ACT support was revitalizing with spin off effects (e.g. Green List of Serbia with ACT returned to the sector and managed to generate four new projects). The issues that networks worked on were versatile, social-economic-health-environmental, as well as network building. Traditional networks with secretariats and a fixed structure while stable, are often disconnected from their constituency. Network members are sometimes selected for information or participation in decision making so their participation is rather formal than substantial. Formal networks that are project based, with a light structure, are more flexible and efficient due to their rotating leadership and consensus decision making,

reflecting the constituency of the network. However, they are often donor dependent and need to continue generating projects both for their organizations and networks in order to sustain themselves. Finally, activist networks are more informal, decentralized, with temporary structures that serve their purpose. Although donors consider them a risk, and would not pass due diligence procedures, they manage to mobilize, engage and maintain the local community with far more success than any other type of network. The literature strongly advocates for widening support networks to include all types of CS, state and private sector actors to ensure substantive and continued policy dialogue *(see Youngs 2020, and Bollen 1998 in Annex 7)*.

Local advocacy grantees were formal small and middle size CSOs, that combined traditional and activist advocacy actions. They have a history of work in their local communities and are well recognized but sometimes exposed to the negative narrative of local decision makers (e.g. Komšije sa Dorćola, Tim 42, Pridruži se, Protok – all had intensive campaigns related to environmental and investors' urbanism issues pointing directly to the corruption and bad governance). ACT support was important in keeping them active in their local communities as their biggest concern is sustainable sources of financing. The literature emphasises the importance of flexible sub-granting mechanisms and the lack of a supportive local financial environment in the region *(see Youngs 2020 in Annex 7).*

Community boost grants were micro level, very grassroot initiatives that managed to get closest to the local population, attract attention and gain support. Despite the fact some are officially registered, their biggest challenge is their fragile operational structure, scares resources and informal ways of working which decrease their chances of being considered legitimate representatives despite the fact that they hold enormous power and citizens' trust. The literature suggests that increased support for social movements can be more effective in building community activism and participation *(see Millican 2022, Youngs 2020 in Annex 7).*

Partnership grants were cross-sectoral initiatives led by a local CSO with support obtained from the LSG. In most cases it was a win-win opportunity for civil society and local authorities, with robust engagement of a leading partner (CSO), modest involvement of a local partner (LSG) and very limited engagement of the constituency. Involvement of external expert support was crucial for safe project implementation - it was both their knowledge and brokerage role that kept the process on track. Despite modest LSG involvement, partnerships are generally felt to be crucial. Youngs (2020) find them key for supporting local ownership, investing in leadership and providing financial support to diverse NGOs *(see Annex 7).*

Achievements include raising internal capacities and policy related actions, less constituency building.

Institutional grantees developed key strategic and organizational documents, revised the existing, employed staff and engaged new volunteers, raised capacity through in-house, on demand trainings, rented and adapted premises and purchased small equipment (such as deposit boxes, to keep cash safe). On the program side, only a couple of grantees were able to articulate a concrete program related change (and in most cases these were service oriented organizations). Some influenced the creation of local action plans (such as Public Health Plans in Mačva District), advocated new social services for which the standards have been created (such as Outreach Associate, in the case of Duga Šabac), institutionalized capacity development of young people and initiated the creation of LSG mechanisms envisaged for participation of youth such as Youth Office and Council (e.g. Okular).

Network advocacy grantees also claim to have developed their inner capacities to better advocate their initiatives, some being officially established through ACT support (e.g. NaUM, mental health network). Some networks have established more institutional links with relevant authorities important for reaching sustainable solutions for beneficiaries (e.g. housing for youth without parental care) or supported beneficiaries to exercise their rights (e.g. right for refunding of medical services). Some developed recommendations for implementation of a national program of a new law with potential effect at local level (e.g. Law on Social Entrepreneurship, LAPs) or advocated for the implementation of a strategy (e.g. Mental Health Strategy 2017-2027). Some developed mechanisms and documents (e.g. Green chair, Green Council, LAP

for Waste Management). However, it was not completely clear to what extent reported changes could be attributed to the network or to individual member effort, particularly because decision makers tend to identify with network leaders/members rather than the network itself.

Local advocacy grantees focused more on local themes and the issues advocated have both structural and cultural traits. One group of achievements was related to the creation of local actions plans (e.g. gender equality, youth) and mechanisms (youth coordinator, communication with citizens in crisis situation) while another was about enhancing the existing mechanisms (e.g. boosting involvement of citizens in public discussions related to urban planning, enhancing the role of the local counsellor for protection of patients' rights) and transparency of local budgeting.

Community boost grantees worked closely with their constituencies to tackle grassroot issues. In some cases CBGs managed to create conditions for the increased participation of women in local/rural decision making (e.g. increased census for representation of women in local community councils/MZ in Pirot from 2.6% to 28%) and raise the profile of different groups of women in local actions plans (e.g. women 45+ are separately treated category in LAP for employment in Kragujevac, an effort of CSO Putokaz that used presence in both NAG and CBG to advocate for this to happen) while others managed to entice members of local councils to work for the benefit of local needs (e.g. waste management in Seleuš and Čantavir). Common for all mentioned CBG initiatives is that some were well received by LSGs unlike others that advocated for a local park (e.g. Komšije sa Dorćola) or full operationalization of the youth office and council (e.g. Sejači sreće). The approach of the CBG initiatives could serve as an example of how relations with the constituency may be established, nurtured and maintained (especially those with Okular, Sejači sreće and Komšije sa Dorćola).

Partnership grantees established new services and mechanisms. In Aleksinac, a unique administrative unit was created (as prescribed by the Art. 42 of the new Law on General Administrative Procedure, an important mechanism for the integration of social services and assistance for entitled beneficiaries). Although this was a technical task, and outside the scope of the leading CSO, this actually helped LSG get state funds. The leading CSO also increased the interest of LSG over issues citizens are most constrained by (e.g. infrastructure and communal in rural areas of Aleksinac, villages Tešice, Korman, Žitkovci) and were supported by another ACT grant. In Ada a new Social Protection Strategy and Action Plan were brought while in Ivanjica a separate budget line has been secured for the learning mobility of students. Novi Pazar developed an integrated IT system that will allow real time access to data of social services providers, social service users and the ones on the list (pending). This will help LSG to better plan allocations for social services in their yearly budgets. Palilula Municipality in Niš developed a public discussion procedure while Kraljevo accepted only the form of MoU which secures access of CSOs to all the public policy making. Sremska Mitrovica established a Green-chair which will allow a newly formed Green Network (out of 6 CSOs) to participate in the local parliament on discussions related to the environment while Čajetina provided recommendations for more accessible accommodation for people with disabilities in Zlatibor. Overall, these were useful outcomes but ACT and SDC involvement was crucial for the motivation of LSGs to participate.

ACT initiatives targeted both the general public and very specific groups of people. This can be seen from the achievements above but also through the type of grantees that implemented these. Overall, most ACT support was directed towards social service providers (counselling, education, prevention, psychosocial support, etc.) who work with vulnerable groups of people (Roma, people with disabilities, young without parental care, LGBT, youth, children, etc.), or CSOs that advocate policies that target social groups on the margins with a **specific focus on gender related sub-groups** (such as less employable groups of women 45+, rural women and youth invisible in local policy making, etc.). Another portion of support was directed towards issues most affecting the local community related to environment, urban planning, waste management, communal services, health, which all have direct effect on the entire population but a significant impact on the groups in (or at risk of) poverty such as rural women and youth, Roma, people with disabilities, etc. (the groups, ACT explicitly worked for).

Many initiatives tried hard to identify the right mechanism for advocacy. It was evident that effort was put into working on mechanisms (with CSOs) that sit with the local council rather than the president/mayor so CSOs could react promptly if needed, before an initiative would be rejected or sent for rejection to the local parliament (as evidenced by documents of decisions and procedures). The engaged legal experts/mentors applied cross-cutting and holistic solutions for different processes within local government legislation in order to establish integration of participation principles regardless of the issue (e.g. institutionalization of public discussions in the Municipality of Palilula, and the consultative status of CSOs in Kraljevo for all developmental processes). However, it is too early to assess the effects of the ACT grantees achievements. Many projects are still ongoing or have just finished and the majority of grantees that advocated for a mechanism (e.g. Green/CSO chair, working group, working body, counselling body, office, etc.) or a document (LAPs, programs, decisions, procedures, recommendations, etc.) will only realise their full effect only after a couple of years, once the ex-post evaluations take place (hopefully, if LSGs perform and CSOs oversee the process). Most importantly, the extent to which the engaged citizens and local stakeholders constitute a solid base to be easily mobilized in future actions seeking citizens' participation in local decision making (exercising participative democracies) will depend not only on what ACT grantees did but also on a number of external factors which so far are hindering rather than supporting the process. Hossein (2018) identifies that an effective CSO environment depends less on their freedom to operate, and more on how far they can use that freedom to hold the state to account (*see Annex 7)*. So far, KIIs revealed that most grantees worked through traditional modes of communication with existing pools of beneficiaries, partners, activists, volunteers, members and stakeholders. Authentic development work with citizens is lacking and one of the most probable reasons for this is the one-off nature of projects, gathering people around a project goal rather than an organizational mission. The danger of project driven vs. mission driven approaches is elaborated on in Ringhofer and Kohlweg 2019 (*see Annex 7*).

One of the most frequent arguments heard during KIIs/FGDs, constraining the impact of grantees work, was that: "*Governments actually do not hear people we represent. They send no or fake promises*". Some of this is due to a conflict potential of the issue advocated (such as environmental and urban problems) blocking communication between a local initiative and LSG (e.g. Komšije sa Dorćola initiative). These cases are far less visible in ACT than in other citizen engagement initiatives (e.g. USAID LWs) simply because there were far fewer conflict related issues advocated for, or informal, grassroots and micro activist groups supported. Sometimes, there is simply no political will for a certain process among decision makers or a lack of resources among LSGs with more planned than could be financed. Other constraints include: a) an absence of LSG knowledge of how something should be done, b) a lack of LSG understanding of the partnership role of civil society in developmental processes and their brokerage role with citizens, c) CSOs being perceived as a threat if they generate a significant portion of a constituency of voters, and d) unclear jurisdiction over the issue raised (e.g. scope of work related to local health ombudsman/Team 42 initiative, availability of public apartments for youth without parental care/Cepora initiative, etc.). Sometimes it is unrealistic expectations of CSOs due to: a) a lack of knowledge of how the processes advocated for are legally bound to be implemented and, b) poor advocacy tactics - weak analysis of powers within the LSG so CSOs approach the least influential people. Hossein (2018) explains this is related to how far CSOs are able to use the freedom to hold state, political and economic actors to account *(see Annex 7)*. In general, this entails getting close enough to powerholders to be able to influence change while having sufficient distance to provide scrutiny, critique and policy alternatives.

Grantees have different understanding of their constituency, with different approaches to engagement.

Membership based organizations such as CSOs that work with a specific social group (people with disabilities, children, youth, LGBT, etc.) and provide social services (peer education, HIV prevention, safety planning, psycho-social support and skills development of youth without parental care, mental health counselling, etc.) have a more clear picture on who their constituency is and what their role is given beneficiaries, end users of their services, are the

ones they exist for (e.g. 2500 of beneficiaries on yearly basis, in case of CSO Duga Šabac). CSOs that are traditional advocacy and think tank based, whose work is directed towards decision makers for a cause of general interest consider all citizens and different cross sector actors (CSOs, media, state and local authorities, etc.) as part of their constituency. CSOs that are activist, advocacy and grassroot oriented consider local communities and members of these communities their members (for many that are focused on environmental and urban issues, "people" and "nature" as their constituency). Finally, most CSOs networks consider their members as a first constituency layer, clarifying who they were actually established for only after in-depth discussion.

CSOs tried to engage citizens using versatile tactics, depending on the nature of their work (what they do, where they work, whom they address). Most of time, grantees with advocacy actions did inform and consult citizens most commonly through a survey, social networks and face to face meetings, which were particularly successful in smaller communities where people know each other, levels of trust and respect are dependent on how they are approached and who by. A more creative example could be found with LAG and CBG grantees who organized public campaigns using language people understand (especially youth), street actions and performances, infographics and media presence. Some interesting examples for engaging people could be seen with CSOs that are not advocacy oriented but try to make the issue, such as poverty, a common concern. CSO Patria from Novi Sad invented Humanko, a machine that donates goods to people in need, and Human Map where people in need can access free of charge services (e.g. hairdresser). Both Humanko and Human Map entice local giving and concern for less privileged groups (it is about two very fresh initiatives). The literature argues that it is the nature of civil society, in addition to other dynamic, context-specific factors, that influence different engagement mechanisms to keep politicians responsive to citizens *(see Bernhard et al. 2020, in Annex 7)*.

For consultations over national laws and strategies, grantees used their network members and associates to access different types of stakeholders (e.g. in case of KoRSE, Smart worked with business community, Civic Initiatives helped with CSOs). Similarly, on a local level, CSOs organize consultations with the group in need (women, Roma, youth, etc.) to hear their voices and integrate them into the recommendations submitted to the LSGs. However, generally, CSOs use traditional consultation tools such as meetings or focus groups which can seem passive and abstract, especially for younger people. Furthermore, some KIIs indicated: "*We know well the needs of the groups we represent because we are part of them and have worked with them for a very long time*" or "*we were in a hurry with the project so we agreed on a network level*". This may explain the weak or minimal involvement of their constituency, completely undermining the notion of participative democracy.

Consultations with decision makers were either held in parallel or after information from citizens had been analysed. Most common forms of communication were meetings, round tables, working groups (with involvement in the creation of policies such as LAPs, local development strategies, etc.). While rural populations were more inclined to use local assemblies as one of the most common consulting mechanisms, people from urban areas most often participate through public hearings and discussions. Both LSGs and CSOs are aware of the new Law on Planning Systems which prescribes public consultations, ex ante and ex post assessments as obligatory. While CSOs are trying to inform citizens about these opportunities, the majority of LSGs are passive, fulfilling their legal obligation pro forma.

Generally, the smaller a community is, the more people know each other and tend to push for changes through those engaged in the work of LSG (as was the case of Eko karma and Seleuš, small local communities in Vojvodina, north of Serbia). The bigger a community is, the more complex it becomes. In some municipalities, communication between CSOs and LSGs is protocolar (e.g. Ćićevac and Varvarin) despite the fact CSOs are advocating for a better quality of life for children and youth (the most critical social group to retain), while in bigger cities, this only happens if there is a strong interest in an issue with no conflict potential such as social care (e.g. CSO Cepora, CSO Duga Šabac).

People are generally demotivated, complaining decisions are only in the hand of one person ("T*here is no way I will sign the Law on same sex partnerships*", President Vučić announcement in the media). Activist CSOs highlight that "*the change must come from the bottom. We need more years of hard work. Institutional fight. Democracy with money, with compromise did not give results. More should be done to raise participation, to reach people who want to be active. It is hard but this is the only way.*" It raises a question about whether the CSOs in Serbia are doing enough to inform, educate and involve people on a revolving basis. While this evaluation has identified different ways of working with citizens and many small wins, a follow-up work seems missing given many CSOs and LSGs fail to make people aware of the progress and future actions. On the other hand, international donors financing participative democracy projects often insist on measurable indicators and deliverables through prescribed mechanisms and documents. Long term processes with social impacts but no clear financial benefits requiring other forms of evaluation (e.g. SROI, qualitative indicators, case studies, etc.) are rare. ACT, as with similar (international) initiatives, has done a lot to influence participative policymaking and the mechanisms CSOs advocated should be adopted. However, once the desired mechanisms are brought by decision makers, very little happens. The implementation effects and ex post learnings are still not a constituent part of participative processes. Until this happens, people will continue to feel disappointed and detached from the processes they participate in.

ACT support has generally been rated positive, there is some evidence of strengths and weaknesses.

Many grantees report that they were initially reluctant to apply to ACT due to rumours spread (by less experienced CSOs) that ACT was "*complicated, difficult and demanding to manage*". After experiencing the cooperation and communication with which ACT works, grantees completely changed their initial perception, seeing it as a rare opportunity for small and middle sized CSOs in Serbia and outside Belgrade to obtain direct finance and support with expertise as and when needed. All grantees concluded that ACT was either "*vital*' or "*very important*' for their work. The flexibility of the ACT team – described as "*great support, understanding, politeness, efficiency*'' – has been seen as the most valuable internal factor of the program. Mentorship was particularly highly valued by all grantees. CSOs have rarely had the chance to be supported by expert knowledge and experienced guidance throughout their projects. Often, mentors were the ones who overcame problems and helped grantees with adaptations and changes at the beginning of project implementations (in-depth interventions with networks since many did not advocacy components in their proposals) and throughout these (e.g. Protok, MIS Bor, etc.).

On the other hand, some constructive critiques were voiced in relation to the payment, reporting, planning, trainings, content and duration of support. More flexibility with payment modality of CSO staff is needed, permitting author-based contracts if these are more appropriate (or any other form that is legally accepted and win-win option for both the ACT and a grantee). Grantees also report that their staff engaged on ACT worked for 100-200 EUR net which is inappropriate given the expected scope of work, and far below the minimal wage prescribed by law.

With regard to the reporting system, although Catalyst worked hard to constantly adapt it to respond better to concerns collected during the program implementation, grantees claim to have remained confused about what the reports should reflect. For example, institutional grantees were unclear whether they should report on ACT activities or the entire work of their organization. Some CSOs had separate institutional and concrete program actions, some only did advocacy work. ("*Reports should be adapted to reflect what CSOs do, we cannot report on areas we do not work in. For example, we have far more target populations than offered by the reporting system"*). Many CSOs apply random approaches to their actions (particularly LAG grantees) making it difficult to ascertain who was involved in street actions and the demographic profile.

With regard to planning, grantees found ACT's request that they create advocacy plans separate from the project, burdensome, given their projects were already advocacy ones

(emphasized by LAG grantees). Institutional grantees were not fully clear whether their applications should be related to specific capacity building measures or combine both institutional and program related work. Network grantees were unsure whether their grants were only for institutional support (strengthening the work of network) or advocacy, so had to invest more time initially in redefining their project interventions and then implement the advocacy actions with the same appetite as when they applied to ACT.

In regard to trainings, grantees are unique in finding that there were too many training workshops and that some topics overlapped (fundraising, strategic planning, public advocacy, etc.) both with ACT and similar workshops run by other international programs implemented by BOŠ, Trag, CRTA, MIS, etc. Trainings organized online due to Covid were found rather demotivating. Also, training workshops organized in expensive spas and resorts raised some concern about the cost-effectiveness of the ACT as grantees would prefer more money for their actions and personnel than investment in training accommodation.

Finally, duration and size of support was critical for some CSOs, especially in the case of institutional grants. Two years seems short for institutional and systemic driven changes. The pressure was particularly high for activist organizations who "*had to work with people on the ground rather than sitting in the room focusing only on documents"* and they were not always able to realise everything planned. Also, grantees from other grant scheme (NAG, LAG, CBG) felt that for advocacy projects, support of 6-12 months was short given the process and nonlinear nature of these. "*Boosting local community is far more important than tailoring a paper and a mechanism. People are not interested in all issues. We need to listen to them and work on issues of their concern. Influencing LSG should not end up only and always with brought documents but in changing culture".*

Networking is something ACT should pay more attention to given it has created a great base for exchanges.

Trainings were found to be important opportunities for people to meet and share. Grantees particularly valued the ACT Community conference through which some true connections were made (CSOs targeting gender equality from Aleksinac and Kolubara; CSOs targeting youth from Ćičevac and Sonta, etc.). Trainers were generally valued but there is a lot of knowledge within the ACT grantees network (e.g. communications, work with media, advocacy, etc.) which could serve in future both for knowledge sharing (peer exchange) and coalition building. External knowledge should only be imported inside if it does not exist within the community. This has been found especially important in the case of joint projects of CSOs and LSGs where serious legal and public administration know-how was needed. If highly qualified mentors had not been involved from the state and local administration and academic sector (and the push from ACT), it would have been almost impossible to complete these projects.

ACT expectations from network grantees could have been more ambitious, although logical given the nature and mandates of such coalitions. However, many other initiatives, supported through different grants, have shown the potential for more authentic work because it was issue driven. In order to foster joint actions within civil society, ACT should work more with those initiatives that have proven spin-off and scaling-up potentials (e.g. mental health) where people are willing to share experiences.

Granting mechanism (including capacity building) did contribute to ACT project objectives. However, granting could have been more open to micro and ad hoc initiatives and capacity building been more tailor-made, innovative and less scattered among different knowledge providers.

Grant mechanism and capacity building support were the key engine for all achievements encountered during the evaluation process i.e. to hear and support the needs of less privileged groups in and out of the capital, enhance cooperation between LSGs and CSOs and raise institutional and networking capacities of CSOs.

Achievements appeared to be all of a similar type (documents, procedures, strategies, plans, mechanisms, recommendations, etc.). While ACT expected more from grantees that received bigger financial and development support (IG, NAG, PG), the small-scale grantees (LAG, CBG) managed to achieve similar effects but through more engaged work with local communities and constituencies. This evaluation already stated that the smaller the community or social group CSOs work for/with, the bigger the constituency and the closer the links built. This does not mean that the work of bigger CSOs, especially think tanks, working on more general issues (related to anti-corruption, rule of law, good governance, etc.) with national coverage is any less valuable. On the contrary, it is extremely valuable but more constrained given their access to end beneficiaries is weak. On the other hand, many of the small wins that local CSOs achieve would be difficult to scale up without the support of bigger CSOs because they hold well established links with national level stakeholders. Overall, ACT's brokerage role here could be invaluable.

Capacity building support was very intensive and scattered among different training providers and ACT partners. No communication and coordination among training and mentoring providers took place. While mentoring was deemed essential for all grantees, trainings were useful but burdensome for more experienced CSOs. On the other hand, the civil society newcomers appreciated both the knowledge and the networking opportunities offered through trainings. Many grantees shared that some new approaches were unapplicable, or unrealistic (e.g. training realized by Kreni promeni/Savo Manojlović). They also expressed the need for two types of knowledge: general, related to project management and specific, related to their issues-based work. All interviewed grantees confirmed they were in constant need of learning but would like to see some new forms of knowledge sharing that would facilitate exchange of practices, concrete know-how and collaborations *(there is a broad literature on the role of mentoring and peer learning to support democratic practice generally, see selected references in Annex 7).*

3.3 Efficiency

The project mechanism worked well and backstopping role of national partner was valuable in initiating change.

The organizational structure of ACT, in general, served its purpose, responding efficiently to all operation requests of the programme. Administrative, management and leadership functions were clearly defined but disproportionally shared between the international (Helvetas) and local partner CI (Civic Initiatives). While administration and leadership were predominantly on the side of Helvetas, grant managing and general management of staff were a combination of Helvetas and CI staff. Grantees were unanimous that grant managers and mentors were the most valuable asset of ACT. The level of support they provided to grantees was one of the most important internal factors for the success of the Project.

The ACT office was physically detached from the office of CI so some staff had to move between premises. This was more challenging for CI for whom ACT was a constituent part of their strategic portfolio involving different teams, than for Helvetas for whom this is one of two projects in Serbia and its logical premises.

The identity of both partners with the program was strong but different cultures (business vs. soft forms of work), working practices (administrative vs. content) and physical detachment from the base were challenging for achieving common consensus on key programme issues – i.e. approaches to participative democracy, the focus of the support (structure vs. culture), how it should be measured (quantitative, more output related vs. qualitative, more impact related), and who should be supported (polished projects with opportunistic partners vs. great but not well structured projects with unexperienced but committed leaders).

Knowledge was obtained through project partners (Trag – training/mentoring for NAG, LAG and CBG; Boš – training/mentoring for PG; Catalyst – CRM system), group of mentors from CSO Serbia in Move (in the initial stage of the project) and a national partner (Civic Initiatives – managing/training/mentoring IG). Selected partners are well-established organizations with

huge experience and results in the expertise recruited for. They are all familiar with each other, often partnering on other initiatives. However, on ACT they each implemented their own assignments without proper coordination which often led to overlapping topics and unsynchronized approaches.

The CRM system, created by Catalyst to ease the application, monitoring and reporting processes both for the grantees and program, provided efficient solutions for project management. It was a novel system of work for the civil sector because it was completely online but it was also a learning opportunity given other such systems will be put in place by different donors that are gradually transferring from offline to online processes for efficient project management. The system offers easy access to different project data on both aggregated and disaggregated bases which allows for crosschecking and analysis, much needed for sound decision making and adaptations. On the other hand, while IT solutions may be useful for data management, a softer approach would be beneficial to ensure that monitoring and evaluation are serving a learning purpose. If ACT had an in-depth MEL plan it could provide a sound link to the theory of change and help all partners involved understand better the context of collaborative learning and adapting. This could also ease stakeholder management and boost knowledge sharing and usage within the program ecosystem. *(See Analytics in Action on Log Frame/TOC, Annex 7).*

ACT is an important legacy of SDC, but in order to sustain this, the national partner, Civic Initiatives, must gradually take over full responsibility for the ACT program. CI enjoy a high level of respect and trust from CSOs in Serbia and are seen as the most important sectoral leader *("The only ones that are fully aware of needs of the civil society and do care about issues burdening CSOs, especially when it comes to differences in financing the national and local level CSOs. For many other big Belgrade based CSOs their whole work is just a business, they have their own agenda, tailoring against the needs of donors rather than the constituency they represent"*). There is much sectoral work that they will need to run in parallel with their programs and development. Therefore, work of Helvetas and SCO with CI combines administrative, management and leadership development that must be in line with the mission, culture and values of CI, taking into account burning issues such as retainment. CI already have a good organizational structure, institutionalized procedures and processes, experience with grant managing and knowledge collection and sharing (through their sectoral resource centre and knowledge hub). A shared leadership incentive could be a good starting point and it has to come from Helvetas. Shared leadership replaces micromanagement practices and aspires equal and consensus-based distribution of power over planning, communication, coordination and decision making among three key positions: international, national and local leaders. Along with the sound organizational development plan and committed work of all parties involved, CI will likely raise its quality and credibility bar. *(See Millican 2022 on supporting local ownership and leadership, Annex 7).*

No specific synergies with other SDC initiatives were noted, grantees rather report on cooperation with different donors' initiatives. Social inclusion principles were mainstreamed as in focus of majority of supported CSOs.

Some CSOs used several types of ACT grants which made them more aware of what other CSOs are doing. It also helped to link their work (one grant works for the benefit of another, as in case of CSO from Aleksinac, mentioned in the previous section). The only SDC initiative mentioned during KIIs and FGs was related to youth employment under the roof of NIRAS project, by a couple of CSOs that are either partners to that project or had participated in some form. Although the capacities of other SDC projects' ecosystems have not been in the focus of this evaluation, the assumption is that they may hold similar features and if brought closer together this could be advantageous, since inclusive democracy is a key driver/value of all SDC initiatives.

In general, grantees cooperate with different international donors. They have experience with local sources of financing (LSGs, state ministries) but few CSOs receive stable local financing (these are most often CSOs registered as social services providers). Some of the most present donors in the activities of CSOs are USAID, EU, SIDA supporting the rule of law, anti-

corruption, good governance and environmental issues but through strategic partners at national level (CSOs such as Boš, Trag, CRTA, NKD, MIS, who further, using the sub-granting mechanisms, try to inject resources in the grassroot level.) The next group of donors are the ones that in most cases work directly with CSOs such as UNDP, WHO, Caritas, foreign embassies who are interested for social, environmental and health issues. Finally, there is GIZ in economic and environmental issues but working with a very specific types of business oriented CSOs with well-established links with decision makers.

3.4 Sustainability

Majority of ACT grantees are micro, small and medium formal and informal CSOs, fragile and resilient, project dependent and with financial reserves of 3-12 months.

The majority of supported CSOs are pure activist organizations, with a couple of employees, growing at a slower rate with incomes from government, donations and companies. They are skilled and manage to raise funds from different sources but have reserves for only between 3-12 months. Only a couple of bigger CSOs outside of Belgrade (such as Duga Šabac with 200k EUR yearly budget, 8 full time employed) have a more stable financial projection given they receive regular financing through projects of national importance with national and international partners. *(See Youngs on supporting activists through sub-granting, Annex 7)*.

As stated above, sustainability and impact are both negatively affected by external factors, most notably political pressures and shrinking space for civil society activism. The donor community also plays an important role and has a strong impact on the future of the sector. CSOs are faced with different donors and, logically, different requests. The biggest burden is reporting as some ask for weekly (WHO), bi-weekly (Trag), or three weekly (Boš) reports. CSOs with a bunch of smaller projects, find this a real issue *("Administration is burdening us, we will change our donor approach and try to pitch only for one bigger grant, no way we will go any more with several smaller grants."*). For small teams doing everything this leaves little time for engaged work with the local community and constituency.

There is a great discrepancy between CSOs in and out of Belgrade (it is interesting that grantees call them "big and small" while donors "national and local"). Larger organisations (able to absorb single grants over 100k EUR, and already mapped by donors as potential direct beneficiaries) access larger funds, while local CSOs small single grants of around 10k EUR. This forces them to run 10 smaller projects which automatically consumes their human resources, as there are 1-2 people doing everything (the size of grants does not allow for more people to be engaged and paid). Amounts big CSOs provide through sub-granting (Boš, Trag, Crta, MIS and similar who have large long term institutional grants from SIDA, USAID, EU) are not developmental for local CSOs, highly dependent on international donors and projects (such as Polekol, Okular, Protok, Tim 21, Iskorak, Forca, etc.).

ACT institutional achievements are likely to last, however, long-term sustainability and impact dependent on culture of CSOs and LSGs with the (moral and financial) responsibility to follow them up.

ACT has succeeded in implementing policy documents and raising awareness over many issues important for people's quality of life, from national to grassroot level. As already stated, it will take time to see the full effect of these, and their relative success. In a country that accepts the idea of participative democracy but actually does almost nothing to establish and preserve it, it would be difficult to expect huge systemic change.

3.5 Visibility

ACT is recognized as an extremely valuable program in the donor and the civil society sector and has explicitly placed participative democracy back on the agenda of the donor community.

Grantees confirm that ACT paid a lot of attention to visibility, and communications but was flexible and responsive when grantees asked to remove logos in order to reduce the risks related to local community engagement. This is particularly important for small grassroot

initiatives that are lobbying national and local authorities over the most burning issues (environment and urban planning). Generally, the more contested a topic the less useful it is to make donors visible. Switzerland is often perceived in public as a country with a large Serbian diaspora, strong business and economy, and investing in a dual education system *("Sometimes people think that we want to send people to Switzerland for work")*. The fact that it is the cradle of participative democracy is known only to a more educated group. Overall, its neutral status is beneficial for ACT and its leverage capacity should be further explored. *(See Youngs 2020 on importance of media and communications, Annex 7,).*

Visibility is important for the identity of the program (and it was very well designed and preserved in the case of ACT). However, "*the message is more important than the size of the logo"*. A major issue raised by grantees is about donors going from one topic/priority to another and the government using the communication gap (intra sectoral, within the civil society, and inter sectoral, between the civil sector and donor community) to spread a negative image of CSOs in public. The evaluation found that the level of communication and coordination within the donor community is more personal than institutional which breaches the principle of accountability, something most donors insist on. Personal relationships are important but occur between middle level staff that, while knowledgeable, have limited decision-making power. The most recent civil society initiative of USAID and SDC and media initiative of USAID and SIDA are one of the best examples of how effort can be better balanced for the sake of end users. This approach is not an easy one requiring adaptations, synchronizations and changes but is definitely the best one to respond to the agile and non-linear nature of international development. It would be advisable to see more of such cross donor and cross sector cooperation, coordination and decision making.

4. Recommendations

4.1 Relevance

1. ACT should bring sound strategic decision making to its future direction, carefully taking into account the negative context in which the program operates (and other hindering factors the evaluation reflected) as well as the effects of the program achieved so far. Systemic changes over many issues are more than needed (the process of reforms is continuous) and citizens' participation in that regard crucial but seriously constrained by poor accountability and governance of decision makers, and the rule of law that is constantly backsliding in Serbia. Everything achieved through ACT so far is relevant but requires continuity and commitment both of state and non-state actors, and a need to step out of the project timeframe and understand that once the project is completed, the real work is about to start. For that to happen, a change in behaviour is needed, replacing conditionality with encouragement (partnerships), from both sides (demand and supply), internally and externally (within and across sectors). The Relief web report (2010) stresses the importance of strengthening confidence in state institutions in any transition out of fragility, while a USAID report, cited in Millican (2020), identifies a causal relationship between state/civil society relationships and the maintenance of a democracy, but Youngs (2022), recognises that governments across the region are still reluctant to recognize and treat civil society as a necessary and legitimate component of a democratic system *(see Annex 7).*

2. CI should use ACT as back-up support to initiate inter sectoral and cross sectoral debates on the future of civil society, and aim to reach consensus on minimum standards and quality of work (with focus on visibility, transparency, accountability and continuity of CSO work), and measures to raise trust with the general public and prevent further disintegration due to unequal resources and capacities. This is also echoed by USAID guidelines for working with CSOs, cited in Millican (2022) *(see Annex 7)*.

3. SDC/SCO should put additional effort into creating a safer and more enabling environment for civil society. This could be done through more coordinated work between the international development agencies (and their programs) as well as through more intensive/issue-based work with the state bodies in charge of the civil society sector. Effects

and impact of the civil society sector are absolutely dependent on the good will and partnership support from national and local decision makers, support needs to be driven by values and mission, not project goals. Much of the literature speaks of developing an 'enabling environment' which also frames ways of working with CSOs and a shift towards core and trust-based funding *(see Annex 7)*.

4.2 Effectiveness

1. ACT should provide space both for structure and culture related advocacy actions but leave enough time for changes to happen and impact be seen. Participative democracy is a process consisting of information-education-consultation-partnerships. So far, it is apparent that citizens, communities and civil society have been working hard to be informed, educated and consulted. However, the partnership requires trust, respect and reciprocity and this is the missing element in the process chain. To change this, the system of values has to be revised and reflected in attitudes and behaviour of key actors, national and local authorities, as well as CSOs. ACT should try to influence this and a theory of change approach (rather than LFA) may be helpful here, as it provides a path for a less linear system of thinking and is more beneficial for adaptive agile style project management with quantitative but also qualitative indicators (SROI), more appropriate to this type of program *(see TOC vs. Logic Model in Annex 7)*.

2. Work with constituencies is more effective when citizens gather around an issue that is important for them and their community and are led by a credible group of activists or CSO. They are motivated when they achieve a small but collective win, receive feedback, and are asked how to proceed further. Different groups of people (youth, women, elderly, Roma) need the space to share, create and develop as well as community follow up and support. Therefore, more investment into human and social capital is needed in the long run avoiding pressures that come from project driven initiatives. Youngs (2020) recommends engaging with new forms of activism, and new CSO partners *(see Annex 7)*.

Support must be mission not goal driven: ACT should support more local, small and micro grassroot initiatives gathered around mission rather than an imposed goal.

3. ACT should revise the granting mechanism to support the above recommendations, i.e. **deconstruct the current grant schemes, go with fewer granting schemes and fewer but bigger and longer grants** such as:

- **Institutional grants** – to provide 3-5 years support to organizational development and strategic work that will be directed towards a systemic change (local or national level, depending on the type of CSO or network supported) prior defined in a strategic document. Grant size to be driven by the size of the organization, growth potential and change to influence. Annual reports of the organization to be reports for the institutional grant provided. Organize consultations with international partners SIDA and USAID to learn and exchange experiences and best practices over institutional/core granting.
- **Action grants** to merge local advocacy and community boost grants – to provide 12-24 years of support to both formal CSOs and informal groups of people and activists (grassroot and micro/single person) that will push for small but relevant changes for citizens and their local communities (i.e. mobilising and engaging). Relax the application and reporting procedure especially for new and micro groups of activists.
- **Rapid grants** - to provide 0-6 months ad hoc support in any form (financial, material, knowledge, social links) to emerging grassroot initiatives that need fast and one-off support to mobilize and meaningfully involve a local community around a cause. ACT should follow-up supported rapid initiatives and help with transition to local advocacy grants, if the potential for growth and further support is spotted. ACT to manage and administrate the initiative while leadership to be left to the initiators.
- **Partnership, networking and community boosting grants to be merged with the institutional and action grants.** Partnership building and networking should be enticed as a desirable model but only when the issue comes first. Partnership and networked projects should be seen as a tool for a change rather than a window of

opportunity for a group of people skilled with pitching. Similarly with community boosting, it should be a starting principle of any advocacy action. CSOs should prove they already have and work with a constituency *(see SIDA documents Annex 7).*

- **Push for concrete systemic changes at national and local level**. However, given this is a complex process, entice cross-grantee work and nurture the principle of reciprocity - LAG should help IG with local community boosting while IG should help with knowledge and cross-sectoral linkages.
- Carefully select grantees and avoid organizations that have the traits of GONGOs and PONGOs. Youngs (2020) warns against these *(see Annex 7)*.
- **Give a chance to less polished proposals driven by original ideas and need.** Think about introducing a negotiated procedure followed by a two-phased application process: 1) concept note with initial idea, 2) finalized proposal. In-between, provide support to less experienced organisations with innovative and creative ideas. It is the only way to secure ACT access to talented civil society groups, willing and capable to lead and change.

4. ACT should revise the capacity building mechanism, instead of building capacities, develop grantees in a more holistic manner, everything CSO learn and do should serve their development. Overall, provide fewer trainings but more mentoring and even more innovative learning. Learning needs to be assessed in communication with grantees. General training programmes should be tailored to the needs of newcomers to the sector, on advocacy and participative democracy, as well as organized occasionally in the form of an academy. A pool of trainers and mentors to be created combining knowledge existing within and outside the ACT community. Although their knowledge and expertise should be diversified, they should reach a common consensus on the methodology and quality standards applied in the informal education of civil society activists and organizations. Mentoring should be both general and specific in its nature because grantees need to be backed up both with general project management and specific issue or process related know-how. Innovative learning means ACT should pilot new forms of knowledge transfer that could be obtained through on the job learning, internships, job shadowing, gamification, story-telling, etc.

5. Networking is very important and ACT should invest more in this area. A lot of knowledge, experience and skill exist within the ACT community. People are highly motivated to meet live, exchange, learn one from another, and create something together. This is a proven path to innovation. Many grantees belong to the same community of practice, working on the very same issues but in different ways unaware of what others are doing. Synchronization of work is important for issue and sectoral based work. Most importantly, recognise the potential value local, small and micro grassroot initiatives bring to the national level, big, thinks tanks and networks that, because of the nature of their work, have weak access to citizens as final beneficiaries and the reciprocal value smaller ones can gain from contacts, knowledge, etc. Peer learning can support networking and movement building. Youngs (2020) advises '**Widen support networks** promote innovative partnerships between local authorities, civil society, and the private sector through networks, platforms, and alliances to ensure a substantive and continued policy dialogue, invite not only members of civil society but also representatives of these other partners'. University engagement that is networking with academia is also strongly recommended by international literature *(see references to peer mentoring and networking in Annex 7).*

4.3 Efficiency

1. ACT needs to adapt reporting mechanism to the reality in which grantees operate. Do not push grantees to report in a provisional manner as this may cause bias. If some data is provisional, this should be clearly noted in the reporting system and carefully addressed in later analyses.

2. ACT should ensure that all ACT grantee employees receive the minimum wage prescribed by the law. Find the most appropriate legally acceptable solutions that will work for grantees. Flexibility is important to reduce workload shared among limited employees.

3. ACT should bring its community together as often as possible but in a less expensive manner. Put more money into content and less into accommodation. Search for knowledge within the ACT community and reward it, this will be both more cost effective and stimulating for participants avoiding negative competition through reciprocal giving and receiving.

4. ACT should continue upgrading and using the CRM system but crate a MEL plan. Make an ACT results framework the basis for monitoring and the CRM system the feeding tool. Evaluation and learning elements of the plan should set the basis for knowledge collection, sharing and adapting. When planning, take the knowledge potential of the entire (SDC) ecosystem into consideration to entice cross sector and cross actor learning and coherence.

5. **ACT should use the know-how and experience of project and national partners more efficiently**, not solely as training/mentoring or technical solution providers but learning communities of practice. The learning needs of civil society are big and request coordinated efforts of all ACT partners (CI + Trag, Boš, Catalyst). It is worth thinking how and where they could all contribute more to ACT (Trag has experience in boosting local communities and access to regional best practices and Catalyst with diversified fundraising). If necessary, involve new partners with expertise beneficial for the next ACT phase (e.g. media support).

4.4 Sustainability

1. ACT should Invest more work in developing the capacities of the ACT national partner, Civic Initiatives. Introduce a shared leadership style, create a development plan for CI (how best to fill the gap between current institutional and organizational capacities and the ones CI need by the end of next program cycle and to take full responsibility) and support a more proactive role of CI with initiating and handling the most critical constraints experienced by civil society. SCO should oversee investment, requesting accountability of both ACT partners (Helvetas and CI) and their full commitment to the idea.

2. ACT should experiment with different forms of fundraising with grantees to relax the project and donor dependence of CSOs. ACT could provide additional support to CSOs that are ready to generate the resources for their initiatives through diversified sources of funding. For example, more intense work with the diaspora could be beneficial as local communities have a devastating demography but interested individuals overseas willing to invest in their mother communities on issues raised by local population.

3. ACT should consider scaling up as many initiatives provide solutions that, with minor adaptations, can be relevant to other LSGs and CSOs. ACT could either allocate funds for multiplication and spin off or share it with other potentially interested donors.

4.5 Visibility

1. Provide media support to the work of grantees, through different kinds of media (outlets, organizations, online portals), channels (TV, radio, social networks) and types of media content (podcasts, billboards, video clips, story-telling, documentaries, etc.). Grantees should make their initiatives more visible to the public in order to build trust. The more the public is informed about what CSOs work and support needs, the greater the chance that people will approach and engage, ultimately positively affecting sustainability.

2. Use the already well established SDC ecosystem of cross sector projects and actors to enhance synergy and promote the significance of citizens engagement in the public reform processes. SDC works hard through Swiss Pro, SCTM and SIPRU initiatives but none of these have been sufficiently recognized by public and CSOs. Both SCO and ACT could play a much active role in bringing closer these initiatives to identify niche for joint intervention and more active presence in public.

5. Annexes

Annexes 1-9 have been all referenced in the report and are attached to it.