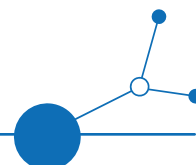
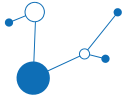


D 1.4.4. - Citizens' involvement in decision-making processes in the Carpathian Euroregion: the Carpathian Civil Society Platform - Strategy and Action Plan



Version 1
03 2024





D 1.4.4. - CITIZENS' INVOLVEMENT IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES IN THE CARPATHIAN EUROREGION: THE CARPATHIAN CIVIL SOCIETY PLATFORM - STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN

Abbreviations:

CSOs- Civil Society Organizations

NGOs-Non-Governmental Organizations

Introduction and background

The Carpathian Civil Society Platform aims to strengthen social cohesion and promote citizen participation in the decision-making process through the mobilization of grassroots civil society actors in the territory of the rural-mountainous area of the Carpathian Euroregion, which covers the bordering regions of Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Ukraine.

The Platform is driven by a shared common vision of Carpathian CSOs to strengthen a vibrant, pluralistic, and rights-based civil society in the territory of the Carpathians. The Carpathian Civil Society Platform is an instrument to realize this vision by offering a framework for cooperation between civil society organizations working primarily with grassroots, local communities, and vulnerable groups.

The Platform is an informal organization across borders attached to the geographically, historically, culturally, and sociologically contiguous territory of the Carpathians, which

"The Hungarian partner's participation in the project is co-financed by the Hungarian State." CE0100083



is the common ground for cooperation and joint actions. Its main objective is to synergize the single and often isolated efforts of CSOs, to increase the impact of their activities at local, sub-regional, and Carpathian levels as well as to generate, disseminate, promote, and mainstream innovative solutions to socio-economic and environmental problems of local and inter-regional relevance, and to free up their innovation capacity to better serve their target groups and articulate the voice of mountain communities.

The rationales for creating the Platform:

- the ecosystem of civil society deteriorated in the last decades in Central and Eastern Europe, and civil societies face serious challenges, such as unfavorable political, legal, and financial environment
- this challenged civil society organizations (CSOs) working in the Carpathians as they are dealing with the most unfavorable social groups in the region far from the centers with limited access to information and funding
- although CSOs are working hard to achieve their missions and goals in an increasingly deteriorating environment, and are initiating innovative solutions to community problems, they operate in isolation from each other due to a lack of supportive and encouraging contexts and institutions, which reduces the social impact of their activities and this is linked to a low level of community-driven development solutions and cross-sectoral cooperation at local, regional, national, and inter-regional levels.

The Platform is a loose, informal network of over 100 CSOs in the Carpathian Euroregion, consisting of local "hublets" (local networks) in each of the sub-regions of the Carpathian Euroregion. Currently, the Platform is run by the Carpathian Foundation-Hungary, in cooperation with local partner NGOs in each country, which act as local focal points for the Platform.

Key challenges

The Platform has a multi-level character addressing the local, sub-regional, and inter-regional levels and related to the broad framework of national, and EU levels. The

"The Hungarian partner's participation in the project is co-financed by the Hungarian State." CE0100083



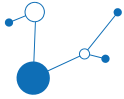
disharmony and sometimes conflicts and gaps between these different levels are not conducive to creating an enabling environment for civil society actors, especially in such remote mountainous areas as the Carpathians. There is a contradiction, for example, EU policy (mostly nice words) regarding the importance of civil society and the practice of national policies, which ignore and, in some cases, intimidate civil society actors and this leads to the shrinking space of civil society. Furthermore, there is a gap between mainstream policy-making institutions and local communities due to a lack of mechanisms and understanding of how to implement policies at the local level on the one hand and a lack of knowledge of the local context on the other.

Governments' attitude toward civil societies leads to the passivity of citizens, apathy for public affairs, and reduces social cohesion, regional solidarity, and deepens the mutual mistrust between state and societies. This negatively influences citizen participation in the decision-making processes at local and inter-regional levels.

In the case of the Carpathian Euroregion, there is a lack of systemic solutions for integrating the development potential of the borderlands, including the lack of integrated strategies and relevant institutions based on unified resources. This is related to the low level of community-led development solutions and cross-sectoral cooperation and can be considered to be one of the basic problems in implementing the socio-economic development of the Carpathians. The other problem is the lack of cooperation and common strategy, considering the specific development needs, among the national governments of the five countries sharing the Carpathians.

As regards civil society organizations expressed their interest in cooperating with other CSOs in the neighboring countries on diverse topics, they also found obstacles to the collaboration, such as lack of funding for transfrontier cooperation - especially for civil society organizations that operate in mountainous areas as they are not prepared to absorb larger EU and national funds, lack of knowledge on how to develop joint cross-border cooperation projects, capacities on how to cooperate across the borders, weak project design and project management skill, and language barriers. Although the war in Ukraine,

"The Hungarian partner's participation in the project is co-financed by the Hungarian State." CE0100083



which borders four Carpathian countries, makes cross-border cooperation difficult, civil societies in the border region were the first to respond to the situation by supporting Ukrainian refugees and providing humanitarian aid to Ukrainian communities. This indicates that Carpathian solidarity, which is based on common historical experiences of exodus, exists.

Strategy

The Strategy aligns with the Alps-Carpathian joint strategy to promote community-led development in mountain areas and to assist community-based institutions in upgrading participatory governance processes as it is underlined in related policy documents.

The Strategy of the Carpathian Civil Society and the related Action Plan have been discussed with stakeholders and in addition to the results and lessons learned from the discussions, are based on the following pillars:

➤ *Needs assessment*

In 2023, the Carpathian Foundation-Hungary launched a survey to assess the needs of civil society organizations in the Carpathians towards the Carpathian Civil Society Platform¹. The survey was a tool to understand how civil society actors see the added value of cross-border cooperation, what organizational and personal challenges they face in cross-border cooperation, and what organizational and personal competencies they need to improve to strengthen the impact of their activities at local and interregional levels. The other aim of the survey was to involve civil society organizations in co-designing the future of the Platform and in defining its activities. (83 organizations participated in the survey.)

The results of the survey and the subsequent local workshops demonstrated that the Platform has its *raison d'être* and is seen by CSOs as an important and niche mezzo-level institution in the Carpathian Euroregion. The survey also showed that there is a general demand from CSOs for the Platform to help them in various ways to build the

¹ See attachment for the detailed summary of the survey



organizational and personal capacity of their organizations to achieve their goals, mobilize citizens, and serve their communities more effectively.

Needs are outlined in the following areas:

First, many organizations are thinking about the possibilities of cross-border cooperation, but they do not know how to get started and find it difficult to find the right and reliable project partner on the other side of the border. Therefore, there is a common need to share experiences of cross-border cooperation and other projects implemented by civil society organizations to learn from each other.

Second, financial support opportunities for small-scale cross-border cooperation are limited, and those available to CSOs often do not match real needs, are too large and bureaucratic for smaller organizations that are not able to pre-finance cross-border cooperation projects, and do not have sufficient staff capacity to meet bureaucratic requirements.

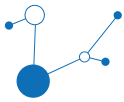
Third, there is a high demand for exchanging good practices, finding partners for cross-border cooperation, developing joined projects, exchange of information on funding and partnership opportunities, and organizing networking events at local and inter-regional levels.

Fourth, there is a demand for organizational capacity building and personal development. This includes strategic thinking, improving the communication of the organizations (promotion, PR, “marketing”), improving the skill for proposal writing, and service for personal professional development (mentoring, coaching, etc.)

- *The Carpathian Foundation experiences promoting cross-border cooperation and civil society development in the Carpathian Euroregion*

The Carpathian Foundation since its creation in 1995 has extensive experience in providing technical and financial support to local communities and civil society organizations, promoting cross-border cooperation, and developing civil societies in

"The Hungarian partner's participation in the project is co-financed by the Hungarian State." CE0100083



the Carpathian Euroregion. These field experiences and continuous dialogue with local stakeholders have grounded the initiative in creating the Platform.

➤ *Experiences of the Carpathian Civil Society Platform so far*

The Carpathian Civil Society Platform initiated by the Carpathian Foundation-Hungary and its partners from Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Ukraine was established in 2018 through an intensive dialogue with CSOs and other stakeholders.

Since its creation:

- Three inter-regional meetings were organized to share experiences, and good practices and identify potential cross-border projects among CSOs
- Local networks (“hublets”) have been established in the sub-regions of the Carpathians
- Initiated the creation of a virtual platform (a knowledge hub) to share news, and information, exchange ideas, and find partners for joint activities and projects
- Capacity building programs for CSOs were organized on topics identified by the members of the “hublets”
- Micro-grant program has been launched to provide core funding for CSOs to support their small-scale projects and initiatives
- Social Innovation Award to make visible CSOs’ efforts responding to local challenges
- Dissemination of social innovation practices through the announcement of the Carpathian Social Innovation Award

These achievements and experiences gained form a solid basis for the renewal and further development of the Carpathian Civil Society Platform.

Strategic directions

The Strategy is based on the belief that robust civil societies and the innovative energies they unleash can contribute to the renewing of existing transnational governance structures of cooperation from the bottom, as well as the emergence of new cooperation structures and reinforce citizen participation in decision-making processes at local,

"The Hungarian partner's participation in the project is co-financed by the Hungarian State." CE0100083



regional, and inter-regional levels. It also aims to position CSOs as change-makers in the long term.

The main strategic goals are:

- To make the Carpathian Civil Society Platform a self-propelling organization by designing its organizational structure and strengthening the ownership of the network's members encouraging their self-activity to create cross-border thematic working groups, pop-up hubs, etc.
- To extend the reach of the network by communicating with local governments of small communities and local businesses to broaden the Platform's stakeholder base, provide a space for dialogue among local actors, and strengthen cross-sectoral cooperation.
- To build strategic partnerships with key stakeholders such as the Carpathian Convention and other international organizations covering a specific segment of the Carpathians, to bring mainstream policymakers closer to the local level and vice versa. Close cooperation with the Association of the Carpathian Euroregion is essential, including joint programs such as the exploration of local cultural heritage as a driver of tourism and local economic development, contribution to the creation of the cross-border functional area, and the development of the mechanism of the participation of civil society in cross-border governance.
- To secure financial resources by cultivating existing donor relationships and identifying new ones to support the overall activities of the Platform, including organizing inter-regional (Platform) meetings, supporting capacity-building programs, the Social Innovation Award, and launching a micro-grant scheme to support CSO initiatives.
- To systematically strengthen the capacity of young emerging and committed change-makers and social entrepreneurs by establishing the Carpathian Leadership Academy (CARLA) to provide knowledge transfer, and regular peer learning

"The Hungarian partner's participation in the project is co-financed by the Hungarian State." CE0100083



opportunities, serve their personal development, and contribute to strengthening the Carpathian identity.

- To empower young people by involving them in participatory decision and policy-making processes based on intergenerational learning methods.

Actions Plan

The action plan below sets out the steps needed to achieve the short- and long-term strategic objectives described above and takes into consideration the capacity of the organizations, which are behind the Platform and resources available for the next two years.

1. To renew the existing online platform, whose original purpose was to disseminate information on events organized by platform members, funding opportunities, and partner search, and to make it available in the five spoken languages of the Carpathians by using AI technology.

Timeline: April - December, 2024

Responsible: Carpathian Foundation-Hungary with partners

2. To elaborate a paper on the organizational structure of the Platform and discuss it at the next interregional meeting held in 2025.

Timeline: April - October, 2025

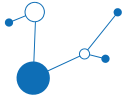
Responsible: Carpathian Foundation-Hungary

3. To organize systematic thematic capacity-building trainings in each Carpathian sub-region on common issues and, at the same time, allow Platform members to initiate thematic workshops on cross-cutting issues with cross-border relevance.

Timeline: May 2024 - ongoing till the end of 2025 and first half of 2026

Responsible: Carpathian Foundation-Hungary and partners

"The Hungarian partner's participation in the project is co-financed by the Hungarian State." CE0100083



4. To establish a grant-making mechanism to provide micro-grants (core funding) for small-scale cross-border cooperation projects and joint actions or events initiated by CSOs.

Timeline: May 2024 - ongoing till the end of 2025 and first half of 2026

Responsible: Carpathian Foundation-Hungary and partners

5. To explore the possibility of establishing a Carpathian Leadership Academy (CARLA) that would serve the personal development of young emerging CSO leaders, entrepreneurs, and local government officials.

Timelines: December 2024 for the concept note and March 2025 for the detailed feasibility study

Responsible: Carpathian Foundation-Hungary and partners

6. To organize the interregional summer camp with the participation of CSOs working with young people and discussion of the Platform's strategic directions and the action plan

Timeline: June - August, 2025

Responsible: Carpathian Foundation-Hungary and partners.

7. To launch the next round of the Carpathian Social Innovation Award

Timeline: January, 2025

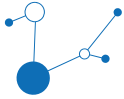
Responsible: Carpathian Foundation-Hungary and partners

8. To collect best practices on citizen involvement in decision-making, and other citizens' mobilization tools like community budgeting, community foundations, youth banks, etc. - dissemination of best practices

Timeline: May 2024 - ongoing till the end of 2025 and first half of 2026

Responsible: Carpathian Foundation-Hungary and partners

"The Hungarian partner's participation in the project is co-financed by the Hungarian State." CE0100083



9. Partnership-building with stakeholders of other sectors (business and public) - events organized for that purposes

Timeline: May 2024 - ongoing till the end of 2025 and first half of 2026

Responsible: Carpathian Foundation-Hungary and partners

Monitoring and evaluation

The evaluation of the Strategy and Action Plan is based on the regular monitoring of each measurable indicator described in the Action Plan. In addition, we collect and analyze feedback from the main stakeholders of the process, and the participants of the events organized within the framework of the Platform.

The main indicators for Monitoring and Evaluation are the following:

- a renewed Virtual Platform
- a discussion paper on the future organizational structure of the Platform
- number of capacity building trainings conducted
- fund for supporting the collaborating CSOs
- a feasibility study on the Carpathian Leadership Academy
- organization of the summer camp
- the awardees of the next round of the Carpathian Social Innovation Award
- the collected and disseminated best practices on citizen involvement in decision-making

"The Hungarian partner's participation in the project is co-financed by the Hungarian State." CE0100083



Risks and contingencies

While implementing the Action Plan the following risks and contingency measures to mitigate its impact have been identified:

- Passivity of the members of the Platform - medium probability and high impact. Measure: strengthening ownership of the Platform through ongoing communication with its members, pro-activity, and being open to their initiatives.
- Workload of the staff of the Carpathian Foundation and its partner organizations implementing the Action Plan - medium probability and high impact. Measures: better planning and coordination.
- Financial resources have the highest impact on the project's implementation. The funding resources are more or less secured to cover the implementation of the Action Plan (short-term) until the end of the project period, thus the risk is low but for the implementation of the strategy (long term) the risk to secure funding is high. Measures: donor's cultivation, broaden donor base, make visible the Platform, and build a strategic partnership.

Review and Adjustment

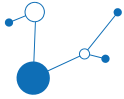
This Action Plan will be reviewed by the members of the Carpathian Civil Society Platform based on the monitoring and evaluation plan every 6 months from its approval and will be adjusted whenever needed.

Communication Plan

The Action Plan will be broadly communicated by the Carpathian Foundation-Hungary and its partners

- to CSOs by the following means: emails, Facebook page, webpage

"The Hungarian partner's participation in the project is co-financed by the Hungarian State." CE0100083



- to other stakeholders by the following means: emails, Facebook page, webpage, regular online ZOOM meetings
- to press, media by the following means: direct mails

We will publish a brochure as to provide the visibility of civil society organizations and the Platform.

This action plan has been prepared with the intensive support and deep engagement of civil society organizations taking part in the Carpathian Civil Society Platform collaboration from Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Ukraine.

"The Hungarian partner's participation in the project is co-financed by the Hungarian State." CE0100083