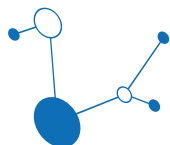


D.3.2.2

Transnational structures for long-term cooperation in mountain areas

Improved structure for cooperation of civil society organizations (CSOs) from the Carpathian region.





Solution 3.2.2.

Improved structure for cooperation of civil society organizations (CSOs) from the Carpathian region.

Strengthened framework for fostering collaboration among civil society organizations (CSOs) in the Carpathian region.

1. Solution Introduction

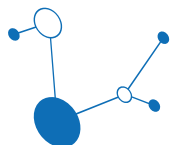
The Carpathian Euroregion is marked by persistent socioeconomic underdevelopment, largely due to its mountainous, peripheral geography and complex inter-state history. Growing disparities between national economic centers and border regions undermine cohesion, reflected in rising poverty, youth outmigration and brain drain. The absence of systemic solutions for harnessing cross-border development potential—such as integrated strategies, common institutions and shared resources—further constrains growth. Community-driven initiatives and cross-sector cooperation remain weak and fragmented.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) across the Carpathians face additional structural barriers, including restrictive political, legal and financial conditions. CSOs serving disadvantaged groups in remote rural and mountain areas often lack organizational capacity, access to information and sustainable funding. Despite strong local commitment, many operate in isolation without a transnational support network, enabling environment or institutional backing, limiting their ability to scale impact and contribute effectively to regional development.

Guided by a common vision shared by Carpathian CSOs to strengthen a vibrant civil society, the Carpathian Civil Society Platform is an instrument (solution) to enhance social cohesion and promote citizen participation in policy and decision-making processes by networking and mobilizing civil society actors at the local, subregional, and transnational levels. and contribute to strengthening and broadening cross-border cooperation between CSOs.

From the outset of the project implementation, the Platform has been envisioned as a long-lasting, self-propelling transnational organization by enhancing its internal capacity and building ownership among its stakeholders. Internal capacity and ownership had been developed through a set of interconnected and complementary key actions, including:

1. Regular physical Platform meetings that provide opportunities for CSOs to share experiences, build partnerships, and plan joint projects.
2. Creating a virtual (digital platform) to help CSOs find partners for joint cross-border cooperation projects and funding opportunities.
3. Organization of local workshops addressing the organizational capacity of CSOs and networking local CSOs around local focal points in each Carpathian subregion.
4. Launching grant programs to support small-scale cross-border cooperation initiatives addressing the financial needs of CSOs
5. Introducing the Social Innovation Award to recognize CSOs' solutions to local challenges.



In terms of institutional development, CF, together with its local partners, developed and introduced operational guidelines for the Platform (mode of operation), aiming to gradually shift the loose transnational network of CSOs into a structured, sustainable, and self-propelling organization.

All these actions, co-designed with CSOs, strengthened the ownership and common identity of the Platform.

To ensure the long-term sustainability of the Platform and its complementary activities, it is vital to cultivate current donors and broaden the donor base by involving new donors and institutional partners. Besides, a consolidated Platform can increase the absorption and leverage capacity of CSOs.

2. Target Groups

The primary target group for this solution is mainly grassroots civil society organizations. At the same time, CSOs operate within a well-defined local context and regularly interact with local governments; thus, through the Platform, local governments are the secondary target group, as they mostly share the same goal with CSOs: the well-being of the local citizens, which requires cooperation between CSOs and local governments. With a strengthened capacity, the Platform could eventually reach transnational policy-makers.

The creation of the Platform is a process based on strict participatory principles, utilizing various planning tools to define the preparatory steps that led to the solution.

⇒ The sources of the main inputs from the TG:

At the outset of the project, a survey was conducted to assess the needs of CSOs regarding the Platform a) to understand how civil society actors perceive the added value of cross-border cooperation, b) what organizational and personal challenges they encounter in cross-border cooperation, c) what are the organizational and personal competencies they need to enhance the impact of their activities both locally and across regions. Furthermore, the survey served as a tool for co-designing the Platform's strategy with CSOs, defining its objectives, and the activities for the pilot actions. (83 organizations participated in the survey).

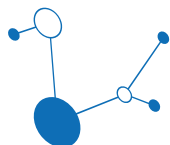
⇒ Needs are outlined in the following areas:

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 identify partners on the other side of the border.

Second, financial support opportunities for small-scale cross-border cooperation are limited. The funding available to CSOs often does not align with their actual needs and/or is too large and bureaucratic for CSOs that are unable to pre-finance projects and lack the staff capacity and skills to meet bureaucratic requirements.

Third, there is a significant demand for sharing good practices, finding partners for cross-border cooperation, developing joint projects, exchanging information on funding and partnership opportunities, and organizing networking events at local and transnational levels.

Fourth, there is a demand for organizational capacity building and personal development. This includes strategic thinking, improving the organization's communication, enhancing the skills for proposal writing, financing, and service for individual professional development (such as mentoring, coaching, etc.).



Another survey was conducted to define the function and the structure of the virtual (digital) Platform

Besides surveys, each element of the pilot activity was discussed by the stakeholders' group (local focal points) and the members of the Platform during its annual meetings.

There was an intensive exchange of experiences with other Consortium members during the partners' meetings; however, it has not yet led to a formal partnership, though the opportunity is there. In the case of CF, for example, there is a clear potential for collaboration with the ACE. This could involve joint efforts to establish partnerships between LGs and CSOs, as well as working together to develop an integrated strategy for the Carpathian Euroregion. A partnership agreement with ACE is under preparation.

There is a strong collaboration with EURAC and ISIG, which provided mentoring and helped us to stay within the contextual framework of the CM project.

3. Methods/Tools: The solution/s

The solution consists of the following tangible outcomes.

The establishment of the Platform has significantly strengthened transnational cooperation among CSOs from Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine. This is reflected in the consistently high participation at annual Platform meetings, attended by around 80 CSOs, which provide a forum for experience-sharing, peer learning, idea exchange and the initiation of joint actions.

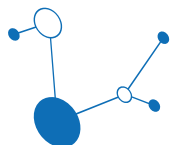
To advance the transition toward a self-sustaining organization, the organisational structure and operational guidelines of the Platform were jointly prepared and discussed with stakeholders. A key milestone was the Summer Camp in July 2025, where the Council of the Platform was formally elected and introduced as a new governing body. The Council plays a central role in shaping governance, decision-making and operational processes, while also serving as an advisory body to the Carpathian Foundation during the transition phase. In addition, it ensures linkages with local subregional networks ("hublets"), thereby embedding the Platform within grassroots structures and reinforcing its long-term sustainability.

According to the organizational structure, Platform members can establish the following two structures:

Type of Structure	Description	Examples / Purpose
Transnational (inter-regional) working groups	Permanent groups organized around specific fields of work and interests.	Youth, Roma, refugees, culture, community development, environment, etc.
Pop-up hubs	Ad hoc groups created to address crosscutting, regionally relevant strategic and policy issues.	Flexible forums for dialogue, joint problem-solving, and policy input.

The virtual Platform complements the **once-a-year in-person Platform meetings**, providing a continuous tool for searching for partnerships, making connections, and sharing relevant information with CSOs, such as funding opportunities and events. Currently, over sixty organizations are registered and use the virtual Platform, which also functions as a useful database of CSOs and NGOs.

The **Social Innovation Award** aims to recognize and disseminate innovative solutions of CSOs to local socio-economic challenges. It showcases successful grassroots initiatives that improve community well-being. The



awarded initiatives will be published and shared throughout the region to inspire other organizations to adopt them in their own context. Since its launch, over 40 CSOs have applied for the award.

Workshops, reflecting the competency and skills needed by CSOs to strengthen their organizational capacity. The topics of the local workshops, which differ from subregion to subregion, were identified by local CSOs and conducted by the local focal points, involving experts from other NGOs. Besides knowledge transfer, the workshops contributed to strengthening local networks (“hublet”), which are the main building blocks for the Platform. Through the experience gained from workshops, CF identified a significant need to strengthen knowledge, competencies, and skills, as well as the individual development of CSOs' leaders. To address this need, CF prepared a concept note for the transnational **Carpathian Leadership Academy (CARLA)**. This initiative will be a comprehensive educational program focusing on young emerging leaders.

In response to the financial needs of CSOs, CF has launched a **micro-grant program, supporting small-scale projects and raising funds from other sources.**

The grant program focuses on three key areas and elements:

Focus Area	Description	Key Elements
a) People-to-people cross-border cooperation	Strengthening connections between communities through direct interaction.	Study trips, exchanges, joint small-scale events.
b) In-country CSO development	Building the capacity of national CSOs through collaborative initiatives.	Cooperation among 2-3 CSOs, strong focus on youth engagement and mobilization.
c) Cross-border partnerships with Ukrainian CSOs	Enhancing cooperation with non-EU Ukraine by leveraging EU partners' experience.	Partnerships with CSOs along the border, sharing EU pre-accession knowledge and practices.

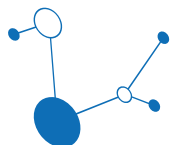
The topics of the grant funds are based on CSOs' inputs and project ideas, which were generated during the Platform meetings. The grant funds have been secured for this year and the next.

The structured Platform, under the leadership of its Council, will remain a permanent and adaptable transnational network of CSO cooperation beyond the CM project's duration. Tools developed during the pilot phase, such as the digital platform, the Social Innovation Award and capacity-building activities, are designed for integration into the post-project phase and can be sustained through the self-propelling Platform, supported by technical assistance from CF and its local NGO partners. Funding for the grant-making programme is already secured for the current and following year. The launch of CARLA, however, will depend on future fundraising outcomes and the successful engagement of institutional partners, including think tanks, universities, local and regional governments and businesses from across the Carpathian Euroregion, a process that requires additional time and coordinated effort.

A transnational structure for long-term cooperation among grassroots CSOs and a bottom-up approach is rare; no similar model exists, making this solution innovative and relevant for other mountain regions.

Lessons learned from the pilot confirmed that

- Active and non-formal involvement of stakeholders is the key to success
- They can be involved if they benefit from being involved
- Internalization of the project by stakeholders is another key factor
- They should not only feel the ownership, but also practice it
- Bottom-up approach is crucial and must be rooted in real needs



- Change mindset through cooperative actions

The solution will be tested in the Carpathian Euroregion, which consists of the bordering regions of Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Ukraine. This will be done through the committed focal points (partner NGOS) in each subregion: Eger, Hungary; Rzeszów, Poland; Sighetu Marmatiei, Romania; Bardejov, Slovakia, and Uzhhorod, Ukraine. A cooperation agreement will be signed with these organizations at the end of the project. Additionally, the solution could be scaled in collaboration with ACE, and this will also be formalized and confirmed through a cooperation agreement.

The Platform has proven its *raison d'être*, which ensures the organizational framework for long-term cooperation in mountain areas.

4. Added Value & Uptake Potential

All CF's NGO partners that serve as local focal points in each of the five Carpathian subregions, committed to using the Platform beyond the project duration for three reasons:

1. They are members of the Platform's Council,
2. They are the focal points of the CF project and are aware of the added value of cross-border partnership.
3. Dealing with CSOs and local communities is their everyday routine.

They participate in the monthly online partner meetings that coordinate the activity of the pilot actions. They actively engage in the implementation process by conducting surveys, translating documents, evaluating SIA applications, etc.), and discussing Platform-related documents such as mode of operation, CARLA, etc. They organize the participation of CSOs in the face-to-face annual Platform meeting, foster relationships, and exchange among involved partners, and ensure ongoing CSOs involvement and responsiveness to their needs.

Through cooperation with ACE, which engages with local and regional authorities and institutions in the Carpathian Euroregion, CF's solution, i.e., the role of CSOs in cross-border cooperation and policy-making, could potentially be integrated into regional development policies.

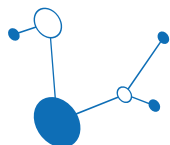
The EU-level civil strategy is under preparation and will be approved soon. This is an opportunity for the Platform to assist Carpathian CSOs in advocacy efforts and raise funds directly from the EU civil fund, and to distribute grants to CSOs in the region. This is the potential for the Platform to grow into an umbrella organization.

5. Risk Management Plan

1. Risk: Weak horizontal (peer-to-peer) networks

Impact: Medium/High

Mitigation Measure: Organize CSOs into interest-based groups (e.g., youth engagement, green transitions, rural entrepreneurship). Extend your Summer Camp into seasonal thematic meetups (quarterly virtual hubs).



2. Risk: the needs of the Platform and its activities generated by the project are greater than the available financial resources.

Impact: Medium/High

Mitigation strategy: expand donor base and engage institutional stakeholders, while enhancing the visibility of the Platform at local, regional, national, transnational, and EU levels. Fundraising for its members who are otherwise not able to raise funds for their activities.

3. Risk: maintaining the interest and engagement of stakeholders (CSOs) in the operation of the Platform.

Impact: low

Mitigation strategy: strengthen the internal organizational capacity and the structure of the Platform. Continue complementary activities (annual meetings, trainings, grant programs)

4. Risk: related to logistics, equipment, and resource allocation that may affect the implementation of the project

Impact: Low/Medium

Mitigation: better planning and finding synergies.

6. Post-Project Output Ownership & Durability Checklist

CF and its partner NGOs assume long-term responsibility for supporting the structured Platform by providing continuous technical assistance. A peer-mentorship programme is already in place, where experienced NGOs mentor smaller organizations in a mutual learning framework through workshops and exchanges. The Council is considering, though has not yet decided, the introduction of a symbolic membership fee as a means to strengthen stakeholder ownership and commitment.

In parallel, efforts are directed toward formalizing cooperation with the Carpathian Convention, the only intergovernmental body covering the entire region and directly linked to national governments, to reinforce institutional legitimacy and ensure alignment with broader regional frameworks.