

# BUILDING RESILIENCE THROUGH PARTICIPATION

LESSONS FROM THE CIVIL  
SOCIETY IN EASTERN EUROPE  
AND THE WESTERN BALKANS

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SUMMARY

In times of multiple crises that affect the sustainable development agenda, resilience has become a buzzword in the international development community. While civil society has been involved in bottom-up resilience building in the global South for quite some time, it is crucial to define the risks that may compromise the underlying values of civil society organisations (CSOs) such as human rights, inclusion, equality and sustainability. Based on the best practices of CSOs from

the Eastern Neighbourhood of the European Union (EU) and the Western Balkans, this policy paper identifies the most efficient ways for the donors to support resilience building. Since resilience building is a long-term process, donors and the European institutions particularly, should commit to long-term resilience-building programmes, mobilise the use of local knowledge and thus contribute to addressing the root causes of poverty, inequality, insecurity and unsustainability.

## INTRODUCTION: THE RISE OF RESILIENCE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE PERMACRISIS

The COVID-19 pandemic led to an unprecedented rise in global poverty and inequality <sup>↗ LINK</sup>. It also contributed to the worldwide trend of deteriorating democracy and the shrinking civic space <sup>↗ LINK</sup>. Russia's invasion of Ukraine further worsened inflation, and reduced food and energy security; it hit the global economy at large and added further obstacles to recovery and poverty alleviation worldwide <sup>↗ LINK</sup>. This contributes to political instability and insecurity in the European Union's (EU) neighbourhood and Africa, and it may also delay mitigation of and adaptation to climate change.

With the multiplying crises, the ability of societies to cope with stresses and shocks has become an objective on its own. Resilience, including in the context of the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, is now a buzzword <sup>↗ LINK</sup>. Yet, there is a task ahead of civil society organisations (CSOs): to find recipes for building bottom-up resilience while not compromising their role in promoting human rights and environmental sustainability.

The Latin origins of the term resilience suggest the desirable idea of societies 'springing back' in reaction to a crisis. However, this idea may conflict with the deep change and transformation of societies required to achieve sustainable living conditions. Resilience building that would prevent further crises by tackling the root causes of poverty and insecurity, is therefore a long-term process of positive societal change – which should be at the core of development efforts.

## BEHIND THE BUZZWORD: THE RISKS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Over the last decade, the very conceptualisation of risk has transformed; it has transcended from the local to the global, and crises are now perceived to be multidimensional, complex and multi-faceted in nature to the extent that they are now understood as 'endemic', and that the only remaining solution is to become resilient to them <sup>↗ LINK</sup>. As proposed by state and international actors, the concept of resilience constitutes a new form of *governance*, a form that emphasises uncertainty and encourages us to live with risk rather than eliminating it <sup>↗ LINK</sup>.

With its background in systems theory, the term is being increasingly deployed in sustainable development by governments and international organisations which perceive resilience to be critical in progressing towards and addressing the SDGs. Despite its widespread use, however, scholars have criticised its translation from the natural to the social world as being ill-defined and some have even argued that its ambiguity has rendered the concept 'almost meaningless' <sup>↗ LINK</sup>.

Interventions in the name of resilience rarely address the root causes of why particular societies face certain shocks, and consider these crises to be inevitable. Externally defined resilience-building interventions often exclude the voices of local and civil society actors, whilst simultaneously placing the responsibility for resilience-building onto those already in marginal positions <sup>↗ LINK</sup>.

These top-down interventions may act to reinforce and promote neoliberal concepts, removing responsibility from the state and placing emphasis on the individual, and thus perpetuating the structural causes of poverty, injustice, exclusion and unsustainability that many CSOs have been challenging for decades [↻ LINK](#). Consequently, neither resilience nor sustainable development can be achieved with a quick fix.

## MAKING RESILIENCE WORK THROUGH PARTICIPATION AND LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

The conceptual ambiguity of resilience, however, is a positive attribute in a way, as it can help to address some of the concerns by encouraging more diverse engagement and collaboration and thus fostering the inclusion of different perspectives and actors, including the CSOs [↻ LINK](#). As the definition and characteristics of a resilient system are something society decides upon, the inclusion and participation of a broad range of perspectives and actors is imperative.

Participation of a wide scope of actors, including civil society, through bottom-up participatory approaches, has been increasingly recognised as being crucial for building sustainable development and resilience by the academic community [↻ LINK](#). Many local communities and civil society actors have specific knowledge of how to relate and respond to changes in their particular local contexts [↻ LINK](#). These actors, women, men and children, are on the ‘front line’ of the crisis, and thus not only do they hold context-specific knowledge, but they should also be empowered in the resilience-building process as their actions will directly affect the system [↻ LINK](#).

The participation and inclusion of different actors, particularly those who are the most at risk and excluded from decision-making, can help address any potential power asymmetries within the resilience-building process and can ensure that the root causes of their vulnerabilities are voiced and recognised. A more diverse range of actors being involved in a ‘local community’ should not be something that is defined externally; rather this should be jointly defined to enable a wider range of possible ideas and solutions to be generated, and hence there would be a greater likelihood of sustainable resilience-building being achieved [↻ LINK](#).

## TRANSLATING THE EU’S BOTTOM-UP APPROACH TO RESILIENCE INTO A POLICY

Since resilience appeared in the EU’s documents around 2012, it has become a ‘*new compass*’ within EU policy circles [↻ LINK](#). The 2016 *European Union Global Strategy* (EUGS) broadened the concept of resilience to encompass ‘*all individuals and the whole of society*’, and defined resilience as ‘*the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises*’ [↻ LINK](#). As many of the crises challenging the EU over the last

decade have emerged from outside its borders, the focus has also shifted from building resilience within its member states to supporting resilience-building in its neighbourhood [LINK](#).

As outlined in the 2016 EUGS, the EU rightly understands resilience as being context-specific, and requiring *'tailor-made'* solutions. The EUGS also seems to recognise the importance of communities in resilience-building, emphasising the importance of partnering with civil society actors to build resilience; as stated in the EUGS, *'positive change can only be home-grown'* [LINK](#). Thus on paper, the EU's approach to resilience represents an opportunity to shift EU governance from a top-down to a more bottom-up mode of governance, while refocusing the attention on the role of *'the local'* [LINK](#).

This approach to resilience enables the EU to 'govern at a distance' by placing on affected *'states and societies'* the responsibility for building *their own* resilience. Yet the interests of states often radically differ from those of societies and there is a considerable risk that under geopolitical pressure, the EU may tend to identify sectors for intervention and specific objectives for each country at the national level, and to do so in 'partnership' with frequently non-democratic governments. This may lead to strengthening authoritarian regimes and further reducing the civil society space in the name of resilience building.

## BUILDING LONG-TERM CIVIL SOCIETY PARTNERSHIPS THROUGH SUB-GRANTING

Resilience building at the local level needs to be long-term and inclusive, and so must be the corresponding support by the donors. The experience of *People in Need*, the largest humanitarian and development non-governmental organisation in Central and Eastern Europe, with framework contracts with the European Commission (EC), makes a case for the model of EU-based CSOs as providers of subgrants to CSOs in partner countries.

In the Eastern Neighbourhood of the EU, the partnership between like-minded organisations has allowed for supporting local CSOs on post-COVID and human rights issues directly, with more than two-thirds of the total framework contract budget in the form of subgrants provided by *People in Need*. These were supported by capacity building and skills development aimed especially at newly registered or unregistered CSOs and grassroots initiatives – including the development of skills necessary to gain independence from donor funding in the long term. This approach also allows for reaching local CSOs with an absorption capacity below the threshold considered by the EU's Delegations.

In Ukraine, more specifically, resilience building in a conflict situation and the close partnership with the local organisations since 2014 has also allowed *People in Need* to rely on the knowledge of the local CSOs and support them in preparing communication and distribution channels for responses to the large-scale military conflict considerably earlier than when the pending invasion was seriously considered as real by the institutional donors.

During the COVID-19 pandemic and following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, the EC has demonstrated its increased flexibility and swiftness. This newfound

flexibility encompasses the EC's willingness to adapt to the shifting priorities of CSOs and accommodate emerging needs, including those of human rights defenders in sensitive situations. The EC has also taken steps to counter the potential hindrance caused by short funding cycles by introducing a broader range of funding opportunities that encourage sustained collaboration with CSOs – at least in the Eastern Neighbourhood.

## BUILDING CIVIL SOCIETY NETWORKS TO MITIGATE DONORS' INCOHERENT POLICIES

Civil society is also vital in its role as a watchdog when donors – including the European Union – are a part of the problem and their incoherent activities undermine social and environmental rights in the partner countries. The Prague-based *CEE Bankwatch Network* operates in Central and Eastern Europe and focuses on mitigating the negative effects of projects funded or co-funded by the EU, and the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) particularly.

These projects are often non-transparent and prone to greenwashing, and their funds may be misused by the national authorities while many complaint mechanisms are lacking. This requires civil society to address policymakers as well as the public in the partner countries and the EU with the final objective to make the financial institutions responsible for upholding the space for CSOs as relevant actors in decision-making processes. The experience from Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans also underlines the crucial role that civil society has played there and the role it should play in the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine. Without participation, the heralded '*build back better*' approach would backslide into business as usual and a stagnating societal resilience.

*Arnika*, another Czech CSO, supports well-established non-governmental organisations working with local communities as well as loosely organized communities themselves in upholding their right to a clean environment in the Eastern Neighbourhood and beyond, as far as Thailand. It assists them with funding opportunities, media outreach, home-grown technology development, data collection, citizen science, legal tools and ways to address political representation.

Long-term support and flexible funding are also crucial with the closing of the civil society space and prosecution of environmental activists in Belarus and the occupied parts of Ukraine, among others. Sometimes, this support needs to be redirected to other countries when the activists relocate. Protection-wise, *Arnika* has also assisted in dealing with the violence against women engaged in protecting rivers in Bosnia and Herzegovina against the illegal construction of dams to produce hydropower.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The experience of CSOs active in the Eastern Neighbourhood countries and the Western Balkans suggests that building long-term partnerships with the civil society in partner countries is best done by CSOs that share similar values. Multi-year systems of sub-grants to local organisations are a particularly suitable tool for donors, as they enable them to support bottom-up resilience building in informal and changing settings. The incoherence of the EU's policies, however, leads to the situation in which a part of the support needs to be aimed at mitigating the negative impacts that the EU's policies created in the first place.

Ukraine is a noteworthy example of societal and grassroots resilience. The Russian invasion became a strong political impetus for the EC to increase the funding of local CSOs and make it more long-term and flexible, thus presenting a model to follow in other contexts and regions. The recent experience of the civil society has shown that principles for resilience building do not substantially differ from those for enhancing human rights and empowering the citizens of the partner countries as well as assisting their civil society in becoming financially independent of donors in the long term. In particular, the donors should:

- Promote resilience as a 'self-governing project' to prevent further crises rather than mitigating their impacts, and **provide sustained long-term support to CSOs** that would fill the gaps between humanitarian aid and development cooperation and increase the complementarity among the various providers of support to CSOs.
- **Allow the local communities to set priorities** and use local knowledge to find solutions to crises instead of requiring them to serve as service providers for meeting objectives that are pre-set by the donors.
- In line with an OECD DAC recommendation <sup>9</sup> [LINK](#), **increase the predictable and flexible core financial support to CSOs in partner countries** beyond project and programme funding, which should be accompanied by capacity building, including developing the countries' skills for their future financial independence.
- **Consider a minimal percentage of financial support to civil society** in the overall funding, including in the geographic instruments of the EU, as a measure to mitigate and prevent the negative effects of the donor's other policies.
- **Implement Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD) across all policy areas and at all levels** of European institutions, including financial institutions, to mitigate and prevent the intended and unintended negative effects of the EU's other policies.
- **Extend sub-granting so that it would reach smaller CSOs** that are informal and/or have limited absorption capacities.
- **Include CSOs in planning processes**, which should include programming in cooperation with them from the very start.

- Increase the coordination and complementarity between different donors in supporting CSOs and **involve national embassies in creating long-term partnerships** with civil society [↗ LINK](#).
- **Ensure that participation is mainstreamed into new and updated guidelines** for resilience building in development cooperation.

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