

EVALUATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION IN CO-OPERATION ACTIVITIES



Final Report
June 2023
DIO-EVA(2023)41

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Reference:
(2023)41

Acknowledgements

The Evaluation Division of the Directorate of Internal Oversight would like to express its gratitude to the many stakeholders who contributed their time and knowledge to inform this evaluation report.

Member state representatives and a wide range of entities provided valuable access to information and data throughout the evaluation and freely gave time and insights to help deepen our understanding of the Organisation.

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List of acronyms and abbreviations

Congress	Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe
CSO	Civil society organisation
DGA	Directorate General of Administration
DGI	Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law
DGII	Directorate General of Democracy and Human Dignity
DIO	Directorate of Internal Oversight
DPAER	Directorate of Political Affairs and External Relations
DPB	Directorate of Programme and Budget
DPC	Directorate of Programme Co-ordination
EU	European Union
GONGO	Government-organised non-governmental organisation
HRA/HRBA	Human rights approach/human rights-based approach
(I)NGO	(International) non-governmental organisation
IO	International organisation
IT	Information technology
KSP	Key Strategic Priority
MAE	Main Administrative Entity
ODGP	Office of the Directorate General of Programmes ¹
PACE	Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
PMM	Project Management Methodology
PO	Private Office of the Secretary General and the Deputy Secretary General
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SecCM	Secretariat of the Committee of Ministers

1. The ODGP – Office of the Directorate General of Programmes is renamed as the Directorate of Programme Co-ordination (DPC), with effect from 1 November 2022.



Executive summary

As part of its 2022 work programme, the Directorate of Internal Oversight (DIO) included an evaluation of civil society participation in co-operation activities. The evaluation was conducted to contribute to decision making in terms of the Organisation's efforts to strengthen civil society participation and to inform a specific strategic priority of the Secretary General.

Civil society constitutes an important element of the democratic process, and the Council of Europe encourages civil society involvement in the development and implementation of co-operation programmes, projects and activities. The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the current practice, its extensiveness, strengths and weaknesses of civil society participation in co-operation activities, including the extent to which the human rights approach is applied. The lessons learned and good practice examples found in this report should inform key decisions related to civil society participation in the work of the Council of Europe. The evaluation complements the previous evaluations, "Evaluation of the contribution of NGOs to standard setting and monitoring in the Council of Europe" and the "Evaluation of the Council of Europe's Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations".

Methodology

The evaluation team reviewed 15 strategic papers and 135 project documents, conducted 86 interviews and two focal groups involving a total of 120 representatives of the Council of Europe, donors, authorities and civil society organisations (CSOs). The team also conducted three surveys, inviting 1 825 staff and CSO representatives in total to respond. Some 797 responses were received (44%). Data were analysed through quantitative analysis, qualitative content analysis and comparative analysis, using coding to interpret responses. This analysis was then interpreted according to a theory-based framework using a theory of change and against an evaluation matrix.

Findings

The Council of Europe performs well in terms of how it uses civil society participation in co-operation activities to meet project objectives. CSOs have needs and expectations (see paragraph 53) which can go beyond project objectives, such as funding of their staff and operational costs, and alliances and political support for their positions, which the Council of Europe cannot meet. To address CSOs' unrealistic expectations, more communication on what civil society participation in co-operation activities means would be useful, with a clear

explanation of the role the Council of Europe plays, particularly where it contrasts with the high level of funding and political support provided by donors and other international organisations (IOs). Civil society participation in co-operation activities provides many opportunities to make extensive connections with national authorities and civil society within member states. These are excellent opportunities to contribute at the organisational level and not only within co-operation activities, but these opportunities are not always taken by the Council of Europe through its project teams. At the organisational level, the Council of Europe is strongly encouraged to strengthen civil society participation, most recently expressed in the Reykjavik Declaration.

The evaluation confirmed the findings of previous evaluations in terms of the challenges to sustain relationships with CSOs and to select the most pertinent CSOs to participate. The selection processes of CSOs for co-operation activities are considered to be fair and transparent, but there is room for improvement in engaging more diverse groups of CSOs. There is very limited adaptation of working procedures and processes to CSOs' situations, which effectively prevents some CSOs from participating in co-operation activities. The evaluation found that there is room for broader inclusion of civil society to ensure more diversity. This does not rule out accounting for the risks that civil society participation can sometimes bring in cases of political considerations and requirements of confidentiality.

The time available for project staff to allocate to this work is also a resource issue for civil society participation in co-operation activities. The favourable perspectives and comments revealed in the evaluation data confirm the skill and success with which project staff in the Council of Europe manage high pressure and workload to add transversal aspects of project management into their work. The Council of Europe relies on these individual competencies of project staff. For the integration of civil society participation in project management in more depth and breadth, there needs to be a more systematic approach, with organisational mechanisms in place that support and promote project teams' work to strengthen civil society participation in co-operation activities.

The Organisation is handling the politically sensitive relationships with national authorities very well and manages to connect civil society with governments even in polarised political contexts. As a result, co-operation activities are more attuned to citizens' diverse needs. Civil society's participation is also effective in strengthening project results and CSOs are provided with a good platform to contribute and influence authorities on better fulfilment of Council of Europe standards and conventions. Moreover, civil society participation in co-operation activities adds value to the gender mainstreaming and human rights approach of the Council of Europe because it provides concrete measures to implement these transversal approaches. However, the extent this occurs is limited to sectors where it is easiest to achieve, such as Roma and Traveller² rights and children's rights, and it is not systematic, neither in implementation nor in reporting of co-operation activities.

Conclusions

The main conclusions are the following:

- ▶ civil society participation in co-operation activities could contribute, in the words of the Reykjavik Declaration, "to further strengthening the work of the Organisation in the field" and to "further reinforcement of the Organisation's outreach to, and meaningful engagement with, civil society organisations";
- ▶ better communication is needed with CSOs, with room to empower civil society even more to better support organisational level goals of contributing to the fulfilment of, lobbying and advocating for, and monitoring the fulfilment of standards and conventions;
- ▶ the selection of CSOs is not as inclusive as it could be, nor does it lead to as great a diversity of CSOs as it could do;
- ▶ moreover, the working processes of the Council of Europe for CSOs to participate in co-operation activities act as a barrier to inclusive participation;
- ▶ civil society participation in co-operation activities very successfully brings civil society closer to public authorities and services, which in turn strengthens the focus on citizens as rights holders, on gender mainstreaming and on the human rights approach;

2. The term "Roma and Travellers" is used at the Council of Europe to encompass the wide diversity of the groups covered by the work of the Council of Europe in this field: on the one hand a) Roma, Sinti/Manush, Calé, Kaale, Romanichals, Boyash/Rudari; b) Balkan Egyptians (Egyptians and Ashkali); c) Eastern groups (Dom, Lom and Abdal); and, on the other hand, groups such as Travellers, Yenish, and the populations designated under the administrative term "Gens du voyage", as well as persons who identify themselves as Gypsies. The present is an explanatory footnote, not a definition of Roma and/or Travellers.

- ▶ civil society participation is effective when the broader aims of that participation are targeted, when there is an alliance of diverse CSOs, and when there is a more permanent basis of engagement beyond single projects;
- ▶ impact comes from ensuring civil society participation in co-operation activities is cumulative – over and beyond one project – and creates networks of diverse CSOs;
- ▶ the Council of Europe facilitator role in enabling productive working relationships between civil society and national authorities is unique and brings great added value;
- ▶ finally, civil society participation in co-operation activities naturally combines very well with the existing Project Management Methodology (PMM) and human rights approach and can be further integrated.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: The upcoming policy/strategy for civil society participation should include a section on civil society participation in co-operation activities. This should clarify how civil society participation in co-operation activities should contribute to the Organisation's overall policy/strategy for civil society participation and include concrete measures to fully benefit from the opportunities co-operation activities provide to connect with local and national civil society and strengthen civil society's role in contributing to the fulfilment of, lobbying and advocating for, and monitoring the fulfilment of standards and conventions. (High priority)

Recommendation 2: CSOs should be more informed on a regular basis on how they can be involved in Council of Europe work beyond projects (including making use of the specific section on co-operation activities of the policy/strategy for civil society participation once it is available) through concrete means such as newsletters, group e-mails, communiques, etc. (High priority)

Recommendation 3: The Directorate of Programme Co-ordination (DPC) should develop the stakeholder module of the PMM information technology (IT) tool to act as a CSO database to better collect and update information about civil society information in all the geographic areas in which co-operation activities are taking place. (High priority)

Recommendation 4: DPC should build Council of Europe project staff capacity to engage CSOs in co-operation activities and, in a wider sense than participation in individual projects, to build stronger connections with civil society and contribute to the Organisation's overall policy/strategy for civil society participation. This should include guidance on dealing with national authorities that are restrictive towards civil society. (High priority)

Recommendation 5: The Private Office of the Secretary General and the Deputy Secretary General, together with relevant Main Administrative Entities (MAEs), should explore alternative procedures that better enable a wider range of civil society participation, particularly those in precarious situations. These more flexible alternatives to existing procedures should encompass invitations, participant registration, translation and interpreting, travel and per diems, consultancy, and grants. (High priority)

Recommendation 6: DPC or MAEs responsible should include resources for support to civil society in all country and thematic action plans and programmes whenever possible, either through standalone projects or specific budgetary allocations across programmes. This funding would provide for concrete measures to be implemented in countries where there are external offices, more communication with CSOs, and greater analysis of civil society in countries where there are co-operation activities (see relevant complementary recommendations 2, 4, 7 and 8). (High priority)

Recommendation 7: DPC, together with MAEs, and involving external offices where relevant, should develop concrete measures to increase synergies among CSOs in countries where co-operation activities take place, and prioritise working with CSOs collectively rather than isolated CSOs/civil society experts. Such aims should be explicitly explained in the policy/strategy for civil society participation. (High priority)

Recommendation 8: DPC, together with MAEs, should integrate goals and indicators for civil society participation into individual project and programme design and include a section on civil society participation in co-operation activities in annual reports, including country action plan progress and final reports and evaluation reports. (High priority)

Recommendation 9: DPC, through its external offices, should meet with other international organisations and donors on a regular basis to exchange good practices on civil society participation in co-operation activities. These meetings should be used by the Council of Europe to emphasise its added value and unique approach to complement other approaches and harness support from the international organisations and donors. (Medium priority)



1. Introduction

1. The Council of Europe promotes human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Europe and beyond. One of its goals is to achieve a greater unity between its members by establishing common standards and carrying out co-operation activities in the field of human rights and fundamental freedoms.³
2. Civil society constitutes an important element of the democratic process. Civil society is invited to participate in and/or to co-organise activities, projects and events in the national implementation of the European Convention of Human Rights, children's rights, media and data protection, trafficking in human beings, anti-discrimination and inclusion, and violence against women, to name but a few.⁴
3. The 2023 Reykjavik Summit of the Council of Europe underlines the importance of civil society in its call for a review and further reinforcement of the Organisation's outreach to, and meaningful engagement with, civil society organisations and national human rights institutions.⁵
4. As stated in the 2020 [Strategic Framework of the Council of Europe](#),⁶ the Organisation prioritises supporting the role and diversity of civil society, including human rights defenders and national human rights institutions in member states. Besides general aspects of upholding the freedoms of assembly and association, as guaranteed under the European Convention on Human Rights, the Council of Europe also focuses on exploring the best possible ways to ensure better participation by civil society in its activities, including a stronger and more active role for its representatives in the activities of the statutory bodies.

3. Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)11 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the need to strengthen the protection and promotion of civil society space in Europe, available at https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=09000016808fd8b9.

4. Follow-up to the Helsinki decisions on civil society, Final Report SG/Inf(2022)13, available at <https://rm.coe.int/follow-up-to-the-helsinki-decisions-on-civil-society-implementation/1680a62b47>.

5. Reykjavik Declaration, May 2023, available at <https://rm.coe.int/4th-summit-of-heads-of-state-and-government-of-the-council-of-europe/1680ab40c1>.

6. Strategic Framework of the Council of Europe, SG/Inf(2020)34, 23 November 2020, available at <https://rm.coe.int/strategic-framework-of-the-council-of-europe/1680a07810>.

5. The 2019 ministerial conference in Helsinki resulted in the [Helsinki Declaration](#),⁷ which expressed deep concern over the trend of a shrinking civic space, not only for civil society actors, but also for democracy and stability in Europe. Strengthening the role and participation of civil society is one of the key ministerial-level decisions and contributes to Key Strategic Priority (KSP) 11 of the Council of Europe.

6. The Council of Europe is committed to linking its work to the United Nations' Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) both in its [Programme and Budget](#)⁸ and its Project Management Methodology (PMM).⁹ Civil society participation in Council of Europe co-operation activities contributes significantly to the SDGs, and the Council of Europe encourages civil society involvement in the development and implementation of co-operation programmes, projects and activities.¹⁰ For instance, this is especially the case, among many others, towards SDG 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels, with the Target 16.6: Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels.

7. The Directorate of Internal Oversight of the Council of Europe previously carried out various evaluations in relation to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the Organisation. In particular, the 2016 evaluation of the contribution of NGOs to standard setting and monitoring¹¹ examined civil society participation in standard setting and monitoring following revised codes and renewed debate in the Committee of Ministers in the form of a thematic debate.¹² The evaluation ensured a realistic and targeted scope by excluding co-operation (technical assistance), with a view to completing this aspect of civil society participation in this subsequent evaluation.¹³

8. As part of its 2022 work programme,¹⁴ the DIO included an evaluation of civil society participation in co-operation activities. The evaluation was carried out in order to contribute to decision making in terms of the Organisation's efforts to strengthen civil society participation and to inform a specific strategic priority of the Secretary General. It is an important factor for significant funding in projects and programmes and there is ample data relating to civil society participation in co-operation activities from the Organisation's portfolio of projects and programmes. The evaluation is expected to contribute to organisational learning in working with civil society, complementing the previous evaluations related to standard setting and monitoring and the Conference of INGOs.¹⁵

9. With this in mind, this evaluation is focused on assessing the role of civil society in the context of technical co-operation activities in member states, with a view to identifying ways to optimise civil society's involvement. It is a cross-cutting evaluation, which means that it focuses on the mainstreaming of civil society participation in co-operation activities rather than the thematic area of civil society and democracy.

7. Helsinki declaration, May 2019, available at https://search.coe.int/cm/pages/result_details.aspx?objectId=090000168094791d.

8. Programme and Budget 2022-2025, available at <http://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=0900001680a9663f>.

9. Council of Europe Project Management Methodology, ODGP 2016, available at <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=090000168064d4fb>.

10. Guidelines on civil society organisations' participation in co-operation activities, ODGP 2015, available at <https://rm.coe.int/1680656cef>.

11. Evaluation of the contribution of NGOs to standard setting and monitoring, 26 February 2016, available at <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=09000016806bdb52>.

12. Thematic debate "The Role and Functioning of Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) in the Council of Europe" 3 June 2014, available at https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=09000016805c6206.

13. As the third side of the dynamic triangle of the Council of Europe: standard setting, monitoring and co-operation.

14. Work Programme 2022-2023 of the Directorate of Internal Oversight, GR-PBA (2022).

15. Evaluation of the Conference of INGOs, available at <https://rm.coe.int/dio-2021-34-conf-ofingos-report-en/1680a2c2c8>.



2. Civil society's role and participation in co-operation activities

2.1 Civil society participation in the Council of Europe

10. The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, in its Decision "Shared responsibility for democratic security in Europe: the need to strengthen the protection and promotion of civil society space in Europe" reached at its 129th Session, agreed to:

- ▶ examine further options for strengthening the role and meaningful participation of civil society organisations and national human rights institutions in the Council of Europe, with a view to increasing the Organisation's openness and transparency towards civil society, including access to information, activities and events;
- ▶ further strengthen the Organisation's mechanisms for the protection of human rights defenders, including the Private Office of the Secretary General and the Deputy Secretary General's procedure on human rights defenders;
- ▶ invite the Secretary General to explore the possibilities of inviting the relevant human rights NGOs to a regular exchange, with a view to further enhancing co-operation between civil society and the Council of Europe and to enriching the discussions of the Committee of Ministers and other Council of Europe bodies.¹⁶

16. 129th Session of the Committee of Ministers, available at https://search.coe.int/cm/pages/result_details.aspx?objectid=090000168094787f.

11. In her 2020 follow-up to the Helsinki decisions on civil society, the Secretary General of the Council of Europe made a series of proposals on the implementation of the decisions adopted at the 129th Session of the Committee of Ministers in 2019.¹⁷ The proposals provided a very good impetus for action to protect and encourage healthy, robust and diverse civil societies and enhance their interaction with the Council of Europe. Furthermore, the Secretary General introduced a Strategic Framework with the priorities that should represent the core of the Organisation's many activities over the four-year period 2020-24, reflected in its Programme and Budget.

12. The Council of Europe's Key Strategic Priority 11 is "Supporting the role and diversity of civil society, including human rights defenders, as well as national human rights institutions in member states. Besides general aspects of upholding the freedoms of assembly and association, as guaranteed under the European Convention on Human Rights, additional focus will be applied to exploring the best possible ways to ensure better participation by civil society in the activities of the Council of Europe, including a stronger and more active role for its representatives in the activities of our statutory bodies. This will require decisions by the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly respectively."

13. The adoption of these decisions is aimed at ensuring better participation for civil society in the activities of the Council of Europe. This includes a stronger and more active role for representatives of civil society in the activities of the statutory bodies, and thus requires necessary decisions by the Committee of Ministers and the Parliamentary Assembly respectively. The Secretary General reported to the Committee of Ministers on the progress towards these decisions in the final report on the follow-up to the Helsinki decisions on civil society.¹⁸

2.2 Civil society participation in co-operation activities

14. The nature of civil society participation in co-operation activities is determined by the Council of Europe's PMM. The latest version of the PMM was launched in 2016 and includes the human rights approach (HRA) as one of four guiding principles, with the principle of ensuring Council of Europe strategy and values being one of the others. At the same time, guidance specifically relating to civil society participation in co-operation activities dates to 2015 and has not been updated since then.

15. The guidance calls for civil society involvement in the planning and implementation of projects, for inclusion in project governance arrangements such as steering committees and for civil society perspectives to be included in the evaluation of projects. This comprehensive participation is underlined by the PMM and more recent guidance on the HRA.

16. The Council of Europe HRA targets equality and non-discrimination, participation and inclusion, and transparency and accountability, with the role of civil society prominently stated as a means to achieve these targets. At the same time, the PMM's other guiding principle indicates that co-operation activities should contribute to Council of Europe strategy and values, which, as the Helsinki and Reykjavik declarations show, have increasingly focused on civil society participation.

17. Already back in 2014, in a paper on "The role and functioning of non-governmental organisations in the Council of Europe", the Organisation provided a mapping of interaction with national and international NGOs.

Figure 1: Human rights approach in PMM

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF PMM

HUMAN RIGHTS APPROACH TO PROJECT MANAGEMENT

The Council of Europe is the leading human rights organisation in Europe, with considerable opportunity to draw on elements of its *acquis* in project management. This means incorporating cross-cutting dimensions such as gender mainstreaming (see link to existing guidance) and civil society participation (see link to existing guidance), providing the foundation for equality and diversity.

In practical terms, the human rights approach concerns all the stakeholders in a project, both highest-level decision makers and end beneficiaries. Management procedures should encourage and enhance participation, tackle discrimination and enable inclusion. A project has limited resources and therefore should target the areas in which it can make the most change and where there are cases of flagrant inequality or discrimination. Actors in projects are grouped according to their relationship with the state. Those that represent the state and its responsibility to protect and promote human rights should be grouped together as duty-bearers, and those that are entitled to those rights as rights-holders.

The human rights approach should target objectives and activities at the project initiation and planning phases: project design reflects different target groups' needs and activities' varying consequences on those groups. In the implementation and final evaluation phases measures should be taken to support under-represented participation and to disaggregate data to promote and measure equality and diversity.

17. Follow-up to the Helsinki decisions on civil society SG/Inf(2020)8, available at <https://rm.coe.int/09000016809e8f6f>.

18. Follow-up to the Helsinki decisions on civil society: implementation of the Secretary General's proposals - Final Report SG/Inf(2022)13E, available at <https://rm.coe.int/follow-up-to-the-helsinki-decisions-on-civil-society-implementation/1680a62b47>.

Some of the following examples illustrated the depth and variety of civil society contributions to the work of the Council of Europe at the time.¹⁹

- ▶ NGOs carry out training in the domestic application of the European Convention on Human Rights and the Revised Social Charter.
- ▶ NGOs implement community-led heritage projects for urban strategies for historic towns or the rehabilitation of common heritage of different communities as well as the trainings for election observation.
- ▶ NGOs are key actors in the implementation of the Confidence-building Measures Programmes and in the field of prison reform.
- ▶ At the European level, NGOs are driving forces for the implementation of the No Hate Speech movement activities such as the European Action Days against Homophobia – and Transphobia.
- ▶ NGOs have played an important role both at European and global level to promote the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (CETS 210), including through co-operation on targeted projects.
- ▶ NGOs have been very active in the implementation of the Disability Action Plan 2006-2015.

18. More recently, at the 131st Session of the Committee of Ministers in Hamburg, an information document prepared by the Secretariat on joint programmes between the Council of Europe and the EU in 2020 stated: “An increased inclusion of representatives of the civil society in Joint Programmes represents a real added value to interventions, and direct involvement of citizens in the action should be further promoted. CSOs and authorities at local level should be acting as a direct vector of communication to citizens, reflecting concrete changes brought by Joint Programmes to their daily lives.”²⁰

19. Thematic debate “The Role and Functioning of Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) in the Council of Europe” SG/Inf(2014)23, available at https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=09000016805c6206.

20. Joint Programmes between the Council of Europe and the European Union in 2020 – Information document, available at https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=0900001680a286b9.



3. Evaluation approach

3.1 Rationale and purpose of the evaluation

19. As a thematic evaluation, the purpose of this evaluation is to assess the current practice, its extensiveness, strengths and weaknesses of civil society participation in co-operation activities, including the extent to which the human rights approach is applied. The evaluation is formative, to better understand civil society participation in co-operation activities and identify the lessons that can be learned from civil society participation in co-operation activities. It involves an assessment of the effectiveness of the contribution of civil society to co-operation activities to enhance the impact of civil society participation in co-operation activities.

3.2 Evaluation scope

20. Co-operation activities in the context of this evaluation are defined as all projects implemented through extra-budgetary resources. The timeframe was set to include the projects that fell within the three most recent Programme and Budget cycles, 2018-19, 2020-21, and 2022-25. To narrow the focus, the evaluation did not attempt to assess the results of projects targeting civil society specifically, rather it included the cross-cutting elements of civil society participation in all types of projects, without focusing on civil society as a target group.

21. Council of Europe co-operation activities financed from extra-budgetary resources are co-ordinated by the Directorate of Programme Co-ordination. The DPC ensures the strategic programming of these activities and mobilises extra-budgetary resources for their implementation, while co-ordinating the Council of Europe's action with other organisations and agencies. It also plays an active part in identifying and implementing projects and in raising funds for their execution.²¹ This evaluation focuses on the co-operation activities financed by extra-budgetary resources and therefore exclusively co-ordinated by the DPC.

22. Co-operation activities financed by extra-budgetary resources have been implemented or are in planning in the form of over 840 projects²² since 2018, in more than 40 countries and regions, by over 60 different divisions/units of the Council of Europe.

23. The Council of Europe's Project Management Methodology²³ (in force since 2016) provides tools to ensure a human rights approach (see Figure 1), including gender mainstreaming, of which civil society participation is an essential component. These tools include guidance specifically on civil society participation²⁴ and respond to reporting requirements for all co-operation activities on the human rights approach. Prior to the Guidelines on civil society organisations' participation in co-operation activities, civil society participation in projects was managed according to the approaches of different parts of the Organisation, which varied both in methodology and extent.

3.3 Users of the evaluation

24. The users of the evaluation findings are primarily the Secretary General, the Directorate of Programme Co-ordination, the Directorate General of Human Rights and Rule of Law (DGI), the Directorate General of Democracy and Human Dignity (DGII), the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (Congress). The Secretary General intends to introduce a policy/strategy on civil society participation in the Council of Europe. The DPC co-ordinates the co-operation sector and its mandate includes the PMM, the human rights approach, and gender mainstreaming in co-operation activities. The DGI and the DGII comprise the most Council of Europe staff who are responsible for implementing co-operation activities. The evaluation is expected to be useful for the stakeholders and experts involved in co-operation activities. Other stakeholders include the senior management of the Council of Europe in addition to the Committee of Ministers. More widely, the evaluation is anticipated to be of interest to the Council of Europe member states' representatives and to civil society, along with other international organisations working in technical co-operation and donor organisations.

25. Evaluation stakeholders were represented in a reference group comprised of nominees from each entity:

- ▶ Private Office of the Secretary General and the Deputy Secretary General
- ▶ Secretariat of the Committee of Ministers (SecCM)
- ▶ Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
- ▶ Directorate of Programme and Budget (DPB)
- ▶ Directorate of Programme Co-ordination
- ▶ Directorate General Human Rights and Rule of Law
- ▶ Directorate General of Democracy and Human Dignity

3.4 Dissemination plan

26. The evaluation report is presented to the Committee of Ministers Rapporteur Group on Democracy along with the management response and action plan overseen by the Secretary General to address the recommendations made to the respective MAE. The report is published and has been shared with all stakeholders that participated in the evaluation process. There will be a follow-up of the management response and action plan for four years following the publication of the report.

21. Council of Europe list of external offices, available at <https://www.coe.int/en/web/programmes/external-offices>.

22. According to data extracted from the PMM IT tool on 6 July 2022.

23. PMM guidance for Council of Europe staff, available at [PMM website for Council of Europe staff](#) and in a public limited version, available at [Project Management Methodology](#).

24. Guidelines on civil society organisations' participation in co-operation activities, ODGP 2015, available at <https://rm.coe.int/1680656cef>.

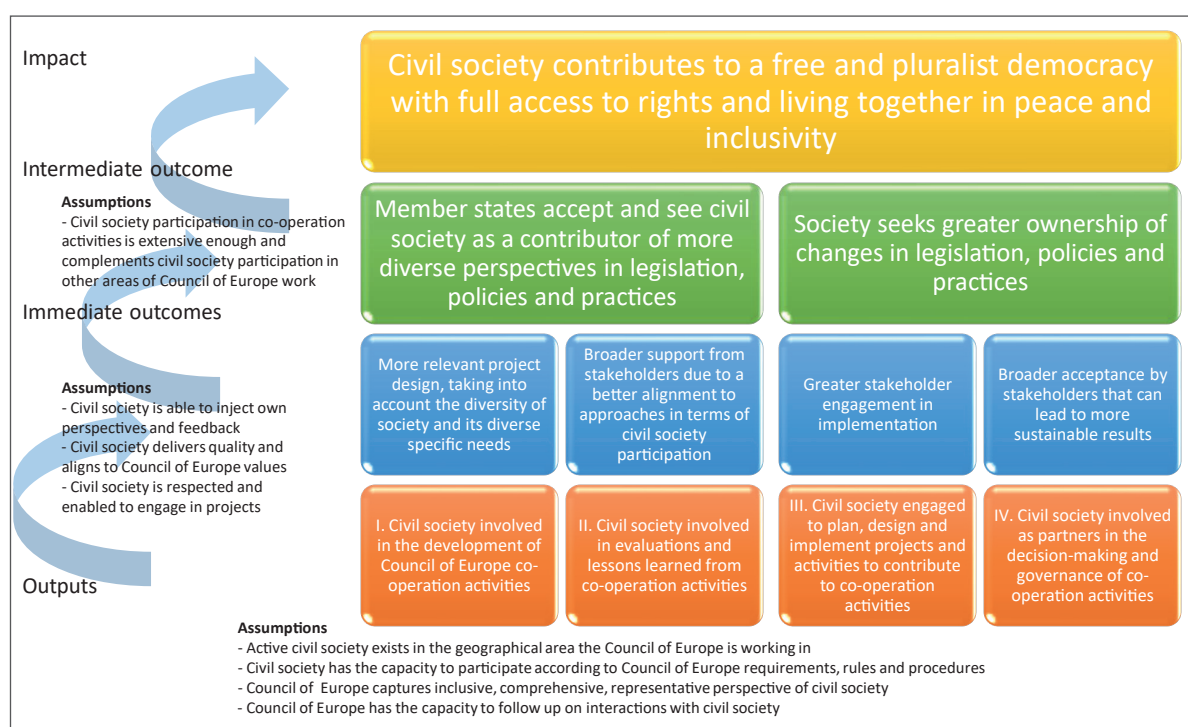
3.5 Theory of change

27. The evaluation is theory-driven, using the theory of change presented in Figure 2. The theory of change was developed by the DIO, discussed at the reference group meeting on the concept note and further refined with reference group member support,²⁵ based on a review of Council of Europe documents specifically related to civil society participation in co-operation activities as well as the information notes of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, the Committee of Ministers declarations and the theory of change of the Programme and Budget²⁶ on civil society participation in the Council of Europe in general. The main objective is to increase civil society participation in Council of Europe work, with a focus on co-operation activities, to improve the quality and sustainability of the outputs and outcomes. It was designed to include the most significant outputs and outcomes.

28. At the bottom of Figure 2, the theory of change lists the outputs from the mainstreaming of civil society participation in co-operation activities. The upper levels of the theory of change describe how civil society participation in co-operation activities progresses from (i) the form of involvement in the immediate outcomes which the produced outputs are expected to contribute, to (ii) the intermediate outcome of civil society participation in co-operation activities, and to (iii) the overall intended impact in member states. Lines connect the different boxes from outputs, to immediate outcomes, to intermediate outcome and to impact, illustrating how the intended changes are expected to happen.

29. The assumptions or external factors that need to be in place for changes to happen (connections (blue arrows) from one level to another) are specified on the left-hand side of the theory of change. These have not been extracted from Council of Europe documents but were added by the DIO. The evaluation collected data to test whether the theory of change works in practice.

Figure 2: Theory of change for civil society participation in co-operation activities



25. PO, SecCM, PACE, DPB, DPC, DGI, DGII as represented in the reference group for the evaluation.

26. Council of Europe Programme and Budget 2022-2025, available at https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=0900001680a9663f.

3.6 Evaluation objectives, criteria and questions

30. The objective of this evaluation was to inform decision makers about civil society's participation in Council of Europe co-operation activities by:

1. analysing civil society's participation in co-operation activities, with particular emphasis on good practices and existing obstacles;
2. identifying the added value of civil society's participation in co-operation activities;
3. identifying possibilities for optimising this participation.

31. The evaluation assessed civil society participation in co-operation activities against the evaluation criteria of relevance, efficiency, effectiveness and coherence. The overarching evaluation questions and sub-questions were as follows.

- ▶ **Relevance:** To what extent is civil society participation in co-operation activities relevant to the aims of the Council of Europe?
 - To what extent does civil society participation in co-operation meet the Council of Europe's needs?
 - To what extent does civil society participation in co-operation activities meet civil society's needs and priorities?
- ▶ **Efficiency:** To what extent does civil society contribute and participate efficiently in co-operation activities through Council of Europe processes designed to facilitate that participation?
 - To what extent does the Council of Europe apply inclusiveness, equity and transparency in the selection of civil society?
 - To what extent do the Council of Europe's processes and working arrangements allow for efficient participation of civil society in co-operation activities?
- ▶ **Effectiveness:** To what extent is civil society participation in co-operation activities effective?
 - Under which conditions is civil society participation in co-operation activities most effective?
 - What are the reasons why civil society participation does or does not improve the effectiveness of co-operation activities?
 - In terms of impact, to what extent does civil society's participation in co-operation enable civil society to fulfil its role in strengthening diversity in co-operation activities?
 - In terms of impact, what are the unintended effects of civil society participation in co-operation activities?
- ▶ **Coherence:** To what extent is civil society participation in co-operation activities coherent with Council of Europe aims for civil society?
 - To what extent does civil society participation in co-operation activities complement its participation in other aspects of the Council of Europe and other institutions' approaches?
 - What is the added value of civil society participation in co-operation activities in terms of the Council of Europe's gender mainstreaming and human rights approach?

32. The evaluation did not explicitly nor systematically assess the evaluation criteria of impact or sustainability. Concerning impact, this was due to limited resources being available and because an assessment of effectiveness is sufficient for further fine-tuning of interventions to improve results. Potential impact was assessed through two additional sub-questions under the effectiveness criteria. With regards to sustainability, the criterion was not considered because of the cross-cutting nature of the evaluation and the fact that civil society participation is a process and not a standalone programme in itself.

33. The evaluation matrix in Appendix II specifies proposed related sub-questions and measures for the evaluation questions and provides details on the data collection methods that were used to answer them.



4. Methodology

34. The evaluation was conducted in accordance with the DIO's Evaluation Guidelines.²⁷ The following sections describe the different methods used for data collection and analysis. All data were collected, treated and stored in accordance with Council of Europe data protection rules.²⁸

35. The evaluation team combined mixed data collection and data analysis approaches to carry out this evaluation, involving document reviews, case studies, surveys and interviews, examined through a theory-based analysis, quantitative and qualitative content analysis and with triangulation and disaggregation techniques applied wherever possible.²⁹

4.1 Data collection

36. The evaluation team reviewed 15 strategic documents and 135 project documents (62 project proposals and 73 reports) relating to a total of 78 projects obtained through restricted access to official documents presented to the Committee of Ministers and project documents integrated in the PMM IT tool. Then, the team asked all divisions involved in extra-budgetary co-operation activities to provide as full lists as possible of CSOs according to three categories: CSOs partnering with the Council of Europe in managing and implementing projects, CSOs involved in projects as participants or leading activities, and CSOs working on the same themes and sharing Council of Europe values, but which are not involved in Council of Europe projects. The evaluation team made the same request to the Council of Europe field offices for comparison and quality control and compiled the complete list on this basis.

Table 1: CSOs related to areas of co-operation activities of the Council of Europe

	CSO database
Partners	322
Involved	1 014
Not involved	72
TOTAL	1 408

27. Council of Europe Evaluation Guidelines, available at <https://rm.coe.int/dio-evaluation-guidelines-revised-version-2020/1680a147d1>.

28. Secretary General's Regulation of 17 April 1989 instituting a system of data protection for personal data files at the Council of Europe, available at <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=0900001680684608>.

29. For full details, see Appendix III Methodology details.

37. For the case studies, the evaluation team carried out two field visits to Serbia and Georgia, and remote interviews in the Czech Republic, Portugal and Slovenia. The team selected these countries because they represent the most projects carried out across the range of sectors for the case studies; they cover non-members of the European Union (EU),³⁰ EU candidates for accession and EU member states, including from the perspective of multilateral projects; and Georgia and Serbia also have Council of Europe offices implementing projects. The evaluation team focused on four key sectors of co-operation activities, comprising national implementation of the European Convention of Human Rights, freedom of expression and media, anti-discrimination and children’s rights – based on the greatest number of projects during the evaluation period and the closest connections to the Organisation’s strategic priorities. Interviews were held with participants from CSOs that are involved in Council of Europe co-operation activities, from CSOs that are not, from donors, from among Council of Europe staff and from national authorities involved in co-operation activities.

Table 2: Interviews and focal groups

	Interviews	Focal groups	TOTAL
Czech Republic/Portugal/Slovenia	18	0	18
Georgia	27	1	28
Serbia	28	1	29
General	13	0	13
OVERALL	86	2	88

38. The evaluation team conducted three separate surveys according to the different target groups: staff, CSOs that participate in Council of Europe co-operation activities and CSOs that do not participate in co-operation activities.³¹ The evaluation team translated the CSO surveys into all relevant languages as necessary to ensure the response was as diverse and inclusive as possible. The data were disaggregated by countries that have Council of Europe offices, EU member states and international CSOs, by women, men and other, and by MAE within the Organisation.

Table 3: Responses to surveys

	Invited	Responded	Response rate	Women	Men	Other	Prefer not to say	Skipped
Staff survey	424	286	67%	166	79	1	18	22
CSO surveys	1 401	511	36%	248	179	3	5	76
OVERALL	1 825	797	44%	414	258	4	23	98

39. In each data collection, the evaluation team gathered information on practices in other international organisations to allow for a comparative analysis of civil society participation in co-operation activities. Finally, the evaluation team interviewed donors and Council of Europe managers from divisions not covered by the case studies using the same semi-structured interview guide to validate the external reliability of the case studies and support the generalisation of findings, combining the case studies with the document review and survey data.

30. During the evaluation period 2018-21.

31. The numbers of participants in the CSO surveys are combined in Table 3 because it is impossible to determine separate response rates. This is because the surveys were linked, and respondents switched to the other survey according to whether they were or were not participating in Council of Europe co-operation activities. Some 346 CSO representatives responded to the participating survey and 165 responded to the non-participating survey.

Table 4: Individuals interviewed and their organisations

	Project staff	Manager	Donor rep	Authority rep	CSO involved	CSO not involved	TOTAL	Women	Men
Czech Republic/ Portugal/ Slovenia	3	0	0	7	7	4	21	13	8
Georgia	7	1	6	14	18	0	46	35	11
Serbia	5	2	3	11	10	8	39	25	14
General	0	12	2	0	0	0	14	11	3
OVERALL	15	15	11	32	35	12	120	84	36

4.2 Data analysis

40. All documents relating to the Council of Europe’s approach to civil society participation, including in co-operation activities, were analysed. This involved the analysis of references to civil society participation in co-operation activities in Council of Europe decisions, declarations, statements, information notes, guidance and handbooks, and the relationship between this participation and civil society participation in general in the Council of Europe. The evaluation team examined the selection of project documentation to assess the inclusiveness, equity and transparency of selection of civil society and the Council of Europe’s working arrangements and processes for civil society participation.

41. Quantitative data from the surveys were disaggregated by gender, country of CSO and MAE. The team then compared the data to identify variations and seek explanations in qualitative data collected. The team coded qualitative data from the case studies, surveys and interviews using the indicators from the evaluation matrix as themes and establishing prominent codes that arose from these themes. This led to a total of 42 separate codes, which were measured as positive versus negative in combination with their frequency in the total population of respondents.

4.3 Limitations and constraints

42. Project documents consulted were based on what was available in the PMM IT tool. This meant there was a higher number of proposals available than reports, because practically all proposals are inputted as part of the approval process while users are not as consistent in uploading reports. This was not considered to make a major difference in the analysis, however, since there is no reason to suspect the reports in the system largely differ from those that are not in the system.

43. It proved very difficult to access local and grass-roots CSOs and those that do not work with the Council of Europe. The evaluation team was able to talk with CSOs in each of the countries of the case studies except Georgia, and 165 CSOs nonetheless responded to the survey declaring they were not involved in Council of Europe co-operation activities. In Georgia, no CSOs that were not involved with the Council of Europe in projects were identified in Tbilisi. This reflects positively on the extent the Council of Europe office is connected to civil society in Tbilisi.

44. Donors did not respond to requests for interviews and are somewhat limited among the respondents in the data. Some 11 people were interviewed representing European Union delegations, the EU in Brussels and three different countries. This does not provide confidence in quantitative terms, so the qualitative data were combined with other participants’ and no interpretation was made from a donors’ perspective.

45. There is limited expertise on civil society participation in the Council of Europe context among the evaluation respondents beyond theoretical concepts of civil society and participation. Civil society as a democratic concept is very difficult to distil in practical, concrete actions, while the day-to-day life of individual CSOs is very practical. There is a gap, therefore, between the theory of civil society and the practice and experience of people working with and for civil society organisations. People's perceptions and, therefore, contributions to survey and interview questions are often imprecise and do not give concrete evidence to work with. The evaluation relied upon the theory-based approach and the qualitative analysis of data according to the evaluation matrix to overcome this challenge.

46. The lead evaluator had previously worked on PMM and the HRA. While this did not cause a major conflict of interest, potential bias was accounted for in relation to the value and importance of the HRA. The evaluation team was careful to avoid subjective interpretation in the coding and in the assessment of importance or value from the data.



5. Findings

5.1 Relevance: optimising co-operation activities' opportunities

5.1.1 To what extent is civil society participation in co-operation activities relevant to the aims of the Council of Europe?

47. As mentioned above, the aims of the Council of Europe for civil society participation can be determined from the main strategic documents such as the [Committee of Ministers recommendation to strengthen the protection and promotion of civil society space in Europe](#), the [Reykjavik Declaration](#), the [Helsinki Declaration](#), the [Strategic Framework of the Council of Europe](#), the follow-up to the Helsinki decisions on civil society – [Final Report](#), the [PMM](#) and the Practical Guide for the Human Rights Approach in Co-operation Projects. The aims are to enable civil society to contribute to, lobby and advocate for, and monitor the fulfilment of Council of Europe standards and conventions.

5.1.1.1 To what extent does civil society participation in co-operation meet the Council of Europe's needs?

Finding 1: The Council of Europe performs well in using civil society participation in co-operation activities to meet organisational needs in terms of project objectives.

Finding 2: The Council of Europe's aims to ensure that civil society effectively contribute to the fulfilment of, lobbying and advocating for, and monitoring of the fulfilment of standards and conventions are only partially achievable in co-operation activities because the Organisation cannot finance these aims to any great extent through extra-budgetary resources.

Finding 3: The extent to which civil society participation in co-operation activities contributes to the Council of Europe's overall aims for civil society participation, mentioned in Finding 2, is limited because, in the majority of cases, only specific project needs are met through this participation, without consideration for broader aims.

48. The Council of Europe's needs from civil society participation in co-operation activities identified in the data are as follows:

- ▶ bringing localised, specialist knowledge of and expertise on the implementation of Council of Europe standards and conventions in national contexts;

- ▶ highlighting of local variations in the implementation of Council of Europe standards and conventions according to different sections of society both in terms of identities and habitats (urban, rural, remote areas, border areas, etc.);
- ▶ connecting national legislation, policy and practice in relation to Council of Europe standards to citizens in all their diversity;
- ▶ generating momentum for social change to embrace Council of Europe standards and conventions in different national and local contexts.

49. These can be grouped into specific needs, such as reinforcing the quality of legislation, policy, practices, training, debate and awareness raising through the specialist knowledge and skills of CSOs. They also lead to general needs such as the transversal, cross-cutting aspect of civil society participation in co-operation activities, which relate to increasing the transparency and accountability of public authorities and other actors in human rights, democracy and rule of law issues, and to reinforcing participation and inclusion, equality and non-discrimination.

50. Respondents to surveys and interview questions strongly consider that civil society participation in co-operation activities contributes to the overall aims for civil society participation to ensure that civil society effectively contribute to the fulfilment of, lobbying and advocacy for, and monitoring of the fulfilment of standards and conventions. Some 55% of responses to the surveys indicate a strong relationship between civil society participation in co-operation and the objectives for civil society participation across the whole Organisation as described in strategic documents. CSOs were more favourable to this view than staff, with DGI staff the least favourable, at 42%. Civil society participation in co-operation activities provides vital information and perspectives that cannot be obtained from authorities. For example, a staff member stated: "The involvement of civil society brings added value to the projects because of their proximity on the ground. They help to identify concrete needs and make interventions more practical."

51. Civil society participation provides a link to the actual implementation of Council of Europe standards and draws the authorities' and the Organisation's attention to the reality on the ground in the areas targeted by the projects. Among many examples, a representative of national authorities in Slovenia said: "It is their specific knowledge of the situation, being closer to the potential users and beneficiaries of the project. This is the main positive thing and provides the view from the other side, because people sitting in offices sometimes don't have much contact with the actual users and beneficiaries. Civil society gave some concrete suggestions to the legislation that were accepted. These were improvements and we changed the draft law according to their opinions." A respondent to one of the CSO surveys said: "As a part of civil society, we expect better respect for the human rights of all citizens including the most vulnerable ones, such as persons with disabilities, and especially children and women with disabilities."

52. Civil society is engaged in co-operation activities through different forms of participation, which enable projects to meet their specific needs. However, the more general goals of civil society participation depend upon an enabling environment based on many factors, including financial support. The Council of Europe does not have the financial resources through extra-budgetary resources to invest in civil society support in co-operation activities and, therefore, can only partially meet the overall aims of the Organisation for civil society participation.

5.1.1.2 To what extent does civil society participation in co-operation activities meet civil society's needs and priorities?

Finding 4: CSOs are not always aware of the fact that the Council of Europe does not have the capacity to finance civil society in the sense of a donor, nor that such financing is not a priority of the Organisation.

Finding 5: Many CSO representatives and project staff do not see very clearly how civil society participation in co-operation activities could enable civil society to contribute to fulfilling human rights, democracy and rule of law.

53. CSOs' needs and expectations were identified through various data sources as follows:

- ▶ a platform with national authorities that give legitimacy and credibility to CSO voices;
- ▶ funding for both staff and operational costs;

- ▶ facilitation to enable CSOs to work directly with national authorities;
- ▶ knowledge and expertise of Council of Europe standards, conventions and processes;
- ▶ alliances and political support for CSOs' positions;
- ▶ connections and networks at an international level.

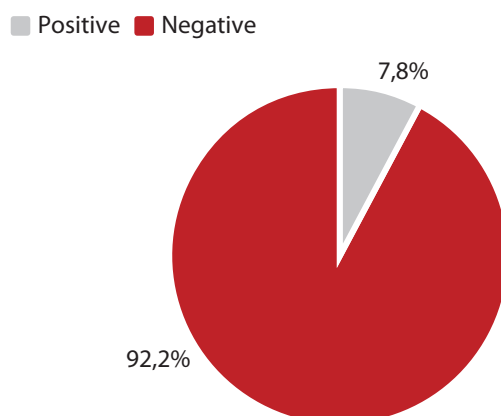
54. Overall, the extent that both Council of Europe and civil society's needs are met is considered to be large based on shared expectations from civil society participation in co-operation activities. However, staff responses demonstrated a 50/50 split in terms of the civil society participation meeting CSOs' needs, and this is confirmed by the CSO surveys, which demonstrate considerable room for improvement in meeting CSO expectations regarding their participation in Council of Europe co-operation activities. Respondents highlighted the challenges many CSOs face to operate on a contractual basis to provide services. Often, the valuable human resources the CSOs would normally dedicate to their activities become tied up in meeting contractual obligations, as indicated by a representative of national authorities in Portugal: "I also saw this in another job with CSOs in public service. It was a disaster because the bureaucracy 'killed' them and they couldn't survive dealing with bureaucracy." The paperwork and detailed requirements sometimes distract CSOs from their primary goals, be they to raise concerns with authorities, to reach vulnerable groups, or to address collective problems, among many others. Respondents recognised that participation in Council of Europe co-operation activities gives CSOs a platform and strengthens their voice, but frequently commented on the lack of support they receive, be it financial, administrative or simply through recognition.

"I ALSO SAW THIS IN ANOTHER JOB WITH CSOS IN PUBLIC SERVICE. IT WAS A DISASTER BECAUSE THE BUREAUCRACY 'KILLED' THEM AND THEY COULDN'T SURVIVE DEALING WITH BUREAUCRACY."

Representative of authorities in Portugal

Figure 3: Extent civil society feels needs met through appropriate forms of participation (CSO survey – based on qualitative analysis of questions relating to what improvements there could be)

Extent civil society feels needs met through appropriate forms of participation (n=84)



55. Civil society's needs and priorities are very diverse and vary according to a wide range of factors. The extent that this is taken into consideration by the Council of Europe is similarly quite variable. One staff member in Georgia, for instance, stated that civil society participation was seen as CSOs doing Council of Europe work: "The findings will improve our overall approach, I hope. I really think if we provide financial support to NGOs through projects, sub-grants – it will have more effect. They will more actively do *our work* [author's emphasis]." Another staff member in Georgia commented that the Council of Europe could contribute a lot more to civil society: "There are pretty good lawyers in CSOs but they work on many issues and are not experts. If we could somehow support them to get more knowledge in the long run it would be very good. Now they depend on us and we are not that flexible to keep up with the speed of change and needs."

56. In Georgia, staff and state authorities talked about the platforms provided for CSOs, but interestingly no CSOs commented on these platforms to confirm it was meeting a need they felt they had. CSO representatives more commonly stated their desire that the Council of Europe assist more in the advocacy of their work. For example, a CSO representative in Serbia said: “The Council of Europe cannot do it, but I will say it anyway. Help us to maintain the watchdog role, to be more politically engaged at the political level. It is not the same as when you trained some people although that is very important.”

57. The higher proportion of negative responses in terms of civil society needs being met comes from CSOs that are not involved with the Council of Europe in the surveys, from the case studies where watchdog CSOs and CSOs not involved in the Council of Europe are included and from the general validation interviews. One CSO in the survey stated that civil society can be helped “through strategic support for the strengthening and sustainability of CSOs as key stakeholders and watchdog organisations in the area of respect for human rights, freedoms and equality in the local/regional environment.”

“THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE CANNOT DO IT BUT I WILL SAY IT ANYWAY. HELP US TO MAINTAIN THE WATCHDOG ROLE, TO BE MORE POLITICALLY ENGAGED AT THE POLITICAL LEVEL. IT IS NOT THE SAME AS WHEN YOU TRAINED SOME PEOPLE ALTHOUGH THAT IS VERY IMPORTANT.”

CSO representative in Serbia

58. In summary, there is strong indication that Council of Europe and CSO expectations from civil society participation in co-operation activities are aligned. Both staff and CSOs consider that more could be done to meet CSOs’ needs from this participation, beginning with a more sophisticated appreciation of the diversity of civil society and a corresponding set of alternative approaches to support the participation of a broader variety of CSOs in different circumstances.

Case study of civil society participation in co-operation activities in the Czech Republic, Portugal and Slovenia

Alignment between Council of Europe and civil society aims

The financing of CSOs is seen as essential by the CSOs themselves particularly in the Czech Republic, Portugal and Slovenia. CSOs reported that, without project funding, their capacity to operate is heavily undermined. This sometimes leads to compromised independence, as many CSOs are very dependent on state funds. A CSO representative in Slovenia said: “If the ministries don’t have the funds to finance the activities, this heavily negatively impacts the capacity of NGOs. It also influences the independence of NGOs, who are heavily dependent on state funds. It is a similar situation to our situation. Everything is funded by the government.”

CSOs in the case study were often not aware that the Council of Europe is not in a position to fund civil society to the extent donors do. A CSO representative in Portugal explained: “We always have financial difficulties. Perhaps in all countries. It is felt a lot here – we have to go searching for new funding to carry out our daily activities. I don’t know if it is a problem of communication. If the Council of Europe has so much financial support to give to NGOs.”

CSOs that are aligned with Council of Europe values are working continuously to better fulfil human rights, democracy and rule of law. This focus can become lost because of the specific project objectives that narrow the contribution the CSOs can offer. The case study demonstrated that there is real potential to work towards the broader goals of civil society participation. A representative of authorities in the Czech Republic stated: “I would give more voice to NGOs and to the project themselves. NGOs they do it anyway, the actual work, helping disabled people and advocacy is on their agenda. And I am aligned with them and have the same goal!”

Effectiveness of civil society participation in co-operation activities

CSO support was most significant when they represented a cross-section of society. A representative of authorities in Portugal observed this in particular: “With the Council of Europe project we are bridging the Council of Europe and CSOs. We listened to more than 700 children and several CSOs, different ones, through our agency.”

The case study illustrated in some instances how important synergies and working together is among different stakeholders including CSOs. Networking is the only way to ensure optimum protection to victims, for instance. A representative of authorities in the Czech Republic underlined this aspect: “You have to have a good system of who is going to do that and in what time. This is especially so when it comes to endangered children and vulnerable people who meet many organisations like CSOs, doctors, police. So the multi-co-operation between CSOs and all the others is very important for them not to be abused by the system. And CSOs feel the same need. This creates a network.”

There are concrete examples in the case study where civil society participation goes beyond individual projects. The Roma programme is established and covers many different projects with a common thread that continually emphasises the contact with the final beneficiaries. A CSO representative in Portugal reiterated this cumulative aspect: “The strategy in Portugal is talk about Roma with Roma. The Council of Europe strategy is the best. In Portugal we know that some government agencies don’t work like this.”

The case study revealed cases where civil society involvement was seen as negative by the national authorities. The CSOs were able to perform the role expected of civil society, but the success they achieve also depends on the willingness of authorities to engage. A CSO representative in Slovenia commented that: “Civil society is the hardest thing to get national government support for. It holds a mirror up to government, showing where it is failing. This depends on the government’s maturity to receive this message. There are signs of massive improvement in combating violence against women and domestic violence with the new government and migration, but there are also some cracks.”

Added value of the Council of Europe

Throughout the case study CSOs underlined the importance the Council of Europe plays in connecting them with national authorities. A CSO representative in Portugal confirmed this: “For us, being involved as an NGO is not the most important thing; it is being in contact with the actors like local government and central government.”

5.2 Efficiency: fairness and transparency towards inclusion and diversity

5.2.1 To what extent does civil society contribute and participate efficiently in co-operation activities through Council of Europe processes designed to facilitate that participation?

5.2.1.1 To what extent does the Council of Europe apply inclusiveness, equity and transparency in the selection of civil society?

Finding 6: The Organisation performs well in terms of the selection processes being fair and transparent, and this is universally recognised by all stakeholders.

Finding 7: Selection of CSOs to participate in co-operation activities focuses on fairness and transparency and does not take into account inclusion and diversity as much as it could.

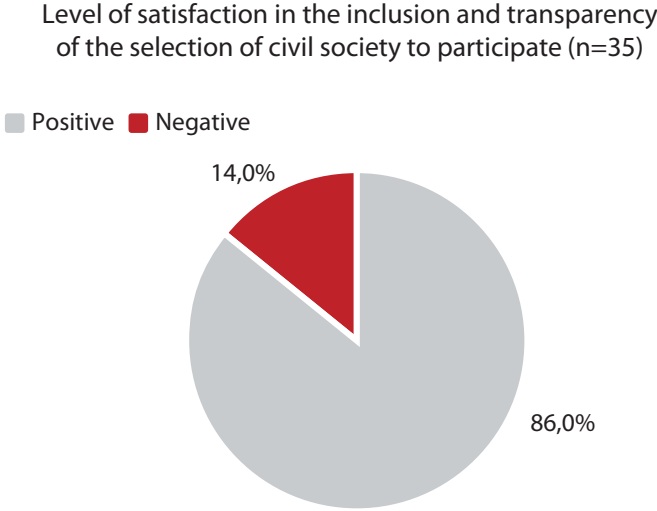
Finding 8: Civil society participation is not insisted on as much as possible from the perspective of inclusion and diversity, while these would be essential principles for civil society to perform its role foreseen at the organisational level, in co-operation activities. There are limits, at the same time, to how much the Council of Europe can address this.

59. The data collected shows that international and European-level CSOs are professional, well-resourced and well-connected institutions with competence and expertise to participate in the international protection and promotion of human rights, democracy, and rule of law. At the national level, there is a large range of CSOs that act as think tanks, watchdogs, and legal and social service providers. At the local level, there is an even greater selection of CSOs that may be activist, community-based, special interest, and that are grass roots. These differences are important to consider in order to ensure civil society participation is inclusive, fair and transparent.

60. The process to select CSOs to participate in Council of Europe co-operation activities was almost universally seen as fair and transparent. The perception is much more nuanced when it comes to how equitable and inclusive the participation is. The Czech Republic, Portugal and Slovenia respondents were more critical of the

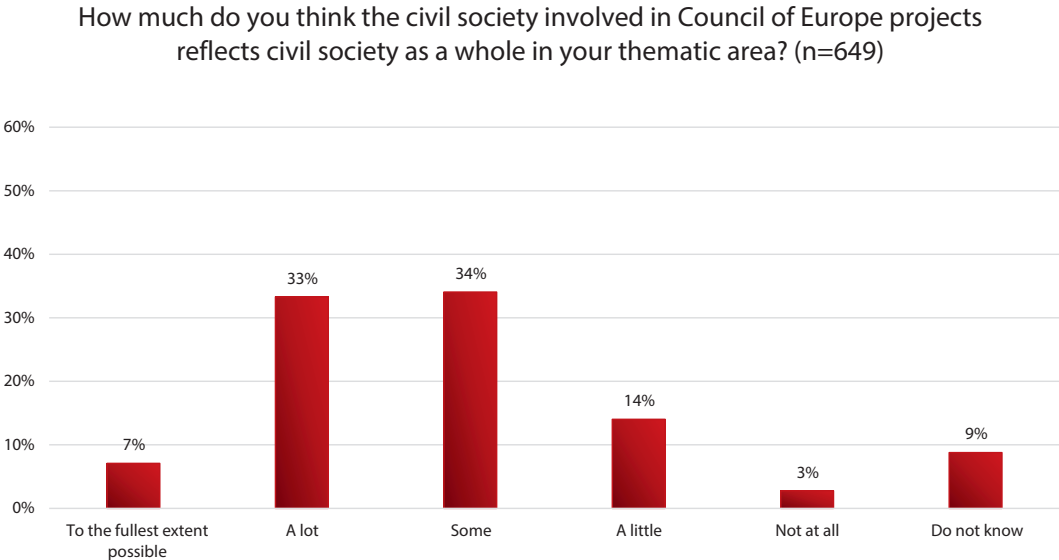
inclusion and transparency of the selection of civil society participating in co-operation activities compared to Serbia and Georgia. The volume of projects and the presence of field offices are important factors in achieving an inclusive and transparent process in the selection of CSOs.

Figure 4: Level of satisfaction in the inclusion and transparency of the selection of civil society to participate (case studies)



61. Staff and CSO views varied considerably about the inclusiveness of civil society participating in co-operation activities. Staff rated civil society involvement in their thematic areas as “a lot” or “to the fullest extent possible” in over 50% of cases, with nearly 70% in the case of DGII. CSOs that are involved in Council of Europe activities rated these two categories at 34% and non-participating CSOs at 11%. Among CSOs, EU member-state and international CSOs rated these significantly lower than others. This reflects the fact that there are few projects but large civil society sectors in EU countries.

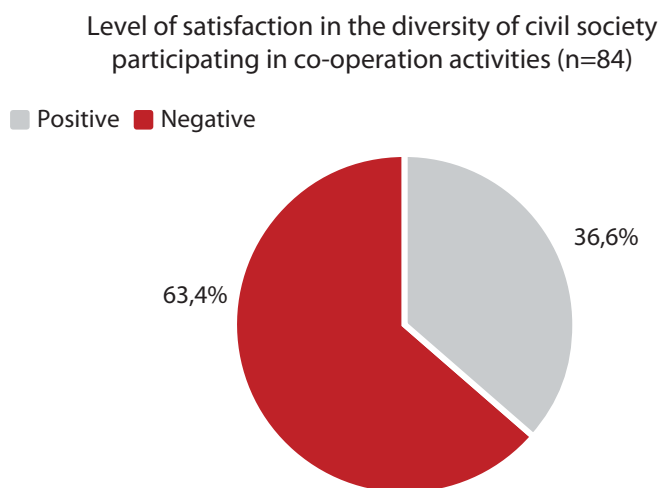
Figure 5: Extent civil society involved in Council of Europe projects as a whole (all surveys - with no major variation between women and men)



62. Many respondents from a range of different types of CSOs were dissatisfied with the level of diversity of civil society participating in co-operation activities. There is a relatively small number of CSOs in each project, often excluding CSOs that have less experience working with international organisations or are not based in countries’ capital cities, close to international organisations’ offices. A Council of Europe manager confirmed

this: “The majority is central-based NGOs. We are less able to reach out to NGOs beyond capitals, for structural issues too. The NGOs are less educated and skilled in fundraising and that makes them weaker on different levels of competency. There isn’t capacity to go beyond local level advocacy. The central level CSOs that are vocal on human rights issues are mostly there.” The diversity is considered stronger in Serbia and Georgia where there are field offices and greater continuity of contacts with CSOs as new projects generally follow project that are ending. The range of CSOs involved in EU countries is much smaller.

Figure 6: Level of satisfaction in the diversity of civil society participating in co-operation activities (all sources, triangulated between case studies, CSO surveys and staff survey, more positive than negative in case studies, majority negative in staff survey and CSO surveys)



63. It is very challenging for the Council of Europe to organise work with civil society in general, due to the volatile nature of this work. CSOs are constantly changing in terms of closures, new registrations, staff turnover, budgetary situations, priorities, etc. There is little published information, or internal reporting, on the extent of civil society participation in co-operation activities at the Council of Europe. Project teams work with more CSOs than are indicated in the PMM IT tool. The evaluation team received from project teams the names of 1 412 CSOs considered as partners or to be involved in projects. Only approximately 200 CSOs are indicated for 100 or so projects in the current Programme and Budget 2022-2025, and 300 projects do not indicate any CSO stakeholders.

64. Current information is on a project-by-project basis, with some data on civil society contracted in bigger co-operation programmes such as the Partnership for Good Governance³² and the Horizontal Facility.³³ Individual project reports describe different forms of participation of civil society in co-operation activities, including shared decision making in the governance of projects, consultation in the design and planning of projects and in the design and planning of specific activities within projects, grants awarded to civil society to implement components of projects, and contributions to the monitoring and evaluation of projects.

65. The evaluation team categorised the different types of civil society involved in Council of Europe co-operation activities or working in the same areas as the Council of Europe. The initial identification of CSOs is very complicated because the organisations are many, and when they are not already known to the Council of Europe it is difficult to decide whether they are meaningfully related to the Council of Europe’s work or not. For co-operation activities, this is not explicitly stated anywhere. At the same time, in many ways academia behaves like civil society and performs a similar role in co-operation activities but may legally be considered as being of the public sector. While some professional associations have clear public sector links such as judges’ associations and associations of mayors but may be formally considered as belonging to civil society. It is therefore important not to be overly prescriptive and to make allowances for *de facto* roles and functions in these special cases.

32. Partnership for Good Governance II 2019-2022, available at <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/pgg2/home>.

33. Horizontal Facility for the Western Balkans and Türkiye (Horizontal Facility II) 2019-2022, available at <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/horizontal-facility/home>.

66. The participation of CSOs in Council of Europe activities is based on the compatibility of values between the organisations. This means that there are many CSOs that would be eligible to participate in Council of Europe co-operation activities. There is a *de facto* filtering among these eligible CSOs according to existing contacts with the Organisation and the realistic opportunity to establish contact. The proportion of national-level CSOs based in capital cities is consequently far greater than local, grass-roots CSOs, particularly in justice and freedom of expression projects and extending to DGI projects in general.

67. The participation of service provider CSOs is also deeper and more meaningful than that of activist and watchdog CSOs. This can be explained by the fact that service provider CSOs are more acceptable to authorities, which makes it easier for project teams to give them more prominent roles. A CSO representative in Georgia emphasised this point: “Otherwise, it is not that state officials don’t respect local or little CSOs, it is not about scale, but there are so many statements against NGOs because they see the watchdog as an enemy. But they are more accountable to the Council of Europe.” This is especially the case in children’s rights projects. In anti-discrimination projects there are more lobbyist CSOs than in other sectors, with more community-based CSOs in Roma projects and in lesbian, gay, bi, trans and intersex projects, which also allows for greater involvement of local and regional, grass-roots CSOs. DGII and Congress projects generally involve a wider range of CSOs.

“OTHERWISE, IT IS NOT THAT STATE OFFICIALS DON’T RESPECT LOCAL OR LITTLE CSOS, IT IS NOT ABOUT SCALE, BUT THERE ARE SO MANY STATEMENTS AGAINST NGOS BECAUSE THEY SEE THE WATCHDOG AS AN ENEMY. BUT THEY ARE MORE ACCOUNTABLE TO THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE.”

CSO representative in Georgia

68. In sum, the Council of Europe does not have a comprehensive picture of CSOs working in Council of Europe areas. Some 95% of the CSOs the Organisation identified were directly involved in projects. The evaluation team was informed of 1 490 CSOs, of which 78 were not involved in Council of Europe co-operation activities. The services that implement co-operation activities mostly only know the CSOs they work with, rather than those from their thematic area that are not involved in Council of Europe co-operation activities. Allowing for how busy project teams are, it nonetheless took a long time to obtain a list of different CSOs they work with and in most cases these lists were not comprehensive. It was easier to identify CSOs in the member states where there are field offices.

69. The process of listing the different CSOs involved in Council of Europe co-operation activities reveals that there are no systems in place, nor procedures in use, to keep up-to-date information about CSOs that are connected to co-operation activities. This relates to stakeholder management, a broader issue that is very important for quality project management. The ever-changing nature of civil society in member states makes this a challenging and complicated task. This is even more so the case when there are no field offices and fewer projects being implemented in certain member states. Moreover, because of the many influences and quickly evolving situations, the purpose, mission and vision of CSOs can quickly change.

70. Despite these real challenges, to work with civil society more meaningfully in co-operation activities, the Council of Europe needs to establish contact lists in a system that keeps up-to-date records and information about civil society in as many of the member states as possible. The PMM IT tool would provide this through the stakeholder module, which links stakeholder references to timebound projects and categorises them according to Council of Europe sector. This should not be limited to co-operation activities, however, and therefore requires a co-ordinated effort across the Organisation. To ensure meaningful interaction with civil society in co-operation activities, there need to be clear guidelines that distinguish between these categories of CSOs. The Organisation needs to know which CSOs it is working with to determine why it works with them and what kind of approach is needed to work together in the most efficient and effective ways. An assessment of the CSO landscape would also respond to this need.

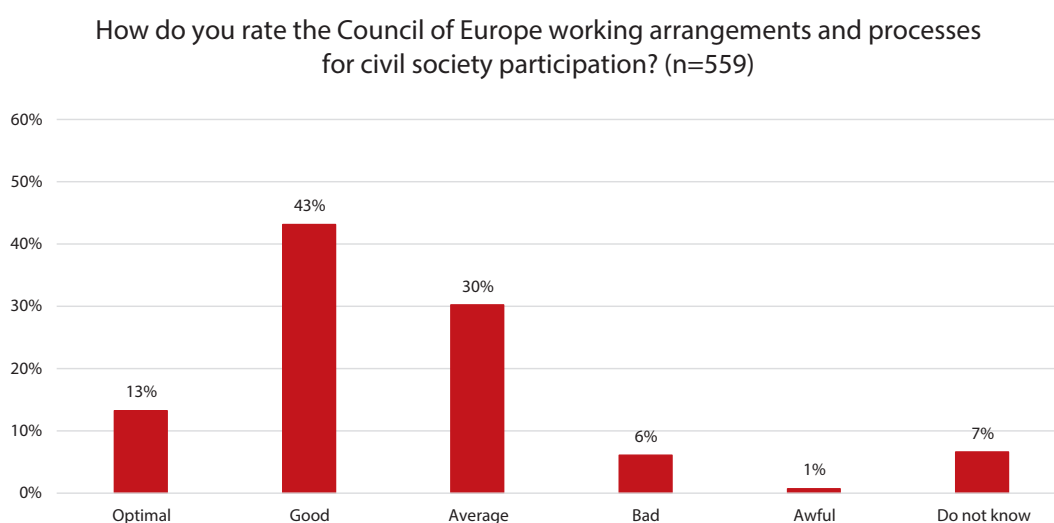
5.2.1.2 To what extent do the Council of Europe's processes and working arrangements allow for efficient participation of civil society in co-operation activities?

Finding 9: Grants and funding requirements are overly complicated for the majority of CSOs to handle and often represent more work than benefits.

Finding 10: Council of Europe working processes, communication and interaction are unsuited for enabling inclusive and diverse participation of CSOs at national, local and grass-roots levels.

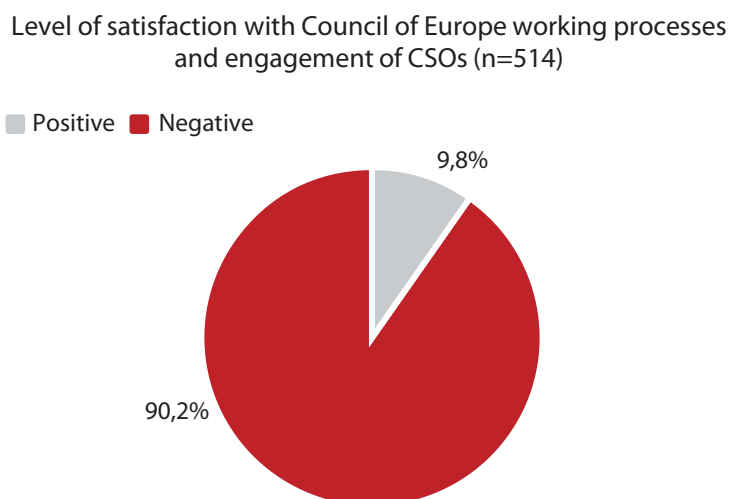
71. The working arrangements and processes for civil society participation were rated highly across the staff survey and the survey of CSOs that participate in co-operation activities, with 56% stating they were good or optimal. The CSOs rated these higher than staff, and DGII significantly higher than DGI.

Figure 7: Rating of working arrangements and processes for civil society participation (all surveys – with no major variation between women and men, except female staff at the Council of Europe, who gave a significantly worse assessment of working procedures)



72. However, considering the assumption that civil society is enabled to participate in co-operation activities and the considerations above relating to inclusion and diversity, the qualitative analysis paints quite a different picture. The evaluation team assessed 90% of responses from all sources as negative, which is very high, even given a slight bias in the surveys because the questions asked what improvements could be made to the working processes and engagement of CSOs.

Figure 8: Level of satisfaction with Council of Europe working processes and engagement of CSOs (all sources, triangulated between case studies, CSO surveys and staff survey, more positive than negative in case studies, majority negative in staff survey and CSO surveys)



73. Staff, managers, CSOs participating in Council of Europe co-operation activities, those that do not, and large and small CSOs in the case studies also expressed dissatisfaction with the administrative and financial arrangements to enable civil society participation in co-operation activities. This dissatisfaction ranges from problems in the languages required, to cashflow and resources consumed in dealing with calls for tender, reporting and detailed financial management. This puts the optimal efficiency of project work into question, as indicated by a CSO representative in Georgia: “There is a problem with the context/flexibility, to be relevant, so finally this project orientation is a problem for everyone. We have a very unstable climate and everything is changing in Georgia and what is written is not the same as in reality. There is a huge amount of bureaucracy to follow which is damaging the CSOs’ work.”

“I TRY TO INVOLVE ALL CSOS THAT ARE ACTIVE DURING OUR MEETINGS. THERE ARE SO MANY CSOS IN GEORGIA IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO COVER ALL OF THEM EVERY TIME. I WISH THAT CSOS IN REGIONS HAD MORE CAPACITY TO BE INVOLVED IN WHAT HAPPENS IN THE CAPITAL. WE GO AND TRAIN THEM AND WE ARE IN THE REGIONS, BUT IT OFTEN IS HARD TO BRING THEM TO TBILISI.”

Staff member in Georgia

74. Many examples were given where this effectively created a barrier to civil society participation beyond highly professionalised CSOs that have longstanding experience in working with international organisations. In one instance, the majority of CSOs in one country did not respond to calls for proposals and expressions of interest for participation in activities in that country because they did not have the linguistic competences to first understand and second respond to these calls. Linguistic competencies effectively became the selection criteria over and above experience working with both communities and authorities. A respondent to one of the CSO surveys emphasised this point: “Facilitating participation in projects by reducing bureaucratic procedures and eliminating language difficulties will improve the process.”

75. The benefits of civil society participation include outreach, achieving greater inclusion and avoiding discrimination, so procedures and regulations hamper crucial aspects of civil society participation in co-operation activities. CSO representatives describe how their ability to do the work required is compromised because of the need to handle the administrative requirements of contracts, or because they do not have the cashflow to implement the activities expected in advance of funding received as part of the contract. A CSO representative in Portugal explained how this prevents participation: “The ways to finance projects prevent those small organisations from applying. Even though they work better than those that apply and succeed. One needs to find a faster way for those that cannot apply, even for small projects for small amounts of money. They are trying to know what kind of rules and documentation they need to follow to prove they use the money. Sometimes they really need support for basic things that others don’t need.” Situations were also reported where participants are unable to attend events they are invited to because the cashflow of their organisations is insufficient to pay travel and per diem costs in advance.

“IT WAS NOT MANAGED LOCALLY, THE WHOLE REPORTING LASTED 6 MONTHS, CHECKING EVERY 50 CENTS AND THEN SOMEONE COMING BACK AND SAYING THE LAST 50 CENTS ARE NOT CORRECT AND ONLY THEN TRANSFERRING THE LAST INSTALMENT.”

CSO representative in Georgia

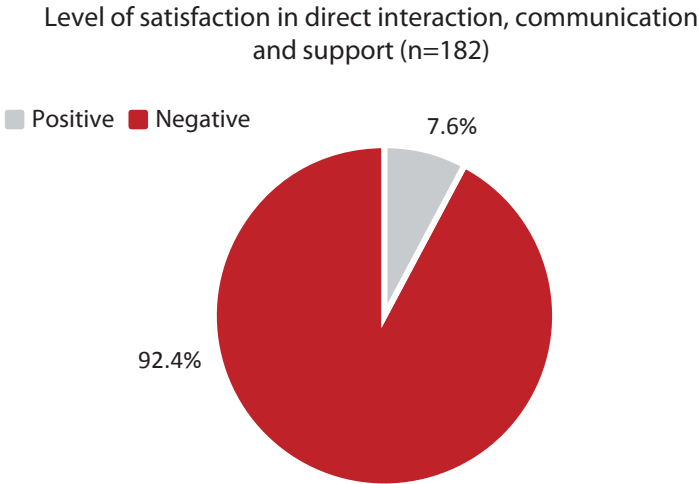
76. For many of the reasons above, grants were also reported to be complicated instruments to enable the financing of CSOs and support their participation in co-operation activities. Council of Europe grants are small in comparison to those from other international organisations, and yet require the same amount of paperwork. Following grant procedures was reported to be very time-consuming, while causing anxiety because of perceived risks associated with delegating control. A CSO representative described how the grant they received was micromanaged by the project team because the team was so concerned about the grant being correctly handled. In another instance, the perceived risk to reputation resulted in the project team very closely managing the outputs from the grants, but this raised concern about potential censorship and denial of freedom of expression. The balance between ensuring good use of donor funding and promoting civil society through grants is challenging for the Council of Europe.

77. A further concern raised was the Council of Europe contracting CSO staff as individual consultants. This depletes the resources of the CSO to obtain the expertise required by the project. Inevitably it leads to a brain-drain from CSOs and weakens the functioning of civil society, as expressed by a CSO representative in Serbia: “The projects are creaming off the best of the best, but not caring for the civil society status, or actually stepping back. We know that it is good to co-operate but we cannot rely on the projects to really invest in civil society.” This is not to say individuals from CSOs should be excluded from expert pools in the Council of Europe, but contracting CSOs to provide the same services rather than individuals could compensate for some of these problems.

78. Good practice was reported in following regular financial procedures of the Council of Europe to contract services from the CSO rather than representatives of the CSO and determining deliverables in accordance with a contract rather than under a granting mechanism. In that way, CSOs were responsible for the contracted deliverables but released from the obligations of grant management and reporting. The project also informed CSOs collectively of the upcoming work programme and invited CSOs to express interest in particular events and activities to determine if they could be contracted to implement those activities. While some procedures are cumbersome to manage for all concerned, there may well be simple solutions within the financial rules of the Organisation in certain circumstances.

79. In addition to rules and procedures, CSOs are disappointed in the lack of direct interaction, support and level of information and communication they receive about the Council of Europe and its co-operation activities. There is evidence that CSOs are sometimes frustrated about being used by the Council of Europe, but not really supported. Some 92% of staff and CSOs in the surveys and the case studies responded that there is little direct interaction with Council of Europe staff and projects and little support offered to CSOs. In the case studies, CSOs were found to be mostly engaged in co-operation activities to provide expertise and knowledge. In the analysis of documents they are also often participants or target groups for the activities. There are only rare instances where an active role for civil society is considered, because this would entail more resources and attention than project teams have the capacity to deliver.

Figure 9: Level of satisfaction in direct interaction, communication and support (all sources, triangulated between case studies, CSO surveys and staff survey <20% variation)



80. One way to improve the interaction and communication commonly cited was the possibility of using networks and coalitions of CSOs in countries. This was positively observed to address the difficulties in reaching local, grass-roots organisations. The risk of creating intermediaries was identified at the same time, with the linking role being one that was sometimes used to act as a gatekeeper to enable some CSOs to engage, but not others.

“WE ARE INVOLVED IN ALL KINDS OF MEDIA FREEDOM ISSUES GOING ON IN GEORGIA. WHAT UNITES US IS THE COALITION FOR MEDIA ADVOCACY, ALONG WITH 14 OTHER ORGANISATIONS. THIS IS THE FORMAT THAT ENSURES THAT CSOS ARE WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP WITH MEDIA AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS AND THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE IS ONE OF THEM. THIS IS HOW WE INTERSECT WITH THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE AND THIS PARTICULAR PROGRAMME.”

CSO representative in Georgia

81. The problem lies in the fact that these are individual efforts, rather than an approach that is systematised and encouraged at an organisational level, despite the practical, concrete guidance from the HRA and the PMM.³⁴ There is very little additional time available in project management, combined with areas of work that are often technical concerning duty bearers, with the intergovernmental focus of the Council of Europe in its standard setting especially. These factors slow progress in implementing the guidance and strategic direction set by the Organisation. For example, the evaluation identified the challenge to combine a transversal or cross-cutting approach, such as civil society participation, with project methodology and results-based management. Project teams are required to spend a lot of time defining outcomes, measured by indicators, and then monitoring them through data collection. In parallel, indicators are needed to measure transversal approaches, also with monitoring and data collection, but these approaches are related to processes rather than to outcomes. Limited resources in project teams means that management priorities need to be carefully balanced to dedicate sufficient time to both.

82. During the evaluation, a specialist in results-based management explained potential symbiosis between transversal approaches and project results-based management if they are considered in parallel as part of the same process. Such integration is the only way to counter the potential adverse effects project logic can have on transversal elements like civil society participation. More resources should be devoted to making this expertise available to project teams.

83. In addition to good work on civil society participation in co-operation activities identified in the case studies, the youth sector was highlighted as reaching more end beneficiaries, beyond the direct contacts of the Council of Europe. The sector opens the door to young people and enables access on their own initiative, not only on the initiative of the Organisation. This means that youth is involved from all walks of life, bringing a rich texture of perspectives. A consequence is that Council of Europe youth work reaches the local level and grass roots and is subsequently known and recognised beyond the first points of contact. The Schools of Political Studies were also mentioned from a similar viewpoint and undoubtedly the World Forum for Democracy has the same potential and is beginning to have similar impact as it builds connections with active and committed CSOs, including youth, throughout Europe and sometimes globally. In terms of establishing networks, the freedom of expression and media and anti-discrimination projects in Georgia and in Serbia are creating sustainable coalitions that continue to operate beyond the lives of the projects themselves. A manager also explained this in the work of the North-South Centre: “It is important to underline that the North-South Centre will give possibility to systematically integrate the networks that already exist. [...] They have all these networks of young people, women organisations and youth organisations.”

Case study of civil society participation in co-operation activities in Serbia

Alignment between Council of Europe and civil society aims

The case study demonstrated that civil society needs to be accompanied and supported, not just involved. The Council of Europe is recognised and valued for the meaningfulness and depth of involvement in topics of fundamental interest to civil society in Serbia, but often the greater financial support of other international organisations is appreciated more. A representative of an international organisation assessed the Council of Europe’s aims: “The Council of Europe is above average in dealing with civil society because it specifically takes civil society into account, and we need to remind other implementing partners. Though I am not sure that there is direct support to civil society capacity.”

34. An internal survey conducted in 2022 by the DPC found the HRA to be well received by project staff.

There are some concerns expressed that the Council of Europe supports service provision by CSOs in most cases and not the scrutinising, watchdog role civil society needs to perform in Serbia. A representative of a CSO providing services said: "They are trying to use our expertise and we are thankful for being recognised," while another CSO representative focusing on the scrutiny role said: "For rights I would expect advocacy from the Council of Europe, but political and civil rights are hardly focused on because of the situation the country is in."

Efficiency of Council of Europe approach to enable civil society participation in co-operation activities

All respondents spoke positively about the fairness and transparency of the selection process of civil society in Council of Europe projects. The Council of Europe is in contact with many CSOs involved in the case study thematic area, especially in children's rights, anti-discrimination and Roma. There was some regret expressed that CSOs working on freedom of expression and media are not as actively involved. Similarly, the scope for human rights law CSOs to be involved is more limited. In no circumstances was there an impression that civil society was treated unfairly. Overall, the diversity of CSOs both in Belgrade and in the regions was seen positively, as was the fact that coalitions and networks enabled more CSOs to be in contact with projects. Nonetheless, interviewees suggested that improvements could be made in strengthening the participation of smaller and local CSOs in Serbia, as observed by a CSO representative: "I know that they take care about that when announcing calls in the project. They say we want to encourage much more civil society outside Belgrade and they have geographic apportioning."

In terms of working processes, the grant procedures were observed to be burdensome in several instances. The project basis for partnership and co-operation with civil society in Serbia is also a concern because of the precarious nature of financing and operating CSOs in the country. Funding is considered too little, too haphazard and overly bureaucratic, causing CSOs to be very stretched and sometimes distracted from their core business. A CSO representative observed: "From the administrative aspect we find the procedure for getting grants a bit challenging, depending on how much work is going on. The financial reporting is also an additional burden that could be eased." At the same time, respondents observed how in most cases the close relationship with individuals in the Council of Europe office counters a lack of more institutional communication and interaction.

Effectiveness of civil society participation in co-operation activities

The role that the Council of Europe plays in enabling civil society to act as a bridge between citizens and the government is highly appreciated by Serbian civil society. In practically all instances, Council of Europe projects meet this need and the special relationship the Organisation has with national authorities opens doors for civil society to engage in the political process. A CSO representative said: "It is not always only support given through the project. It is important if we want to change something concrete on the ground where there are different committees or working groups to deliver some kind of diplomatic message to put on political pressure with some kind of political influence. Nobody wants to have the Council of Europe on their bad side."

Moreover, it was reported that new NGOs are registered on a regular basis and those involved in government working groups often include new faces and organisations that are not active. This raises the concern among civil society of an increasing number of government-organised non-governmental organisations (GONGOs) and political manipulation of the role of civil society in Serbia. Several CSOs suggested that the government is trying to appropriate the voices of civil society for political aims.

Comparison of civil society participation in co-operation activities with other organisations

There is great potential for the Council of Europe to reinforce and magnify the civil society message. The Council of Europe satisfies both national authorities and CSOs because it is in a position of trust with the government and able to balance that trust and relationships. It is nonetheless walking a tightrope to satisfy both civil society and government, as a CSO representative emphasised: "Everybody knows that the Council of Europe has to co-operate with the government. It is really hard with the Council of Europe and other international organisations, they cannot just cut ties. But the main issue is that some CSOs see that as a betrayal."

5.3 Effectiveness: bringing co-operation activities closer to citizens

5.3.1 To what extent is civil society participation in co-operation activities effective?

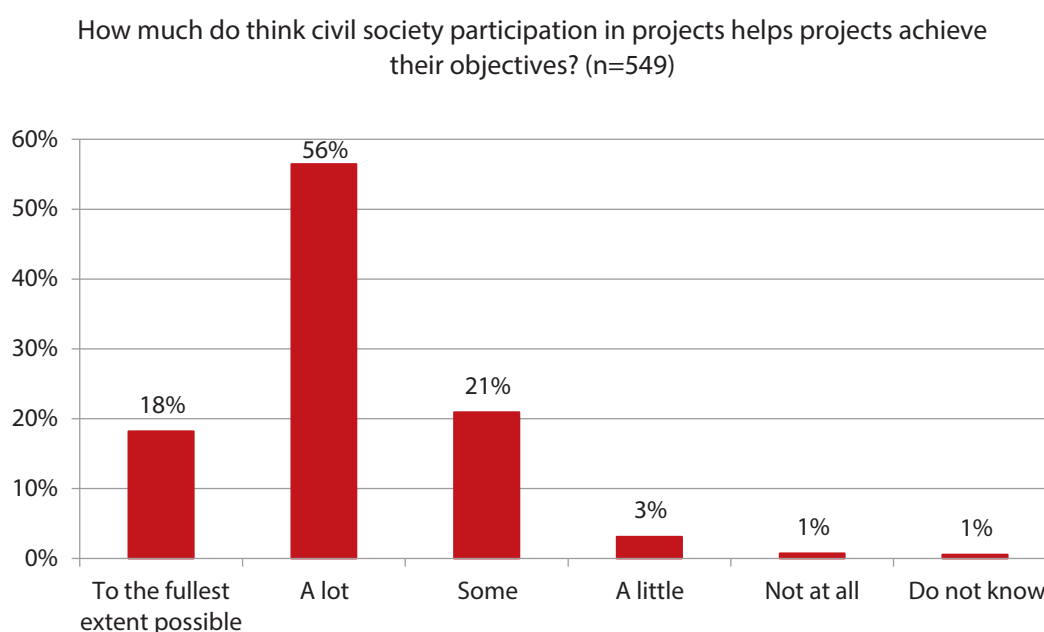
5.3.1.1 Under which conditions is civil society participation in co-operation activities most effective?

Finding 11: Civil society participation contributes to the gender mainstreaming and human rights approach of the Council of Europe. This enables the Council of Europe very successfully to bring civil society closer to national authorities and enables CSOs to perform their role.

Finding 12: Civil society participation in co-operation activities is most effective when the broader aims of that participation are targeted in terms of assessing the implementation of Council of Europe standards, including rights holders' perspectives and bringing focus on human rights.

84. All data collected are very positive about the benefits of civil society participation in projects. Civil society participation in co-operation activities strengthens project results according to 75% of respondents, even though more than 40% of male staff and those who prefer not to say their gender responded that civil society participation in projects only helped achieve objectives some or a little.

Figure 10: Extent civil society participation helps projects achieve objectives (all surveys)



85. This reflects another major added value of civil society participation in co-operation activities, which is the detailed knowledge and observation of the situation on the ground relating to the wide range of Council of Europe treaties and actions on human rights, democracy and rule of law. This benefits the Council of Europe and authorities alike, since it enables evidence-based assessment of the implementation of standards in local, national contexts. A CSO representative in Georgia gave this example: "It is really important because civil society sees best how the situation goes. It doesn't only advocate but also it litigates and so sees a lot of details, which needs to be recorded and communicated." It also enhances the practical nature of measures and recommendations proposed by international experts that do not have the experience in the context of the member state in question.

86. The extent to which the Council of Europe brings civil society and authorities closer together is universally seen as positive. It represents the real added value of the Organisation in comparison to other international organisations, and this is recognised by CSOs, donors and member states alike. A representative of national authorities in Georgia commented: "First of all, we can see the position of civil society when we work together,

and their position is clearer to us. And so, their position and that of officials may come closer. This gives officials a chance to see how their work is assessed by others. [Quote edited for anonymity.]” This added value provides the basis for strengthening civil society in its role and function, as well as enabling important elements of the human rights approach and gender mainstreaming, because it leads to closer connection with citizens as rights holders and greater inclusion of groups that are discriminated against. A CSO representative responded in the survey as to how CSOs make a difference “through the support of CSOs and the sustainability of their activities/roles as guardians of human rights standards and democracy in local areas”.

87. The greatest contribution civil society makes in co-operation activities is when CSOs’ broader role is brought into play while providing their expertise and connection to final beneficiaries in the specific context of the projects.

5.3.1.2 What are the reasons why civil society participation does or does not improve the effectiveness of co-operation activities?

Finding 13: The alliance of diverse CSOs makes civil society participation in co-operation activities more effective by amplifying the results to wider circles of beneficiaries.

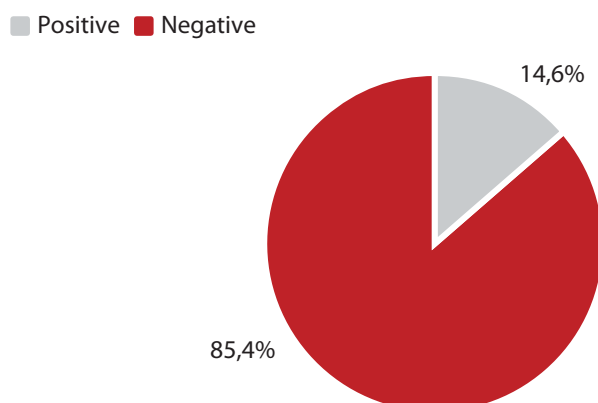
88. Council of Europe co-operation activities vary considerably in the extent to which they provide a platform for civil society across member states. This was reflected in the low level of satisfaction in enabling smaller CSOs and those in regions to participate in Council of Europe projects. This was not across the board and is significantly more positive for anti-discrimination projects, where vulnerable groups are particularly targeted and represented more outside capitals. The case studies were more positive than the surveys, based on the nature of the questioning in the survey that targeted suggestions for improvements.

89. There were examples of coalitions and alliances of CSOs described as easy to organise and bringing many organisations together. A CSO representative in Georgia explained one such coalition: “The coalition to work on the judiciary has almost 40 organisations, with a steering committee of nine members that are very active regarding the judiciary. These steering committee members are always invited; they work the most on this issue. When I have been in these meetings, I always see those NGOs that are active. It is fair and the right group of people.” Networks provide access and greater reach to projects, which mutually benefits the projects and the CSOs involved. This process was described by a CSO representative in Portugal: “Civil society gains proximity if it is involved. It is important to be involved in such institutions because that creates a bridge for contacts; organisations that you can reach out to depending on what you need.”

90. Civil society participation in co-operation activities provides an important contact point for national and grass-roots CSOs. This is very unbalanced between countries where there is some volume of project work and others where there is very little (essentially EU candidates for accession and non-EU countries v. EU member states, European Economic Area countries and the United Kingdom). The Council of Europe is limited in the extent it can reach a wide number of CSOs in its co-operation activities. This is mostly the case in member states where there are only very few multilateral projects covering several different countries, but also in member states with field offices where there is continual implementation of projects both with and without action plans. There are only a few cases where local and regional CSOs are involved in projects.

Figure 11: Level of satisfaction with enabling smaller CSOs and those in regions to participate (all sources, triangulated between case studies, CSO surveys and staff survey <20% variation)

Level of satisfaction in enabling smaller CSOs and those in regions to participate in Council of Europe projects (n=31)



91. There was already a large disparity in the extent CSOs are involved in Serbia and Georgia compared with the Czech Republic, Portugal and Slovenia. In fact, the latter three countries were also selected because they have a greater volume of projects than other EU member states. This means, therefore, that in the 24 other EU countries, the benefits civil society participation in Council of Europe co-operation activities brings are even less extensive than in the case studies. This causes large gaps and creates an imbalance across the geographic space of the Organisation.

92. Coalitions and networks are good mechanisms to reach out to smaller, local, grass-roots CSOs, but they need to be managed very carefully to ensure they contribute to CSO resilience and sustainability and enable CSOs to operate beyond the influence of the project. Project logic must consider the role and functioning of CSOs over and above the scope and lifetime of the project itself and the participation of CSOs in that project. A CSO representative in Georgia highlighted these problems: "When we start an intervention with certain types of CSOs we expect that they have the expertise in a particular issue. So, if it is supposed to be coalition work it is really difficult to have all the coalition participating equally."

93. The intergovernmental nature of co-operation between the Council of Europe and authorities was commented on in both positive and negative terms. Respondents in the case studies commented more positively, predominantly because they represented CSOs that are experienced in working with the Council of Europe. The fact that the intergovernmental nature of the Council of Europe's work is sometimes seen negatively by some staff and the wider group of CSOs suggests that there is not enough communication and information available to underline the intergovernmental dimension.

"THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE IS MUCH MORE FOCUSED ON LARGER, BROADER ORGANISATIONS. IT IS EASIER TO HAVE 12 ORGANISATIONS AT EUROPEAN LEVEL AS PARTNERS. BUT WE ARE THOSE GIVING THE INFORMATION. WE ARE ON THE GROUND AND VERIFYING INFORMATION. MAYBE WE DON'T NEED THESE BRIDGES."

CSO representative in Serbia

94. There are many challenges to establish meaningful networks of CSOs to enable alliances that make civil society participation in co-operation activities more effective. Concrete measures to help CSOs work together more, such as ensuring equal participation, distributing responsibilities, providing support to less experienced CSOs, stipulating requirements for coalitions, or providing meeting opportunities outside capitals, would all help. These require time and resources that could be ensured through specific projects within country-level and thematic action plans and programmes, as well as specific guidance and advice through training for project staff.

Finding 14: Civil society participation in co-operation activities is more effective with a more permanent basis of engagement and a broader scope of participation than individual projects.

95. One overriding theme, linked to CSO needs not being met, was the incompatibility between project logic and the nature of civil society. Project objectives are very specific and entail short-term implementation with tightly earmarked funding. In contrast, CSOs are not pop-up ventures that quickly arise to meet sudden needs. Their primary role is not generally to deliver services, although they often do step in to fill gaps in services. Projects inject large amounts of cashflow that is rapidly deployed in sudden bursts. Boom-and-bust cycles divert considerable resources and energy from CSOs' regular activities, creating even greater inequality between larger CSOs in capitals and local, grass-roots CSOs.

"WE FINISHED ONE PROJECT THAT WORKS ON DISCRIMINATION, BUT WE DON'T HAVE FUNDS TO GO TO COURT ALTHOUGH WE HAVE THE KNOWLEDGE TO PREPARE COMPLAINTS. HOWEVER WE DON'T HAVE A PROJECT THAT WOULD BE A CONTINUATION AND SO WE ARE STAYING IN THE TOPIC BUT TRYING TO FIND SUITABLE RESOURCES WHERE WE CAN SHARE OUR EXPERTISE."

CSO representative in Serbia

96. At the same time, project objectives do not consider the role of CSOs, and they prevent the development and support of the fabric of civil society because, in nearly all cases, funding is predominantly directed towards specific project goals. It is only when project goals are to build civil society capacity that the role of CSOs is targeted. That is not to say that CSOs do not contribute to project results, but vice versa, project results do not represent nor display the benefits and development that takes place in CSOs as they participate in projects. A staff member commented in the survey: "CSOs have a great impact at all levels: policy, advocacy, professional services etc in general or as partners of local and national authorities and specialised bodies. But we don't work on assistance and empowerment. We work to capacitate the specialists in our beneficiary institutions, yet we may advise on how important is to partner or outsource specific services from community-based or specialised CSOs."

97. The project paradigm of nearly all donors and IOs has an impact on the capacity and functioning of CSOs. Funding is short-term according to Council of Europe project criteria, and objectives are more specific than the organisational aims and priorities of each CSO, which means they can distort how CSOs operate both individually and collectively. A CSO representative in Serbia highlighted this: "Our own goals are lost in the donor relationship. We need to maintain the relationship even though the project is not well budgeted. [...] This is hampering the civil society role because it takes over the strategic direction they need themselves." As a result, it can unbalance the civil society ecosystem, including with respect to the relative power and capacities of different CSOs, and between large CSOs in capitals and local, grass-roots CSOs.

Finding 15: Civil society participation in co-operation activities is most hampered by confrontational political contexts, as CSO presence is interrogated and advocacy and scrutiny resisted.

98. The influence of the political, socio-economic climate in each country affects the nature of CSOs. Where there is independent funding and resources are available, civil society is more autonomous and able to concentrate on its mission and vision. Where the climate is more precarious, the instability presents challenges for CSOs to behave and operate in accordance with their missions. Data showed that the quality of civil society participation in Council of Europe projects did not depend so much on the socio-economic climate. It did, however, depend very much on the political situation.

99. By comparing the effectiveness of civil society participation in different contexts, the socio-economic climate does not impact on that civil society participation. There are examples of the participation working well where the socio-economic conditions are bad and working badly where the socio-economic conditions are much better. The factor that impacts on civil society participation in co-operation activities is the political situation. When there is backsliding in the democratic conditions of countries through more authoritarian measures adopted, civil society participation is more hampered. A CSO representative stated in the survey: "Sometimes governments are trying to exclude watchdog organisations from the process and include GONGOs instead."

100. There is good experience in addressing these challenges in the Council of Europe, through extensive consultation and information sharing with civil society, while demonstrating the importance of civil society to the authorities in question. This tends to be at the initiative of experienced Council of Europe staff based on their personal experience in these situations. A staff member in Georgia explained: “So our role, I personally feel, is to find this bond and co-operation again between NGOs and government, to support their policy making and legislative work and to push government representatives to include NGOs in this process. And when we insist, the NGOs are there, because state agencies can’t really say no.”

101. Good practices could be more systematically applied through a standardised process that is analysed, tested and put into practice as part of the PMM. A CSO representative in Serbia underlined this need: “This is of utmost importance in conducting advocacy. CSOs, especially, need the Council of Europe because it has good co-operation with relevant institutions, but we also need somebody who supports us, that is what we need.”

102. The practice would also be transferable to the other activities of the Council of Europe through specific country-related exchange and focus. It would also enable the Council of Europe to facilitate civil society participation in co-operation activities even when governments are less inclined to such participation, as emphasised by a CSO representative in Georgia: “The point is the influence. Can we influence the main objectives and priorities of the project? We cannot influence this. The Council of Europe can promote our work at advocacy level when we have trouble in communicating with the government.” This was recently emphasised in the Reykjavik Principles of Democracy, within the Reykjavik Declaration: “[...] reaffirm that CIVIL SOCIETY is a prerequisite for a functioning democracy and commit to supporting and maintaining a safe and enabling environment in which civil society, as well as human rights defenders, can operate free from hindrance, insecurity and violence”.

5.3.1.3 In terms of impact, to what extent does civil society’s participation in co-operation enable civil society to fulfil its role in strengthening diversity in co-operation activities?

Finding 16: Civil society participation in co-operation activities has impact when the participation is cumulative and over and beyond one single project and its specific goals.

103. There are wide-ranging benefits that go beyond project logframes. Civil society participation in co-operation activities is consistently seen to strengthen diversity and focus on citizens, while contributing to a reinforcement of the function of civil society in the form of opportunities to build networks and form coalitions, and updating knowledge of human rights, democracy and rule of law standards. Civil society participation also enables greater reach of Council of Europe co-operation activities’ results, in addition to greater awareness and practice in applying Council of Europe instruments and contributing to monitoring reports and other monitoring of member states, such as by the Commissioner for Human Rights.

104. The benefits of civil society participation in Council of Europe co-operation activities are viewed very positively by all types of respondents. Across the case studies, over 95% of responses by almost 80% of respondents appreciated the diversity and focus on citizens brought by this participation. A representative of the authorities in Slovenia commented: “Their specific knowledge of the situation, closer to the potential users and beneficiaries of the project. Main positive thing and the view from the other side sometimes office people don’t have much contact with the actual users and beneficiaries. Civil society gave some concrete suggestions to the legislation that were accepted. Some improvements. Changed the draft law according to their opinions.”

105. Participation in co-operation activities provides CSOs with a platform and credibility to contribute to authorities’ work on human rights, democracy and rule of law. This was underlined by a CSO representative in Georgia: “[CSOs] do work with the communities, know better the needs and support the communities. They don’t talk on behalf of them but enable the communities to talk. The I Choose Equality campaign was very good because it provided the space and floor for the members to speak and they were more public in their voice.”

106. The evaluation team found that Roma projects and anti-discrimination projects in general, and children’s rights projects in the case studies, are doing excellent work to ensure civil society participation, although civil society is not the overall objective in these projects. They reach local and grass-roots CSOs, through bringing the project to more remote regions, designing components that are more conducive to civil society participation such as community-based actions, awareness raising and campaigns, consultation and dialogue

processes between civil society and authorities. A representative of authorities in Georgia praised Council of Europe projects: "CSOs from the regions were also involved. There were cases where different needs in different regions arose and, from my point of view, the local CSOs raised these challenges and participated in tackling them at the local level." The combination of these approaches creates an enabling environment for civil society.

"A KIND OF LOCAL CIVIL SOCIETY MANAGED TO MAKE A NETWORK BETWEEN THE [SPECIFIC] COMMUNITY AND THE NEEDS FOR VERY POOR PEOPLE TO TELL THE LOCAL MUNICIPALITY WHAT THEY NEEDED."

Representative of authorities in Serbia

5.3.1.4 In terms of impact what are the unintended effects of civil society participation in co-operation activities?

Finding 17: There is a concentration of resources and participation among few CSOs when projects do not focus on alliances of diverse CSOs. This sometimes leads to gatekeeper situations that make benefits exclusive and are counter to the aims of civil society participation.

107. The data show there is undoubtedly huge benefit for civil society to work with the Council of Europe. In most cases, these are indirect benefits rather than a direct contribution that the Council of Europe is making to CSOs involved in projects. There is tension between the use of knowledge and expertise of CSOs and the meaningful participation of civil society which the Council of Europe targets strategically. In most cases, and most strikingly in EU member states where there is a much lower volume of project work, the connections the Council of Europe can establish with civil society are very limited.

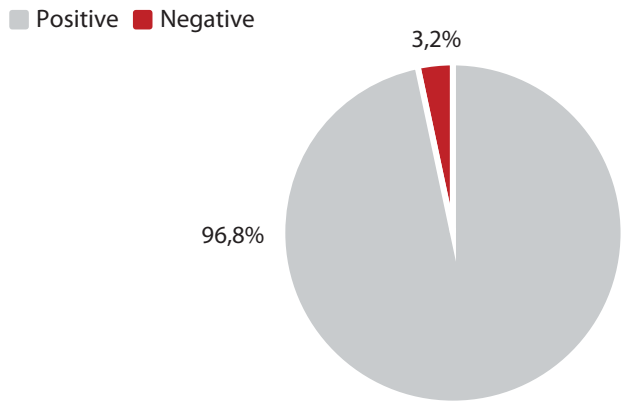
108. It is very difficult to quantify the overall effect of all these benefits of civil society participation in co-operation activities, but it is certain that many of them are down to the role or function of civil society collectively, rather than individual CSO engagement with projects. This is why the fabric of civil society is as much a concern for the Council of Europe as the participation of civil society representatives in project activities. The cultivating of expertise among individuals is only of very limited benefit to the Organisation as a whole. This appears to be well understood by programmes such as the youth programme, the North-South Centre and the Schools of Political Studies, which were referred to quite often as examples of co-operation activities that are well-known and involve far-reaching civil society engagement. This is similar to monitoring mechanisms, the Commissioner for Human Rights and the Venice Commission³⁵ that actively encourage and integrate civil society work into their analyses, opinions, statements and reports.

109. Civil society participation in co-operation activities is seen in practically all cases to bring diversity and focus on citizens, reflecting the important role civil society has in promoting diversity.

35. One of the recommendations in the Evaluation of the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) is to increase CSO outreach, especially during country visits, available at <https://rm.coe.int/dio-2022-35-venicecommission-final-report-en/1680a6555f>.

Figure 12: Degree of diversity and focus on citizens in co-operation activities (case studies)

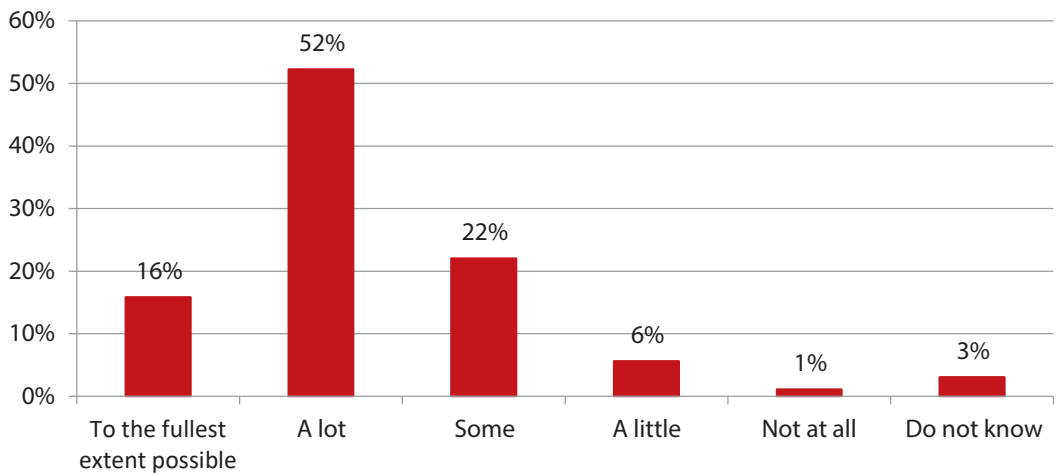
Degree of diversity and focus on citizens in co-operation activities (n=50)



110. Civil society has a role to promote rights holders’ perspectives, to strengthen accountability and transparency, and to enhance participation and inclusion, equality and non-discrimination. These are the main components of a human rights-based approach. Respondents in all data sources viewed very positively the contribution civil society participation makes to a human rights-based approach in co-operation activities. 81% of CSO representatives responded that there was very much or the fullest extent possible contribution to the human rights-based approach through civil society participation in comparison to 58% of female and 48% of male staff of the Council of Europe. Slightly more women among CSOs responded as such compared to men, but not to the same level of divergence. At the same time, DGII’s response is almost 75% in this regard, in sharp contrast with DGI at 38%, partly because of the targeted, technical focus of DGI projects, but perhaps also revealing a different viewpoint on civil society participation that needs further discussion. There is no variation between CSOs in countries with field offices, CSOs in EU member states and international CSOs.

Figure 13: Extent to which civil society participation contributes to the human rights approach, including gender mainstreaming (all surveys – 10% higher for CSOs and 10% lower for staff)

How much does civil society participation contribute to the human rights-based approach (including but not only gender mainstreaming)? (n=549)



111. Respondents were universally positive about the networking opportunities civil society participation enables. This illustrates the collective nature of civil society and the importance of relationships and networks

and suggests that the fabric of civil society needs to be considered in the way civil society is enabled to participate in co-operation activities. Respondents also highlighted the importance of civil society participation to gain up-to-date information and knowledge about the Council of Europe. Repeated comments about how important Council of Europe standards, opinions and guidance are in the work of civil society suggest that this effect of civil society participation is an important element in the empowerment of civil society.

112. At the same time, there are challenges to engage with many CSOs at the same time. Examples were given where large CSOs dominated the participation in co-operation activities at the expense of other CSOs that have less experience or resources, or that are less present in the capitals. A manager also highlighted this problem: "There was one network that was really outstanding, it was the best equipped, with the most resources. And supposedly an enabler, but now it is a bit of a gatekeeper." Respondents explained they were often obliged to engage well-established, more professional CSOs for many different reasons. They were more reliable to deliver professional services, or to meet financial requirements. The CSOs are more acceptable for national authorities because they are known to them already. As explained above, this results in only the specific needs from civil society participation being met.

Case study of civil society participation in co-operation activities in Georgia

Alignment between Council of Europe and civil society aims

In the case study, CSO representatives were frustrated about the passive approach towards the government regarding human rights and the lack of financial support for CSOs from the Council of Europe. CSOs expect more backing of their criticism of national authorities and financial backing that supports their work overall. The political dimension of the Council of Europe's work, seeking to maintain a good relationship with national authorities, is observed but not as positively appreciated by civil society as it is by national authorities' representatives. A CSO representative underlined this distinction: "As IOs are trying to implement projects and have an impact they are trying to be loyal to governments and they end up appropriating civil society's voice and role."

Civil society representatives described how the boom period for CSOs following the Rose Revolution in 2003 has come to an end and civil society is now experiencing financial difficulties and competition for limited funding. This contributes to the expectation that the Council of Europe provide funding to civil society.

There are clear distinctions in the case study of how civil society is involved in international organisations, with some CSOs more involved in long-term monitoring and shadow reporting of the situation of human rights and rule of law in Georgia and others more project-oriented towards capacity building, victim support and awareness raising.

Efficiency of Council of Europe approach to enable civil society participation in co-operation activities

There is high satisfaction in the Council of Europe's approach to include civil society in projects, both in terms of working processes and the actual level of diversity of CSOs involved across all the sectors of the case study. A CSO representative stated: "When I've been in these meetings, I always see those NGOs that are active. It is fair because they are the right group or people. I've never had the feeling that some NGOs are privileged over others." However, respondents also remarked on the limited access of smaller and regional CSOs to Council of Europe projects. A CSO representative observed that not enough is done generally to improve this access: "Regional CSOs face more difficulties to be involved if there aren't regional projects, but only projects taking place in Tbilisi."

Effectiveness of civil society participation in co-operation activities

Respondents in the case study positively viewed the contribution coalitions and networks of CSOs make to enabling more participation of smaller and regional CSOs in Council of Europe projects. This included good practice from international organisations in general in line with the approach seen particularly in Council of Europe anti-discrimination projects, as indicated by a CSO representative: "What is most important is that I have seen many calls for proposals where the major interest is the regions and if CSOs want to participate they need to have a lead applicant from the region. I think that is good practice."

Potential impact of Comparison of civil society participation in co-operation activities with other organisations

The greatest emphasis by respondents of the effectiveness of civil society participation in Council of Europe projects was on reaching more people and enhancing the rights holders' perspective. This was expressed

by two thirds of respondents and exemplified by the comment of a representative of national authorities: “It is not only a contribution of their expertise and knowledge, but their field work and daily work with the community.”

Council of Europe added value to civil society participation in co-operation activities compared with other organisations

The majority of respondents appreciate the platform that participation in Council of Europe projects provides for civil society. This is particularly important in the polarised political situation where the civil society voice is generally dismissed. The Council of Europe is highly praised for connecting civil society and public authorities. A CSO representative observed: “The Council of Europe can promote our work at an advocacy level; we have trouble communicating with the government otherwise.” CSOs also gained credibility from participating in Council of Europe projects, as another CSO representative commented: “At least what the Council of Europe suggests is a good platform where a neutral organisation (the Council of Europe as a kind of third party) gathers all the diversity of different areas from the state and NGOs, to talk and discuss the ideas and share these different perspectives on issues. I like this platform.”

Comparison of civil society participation in co-operation activities with other organisations

Sometimes the participation is perceived as service-oriented, with less consideration of the democratic principles of civil society involvement than other donors. IOs enable civil society participation either through support and capacity building or special considerations for CSOs regarding their situation and their varying ability to manage projects. The Council of Europe is compared less favourably in this regard, as a CSO representative explained: “UNDP [the United Nations Development Programme] has a very flexible approach. They have different sizes of projects/activities. Those that cost 5 000 USD are the easiest, just based on invoices and no reporting. Larger grants are 20 000 – 25 000 USD which have a bit more bureaucracy, but not too heavy. [...] Even if it is the last minute when co-funding is needed, they are ready and provide very last-minute support.” The contrast with other international organisations can pose a problem to the understanding of the Council of Europe’s role when engaging with civil society, as observed by another CSO representative: “But the main criticism regarding the recent work of the Council of Europe is that somehow the Council of Europe became a project implementer and not a political actor in Georgia. As soon as EU became heavily involved, with the association agreement of 2016 which didn’t strengthen daily politics, the Council of Europe somehow lost its active role in equality and human rights and the EU is now more active.”

5.4 Coherence: Council of Europe uniqueness with civil society and authorities

5.4.1 To what extent is civil society participation in co-operation activities coherent with Council of Europe aims for civil society?

5.4.1.1 To what extent does civil society participation in co-operation activities complement its participation in other aspects of the Council of Europe and other institutions’ approaches?

Finding 18: There is real added value in the Council of Europe’s distinct approach in building meaningful, sustainable relationships between civil society and authorities, that complements other organisations’ approaches to civil society participation.

113. Donors sometimes create tension in the relationship the Council of Europe has with its member states because their expectations and agendas are not the same as those of the Council of Europe and because they are influential through the connections they have with civil society in given countries. While the Council of Europe’s goals for civil society participation often align with those of other international organisations and donors, there are important differences in how much resources international organisations can dedicate to and how they promote civil society in comparison with the Council of Europe.

114. The comparison between the Council of Europe’s and other international organisations’ approaches to civil society participation in co-operation activities was mostly favourable towards the Council of Europe. This was particularly true in the concrete instances when civil society is involved in Council of Europe co-operation activities. The overall level of satisfaction from that involvement is high and those CSOs concerned have a good awareness of the nature of the Council of Europe as an intergovernmental organisation and of how the

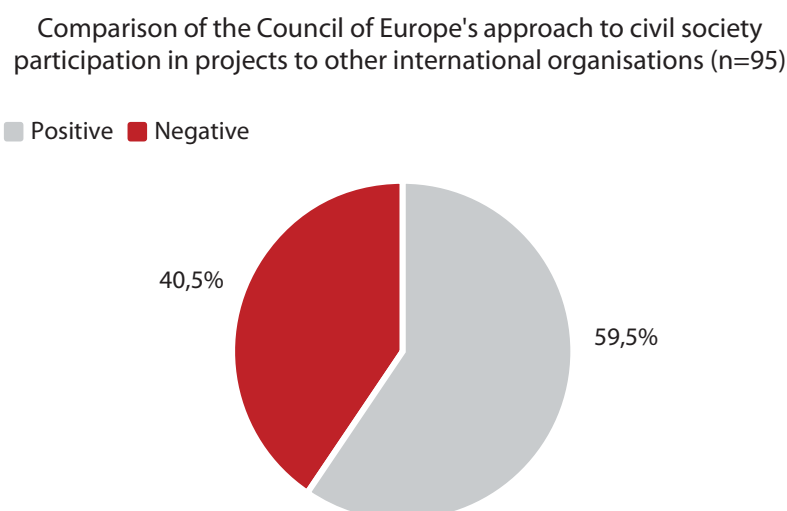
Council of Europe works in close partnership with authorities and civil society. This results in good examples of civil society integrated into government processes.

“I DID RECOMMEND THAT ALL OTHER MINISTRIES TRY TO INCLUDE LEGISLATION FOR CHILDREN IN THE HOPE THEY WILL LISTEN TO CHILDREN’S VIEWS. NOW WE HAVE AN INTER-AGENCY WORKING PARTY FOR KEY MINISTRIES AND AGENCIES INVOLVED IN THE WORK OF THE BARNAHUS AND I EXPLAINED AND PRESENTED THE CONSULTATION WITH CHILDREN TO THEM. THEY TOOK NOTICE. I’M NOT SURE IF YET THEY HAVE DONE LEGISLATION BECAUSE NOT A LOT DONE SINCE THEN.”

Representative of authorities in Slovenia

115. Where the comparison was negative, it tended to be because of the difficult political and social economic conditions the CSOs are experiencing, combined with lower awareness of the nature of the Council of Europe and how it operates, and confusion about the role of the Council of Europe. Often the expectation is for funding and resources that enable CSOs to operate, which is the basis of the support of affluent donors, including the EU.

Figure 14: Comparison of the Council of Europe’s approach to civil society participation in projects to other international organisations (all sources, triangulated between case studies, CSO surveys and staff survey <10% variation)



116. In a similar way, other international organisations have much greater presence that is also more permanent than the Council Europe, due to the high turnover of project staff revolving around the project life cycle. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and United Nations agencies often have broad missions which allow a dedicated focus on CSOs. This is in sharp contrast to Council of Europe offices, in terms of both human resources and mandate. There is an over-reliance on individuals and their personal convictions, along with their connections with civil society, which means that mutually beneficial relations are limited to a small number of CSOs.

117. This element of different expectations is highlighted in the findings of the case studies, where 56% rated the Council of Europe unfavourably in comparison to other international organisations in terms of focus on capacity building over service-oriented participation. The higher number of negative comments confirms, at the same time, that the Council of Europe sometimes prioritises the expertise and information it can gain from CSOs over a more holistic approach to develop an enabling environment for civil society. This is not only a question of the financial capacity to fund civil society. Another approach would be the good practice observed in the approaches in Roma projects and anti-discrimination projects in general, and children’s rights projects

in the case studies, that are doing excellent work to reach local and grass-roots CSOs, through bringing the project to the more remote regions, designing components that are more conducive to civil society participation such as community-based actions, awareness raising and campaigns, consultation, and dialogue processes between civil society and authorities. The combination of these approaches creates an enabling environment for civil society which is essential to achieve the Council of Europe's overall aims for civil society participation.

118. There was wide consensus among all types of respondents, when asked how civil society participation relates to the overall aims of the Organisation, that civil society should not only be a source of expertise and information, but that its role and nature should be embraced to bring greater meaning and effectiveness to Council of Europe co-operation activities. A cross-cutting framework could indicate such an approach and would be important to bridge the gaps that exist between theory and practice.

119. It is difficult to systematically implement civil society participation in co-operation activities in the Council of Europe because of the variety of national contexts, types of CSOs, specific project objectives and limited resources to adopt a mainstreaming approach. This means that it must be approached through a clear framework. While the perceptions of different respondents were largely favourable, few participants from any of the stakeholder groups were able to clearly explain how civil society can best participate in Council of Europe co-operation activities. There are clear areas for improvement in basic aspects of participation, such as sufficient and appropriate communication, relationship building and sustaining, identification and confirmation of shared goals and values.

120. Another aspect raised in the data by respondents relates to the relationship between civil society and the Council of Europe in certain cases. Respondents raised concerns that there was unhealthy competition between CSOs and the Council of Europe in trying to access funding from different sources, as indicated by a manager: "There is competition between IOs in the countries that implicates work with civil society." This sometimes leads to protectionist instincts and withholding of information among organisations, which is completely contrary to the purpose of Council of Europe standards and the benefits that civil society can bring. At the same time, donors describe the added value of the Council of Europe and its uniqueness in implementing projects in its areas of expertise, which suggests it is unnatural for such competition to exist and the benefits of sharing knowledge of Council of Europe standards far outweigh the risks in losing donor funding for projects.

121. The Council of Europe could gain from asserting its unique position facilitating civil society's relationship with national authorities, ensuring its standing among international organisations and donors, and enabling complementary approaches that reinforce the Organisation's relationship with CSOs. This could be achieved by increasing communication and co-ordination with international organisations and donors in countries where there are Council of Europe external offices.

5.4.1.2 What is the added value of civil society participation in co-operation activities in terms of the Council of Europe's gender mainstreaming and human rights approach?

Finding 19: Civil society participation in co-operation activities strongly complements gender mainstreaming and the human rights approach in project management and provides concrete measures with which to implement them in projects.

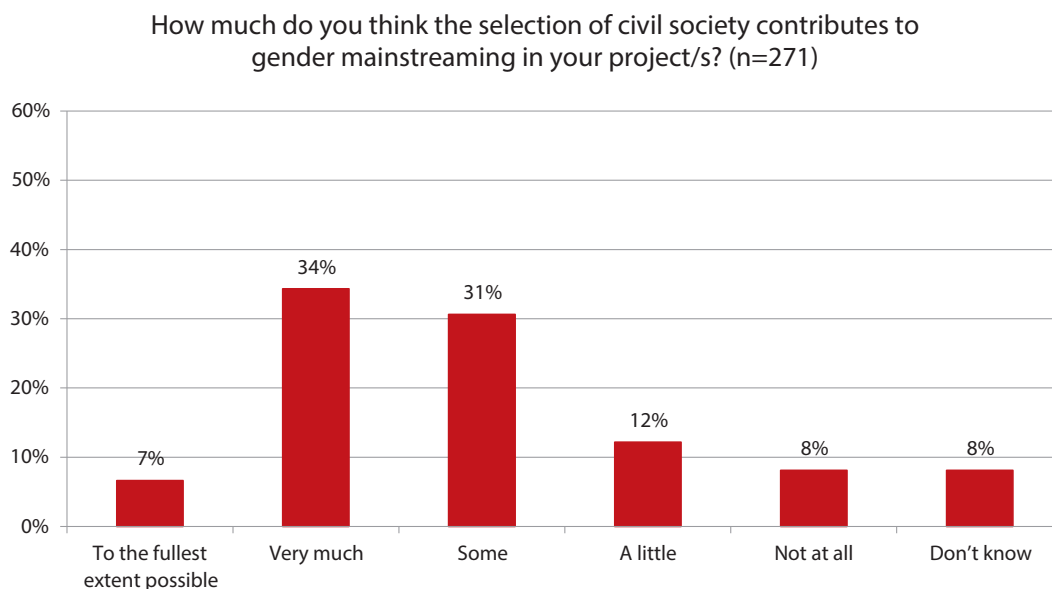
Finding 20: The cross-cutting, transversal approaches in the PMM that provide a framework for civil society participation are not fully embraced or reported on for several reasons, including time pressures, inconsistent emphasis on civil society participation, and adjustments needed in approach and focus of existing stakeholders.

122. Recognising the importance of civil society participation to support gender mainstreaming and the human rights approach is not enough to achieve gender mainstreaming and the human rights approach. It may also be that the project monitoring and focus is oriented primarily on concrete, tangible results and not enough is done to monitor how effectively civil society participation contributes to equality, inclusion, non-discrimination, transparency and accountability, or to effective balance of rights holders and duty bearers to fulfil human rights, democracy and rule of law.

123. It is widely considered that civil society participation is important for gender mainstreaming in projects. This suggests that if gender mainstreaming is considered as part of the approach to enabling civil society participation in co-operation activities, it will have a positive effect on gender mainstreaming. The contribution

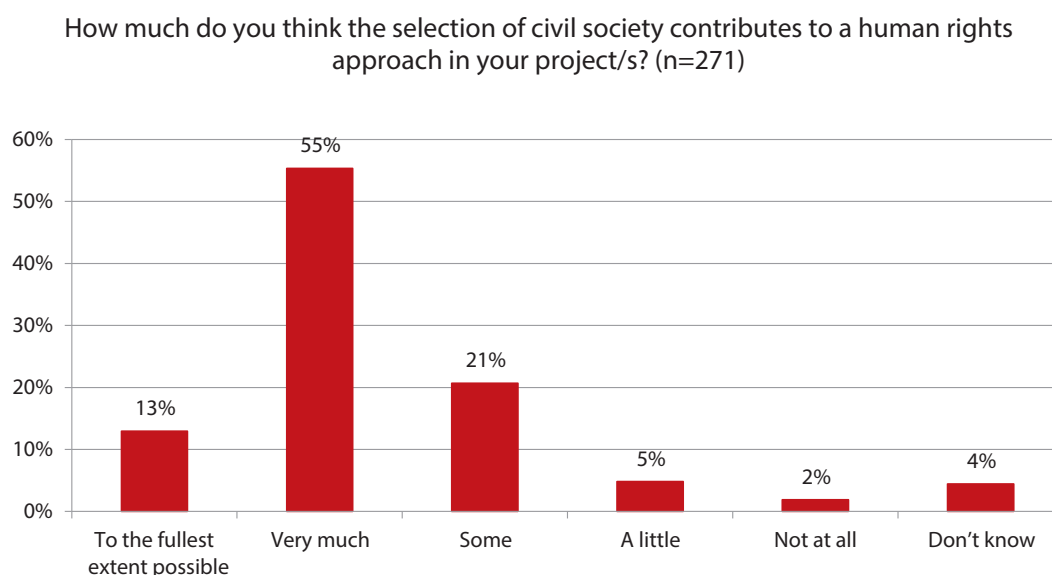
of the selection of civil society to gender mainstreaming in projects is considered greater by female staff than male and those that prefer not to say their gender. Some 48% of female staff responded “very much” or “to the fullest extent possible”.

Figure 15: Extent selection of civil society contributes to gender mainstreaming (staff survey)



124. It was even more so the case that civil society participation in projects contributed to the human rights approach. It follows that consideration of the human rights approach is an important element in the selection of civil society.

Figure 16: Extent selection of civil society contributes to a human rights approach (staff survey – with no major variation between women and men)



125. The selection of CSOs to participate in co-operation activities is perceived as very important for gender mainstreaming and the human rights approach. The most emphasised point made is in terms of drawing greater attention to rights holders. Council of Europe co-operation activities are often very duty-bearer focused given the intergovernmental priority of the Organisation’s work. It is challenging to integrate greater civil society

participation because it takes time and effort to negotiate and communicate different perspectives. The co-operation needs to be encouraged; it is not automatic. It involves a change in approach and adjustment.

126. The added value the Council of Europe brings to civil society participation in co-operation activities is not well understood, even among staff of the Organisation. A clear strategy, stronger focus on the human rights approach and better integration of civil society mainstreaming as part of the human rights approach would improve communication. This would also mitigate the risk that CSOs misconceive the Council of Europe as a supporter of national authorities that fail to uphold human rights, democracy and rule of law in practice, as suggested among some CSO representatives. This could be achieved by a stronger focus on civil society participation in co-operation activities in monitoring and reporting in a standalone annual report.



6. Overall assessment of civil society participation in co-operation activities

6.1 Progress since previous related evaluations

127. The evaluation findings confirm those of the evaluation of the contribution of NGOs to standard setting and monitoring and of the evaluation of the Conference of INGOs where related. The findings confirm that some of the recommendations of each of these evaluations³⁶ remain valid and this is borne in mind for the recommendations of this evaluation. For example, communication efforts were identified as important in both evaluations and led to recommendations to develop tools to better inform civil society about participation in Council of Europe activities.

128. This evaluation showed that simple and easy forms of contact exist, as was exemplified through the e-mail request to CSOs for the survey. The evaluators have the impression that civil society organisations contacted would be willing to receive information on as regular a basis as possible and it would already be appropriate to send the guide, published in 2022, on civil society participation in the Council of Europe³⁷ to these contacts.³⁸ The list of contacts established for the evaluation is a good starting point, but for this to be operationalised, data protection rules would need to be addressed, and the contact list should be expanded and regularly updated. A standalone communication strategy could ensure these basic aspects of civil society participation to help CSOs better understand Council of Europe work. Such a strategy should of course be included in a broader civil society strategy. To counter the inconsistencies in the participation, involvement,

36. Recommendation 7: The Conference develops its communication strategy to improve their visibility among the INGOs and NGOs, as well as to highlight its contribution to the work of the Council of Europe, in terms of results achieved and outcomes reached. This should be envisaged once the mission statement and the results-based framework of the Conference are revised and adopted by the Council of Europe (Medium).

37. Working with the Council of Europe: a practical guide for civil society, available at <https://edoc.coe.int/en/civil-society/11049-working-with-the-council-of-europe-a-practical-guide-for-civil-society.html>.

38. See Section 5.2.1.1 To what extent does the Council of Europe apply inclusiveness, equity and transparency in the selection of civil society?

and engagement of civil society, a more thoroughly worked theory of change would identify what is needed from civil society and what needs to be done to support civil society, as mentioned above.

129. The favourable perspectives and comments revealed in the evaluation data confirm the skill and success with which project staff in the Council of Europe manage high pressure and workload to add transversal aspects of project management into their work. The Council of Europe relies on these individual competencies of project staff. For the integration of civil society participation in project management in more depth and breadth, there needs to be a more systematic approach with organisational mechanisms in place that support and promote project teams' work to strengthen civil society participation in co-operation activities. Such an approach would rely on agreeing exactly what civil society participation means in co-operation activities with all levels of management, and monitoring and enforcing a holistic approach to civil society.

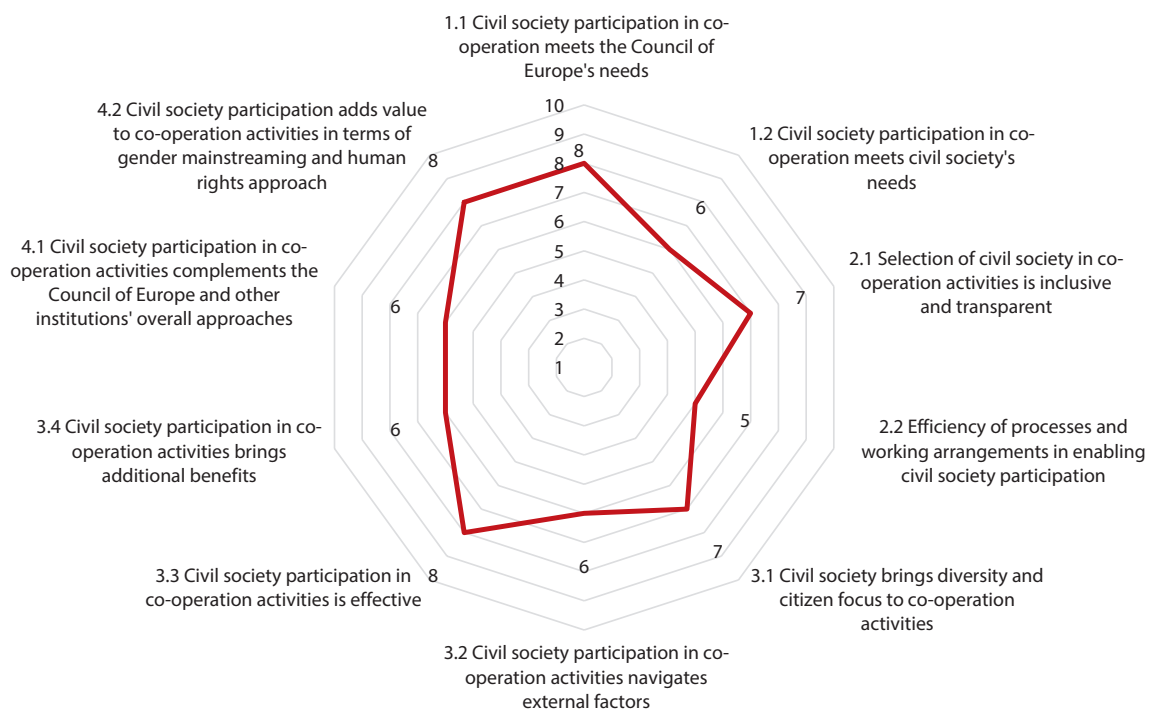
130. The inclusion of civil society should be the rule rather than the exception. This means that mitigating actions should be adopted to enable participation by addressing the inherent threat civil society and political instability together bring. Exceptional circumstances should be established for not enabling its participation rather than vice versa. The evaluation of the Conference of INGOs recommended giving civil society more consideration in the Programme and Budget³⁹ linked to a mission statement for the conference. The time available for project staff to allocate to this work is also a resource issue for civil society participation in co-operation activities, and in a similar way to the evaluation of the Conference of INGOs, could be allocated a higher proportion of project budgets.

6.2 Assessment by evaluation matrix

131. The following assessment (Figure 17) uses the detailed findings of the evaluation to evaluate civil society participation in co-operation activities against the evaluation questions.

Figure 17: Assessment by evaluation matrix

Assessment of civil society participation in co-operation activities according to the evaluation matrix



39. Recommendation 2: Taking into account the mission statement and objectives established, adequate resources are allocated by the Organisation in order to achieve them (High).

132. The indicators in the evaluation matrix (see Appendix II) allow for the assessment of civil society participation in co-operation activities according to the evaluation questions. The Council of Europe performs well in terms of how it uses civil society participation in co-operation activities to meet organisational needs in terms of project objectives, while it could do more to respond better to CSOs' needs. At the same time, the evaluation found some of these needs to be unrealistic. To address CSOs' misperceptions, more communication on what civil society participation in co-operation activities means would be useful, with a clear explanation of the role the Council of Europe plays, particularly where it contrasts with the high level of funding provided by donors and other IOs.

133. The Organisation performs well in terms of the selection processes being fair and transparent, but there is room for improvement in engaging a more diverse group of CSOs in co-operation activities. There is very limited allowance made for CSOs in the working procedures and processes, which effectively prevents some CSOs from participating in co-operation activities.

"IN THE PROJECT I WAS INVOLVED IN, WE TRIED TO WORK WITH SCHOOLS. IT WAS VERY DIFFICULT TO FIND EDUCATORS IN THE SCHOOLS WHOSE ENGLISH WOULD BE GOOD ENOUGH TO PARTICIPATE IN THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE'S BUREAUCRATIC PROCESSES. TAKE TIMESHEETS, AND A STRANGE SYSTEM OF PAYMENT WHERE THEY PAY 30% AND THEN TOP UP. I LOST TRACK."

CSO representative in the Czech Republic

134. The Organisation is handling the politically sensitive aspect of intergovernmental relations very well and manages to connect civil society with governments even in polarised political contexts. As a result, the Council of Europe successfully enables civil society participation to bring diversity and citizen focus to co-operation activities. It also performs well in meeting civil society's own needs through civil society's participation in co-operation activities, according to how effective that participation is in strengthening project results and how it contributes to a bigger picture beyond co-operation activities, essentially in enabling civil society to perform its role. Moreover, civil society participation in co-operation activities adds value to the gender mainstreaming and human rights approach of the Council of Europe because it provides concrete measures to implement these transversal approaches. However, the extent to which this occurs is limited to sectors where it is easiest to achieve, and it is not systematic, neither in implementation nor reporting.

135. The biggest weaknesses in civil society participation in co-operation activities are the extent the projects can reach a wide range of CSOs and the efficiency of the processes and working arrangements that enable civil society to participate. The complexity and inflexibility of administrative processes are creating barriers to civil society participation.



7. Lessons learned

136. It proved very difficult to establish an up-to-date list of CSOs because there is no practice to try to organise this information systematically, and the information is contained in different, unrelated documents and files across different entities. This results in an incomplete picture of civil society related to specific thematic areas and in countries where there are field offices. The diversity, varied perspectives, connectedness and collective influence are vital elements of high-functioning civil society, which form the basis of the essential contribution civil society can have to the Council of Europe. Detailed, up-to-date knowledge of broader civil society related to thematic areas of the Council of Europe is therefore fundamental, and only accessible based on a systematic, regularly reviewed database. In this case the benefit of spending time and effort was ad hoc for this evaluation, but stakeholder management should be an integral part of all areas of work in the Council of Europe and therefore the maintenance of the database needs to be as efficient as possible.

137. The distinction is very important between international, regional and local grass-roots levels and between types of CSOs (watchdog, human rights defender, community based, victim support) and this was exemplified in discussions about the interrelation between INGOs and national CSOs on several occasions. National CSOs are not always equipped and competent to address intergovernmental issues like policy and standards and need support to perform such a function. INGOs enable connection to regional and national CSOs to varying degrees of success, while for national issues direct contact with the national CSO is more effective. This proved very similar for the distinction between local CSOs and a national umbrella organisation. Likewise watchdog CSOs need to be connected with authorities in a different way to victim support CSOs whose expertise is more welcomed. In addition, some sectors tend to have more opportunities for civil society participation than others. Projects that can combine different approaches to adapt to these differences enjoy better civil society participation than those that are not able to do so.

138. The youth sector and the Schools of Political Studies prove to have impact and renown across civil society throughout the Council of Europe. In many of the interviews, CSO representatives mentioned both when describing the further effects of enabling civil society participation. The work they do with civil society has

more explicit objectives of strengthening civil society than most Council of Europe co-operation activities, but nonetheless they provide examples of how to take into account the nature of civil society by recognising its needs enabling in addition to being invited, the potential of CSOs needs working on as well as the existing services they can already provide, and the collective aspect of civil society needs to be focused on.

139. Procedures can be simplified to engage CSOs, as was reported in certain projects to deal with similar tasks and purposes as other projects. In one case, grants were not used for CSOs; rather, standard contracts were signed with the CSOs in question. This transferred the work of the CSO into simply delivering the terms of reference without going through the planning, monitoring and reporting process required for grants. This demonstrates how different contexts and circumstances may be suitable for simpler arrangements according to the different types of CSO involved in the co-operation activities. The same can apply to simplifying communication procedures to simply keeping civil society informed through contact lists, so that there is more basic awareness of Council of Europe work.

140. In some instances, Council of Europe project staff were revealed to assume the involvement of civil society through the nature of the work. In the examples studied, this proved to be a safe assumption as civil society participation was integral to the working methods of the authorities. In other cases though, there were found to be suggestions that authorities would be willing to target greater civil society participation, but they were not always aware of the possibility or ways in which that could be done. Good practice of sharing guidelines on civil society participation enabled project teams to communicate and influence authorities more concerning greater participation and involvement of CSOs. This could become standard practice in all cases, so that assumptions do not fail and willingness to follow this approach is harnessed.

141. Projects that achieve the greatest level of civil society participation are designed to have different components and different activity types, such as awareness raising, capacity building, research and surveying, and collaborative drafting processes. Within these components, they also have a variety of topics and approaches that attract different types of CSOs and establish different points in common with different CSOs. This provides more opportunities for different CSOs, that can then opt for involvement in areas closer to the work they are already doing. It also creates a need for more coalitions and networking between CSOs, helping to strengthen the civil society fabric in given thematic areas.



8. Conclusions and recommendations

142. The Council of Europe's approach to civil society participation in co-operation activities is suitable to achieve specific project objectives. However, this approach is not very clear in relation to the Organisation's overall aims for civil society participation. From this point of view, civil society participation in co-operation activities is only partial and misses the broader aims of enabling civil society to contribute to the fulfilment of, lobbying and advocating for, and monitoring of the fulfilment of standards and conventions. Different perceptions of civil society participation in co-operation activities could improve with better communication to CSOs. Civil society participation in co-operation activities provides many opportunities to make extensive connections with national authorities and civil society within member states. These are excellent opportunities to contribute at the organisational level and not only within co-operation activities, but these opportunities are not always taken by the Council of Europe through its project teams.

143. Civil society participation in co-operation activities could contribute more, in the words of the Reykjavik Declaration, "to further strengthening the work of the Organisation in the field" and to "further reinforcement of the Organisation's outreach to, and meaningful engagement with, civil society organisations". Strengthening the work of the Council of Europe in the field and reinforcing outreach to and engagement with CSOs can be very effectively combined, bringing greater impact to both aspects. This would require strengthening the connection between co-operation activities and the Council of Europe's overall aims for civil society participation, by communicating more with civil society about how CSOs can contribute to fulfilling, lobbying and advocating for and monitoring European standards and conventions through co-operation activities and including a broader range of CSOs in the co-operation activities themselves.

Recommendation 1: The upcoming policy/strategy for civil society participation should include a section on civil society participation in co-operation activities. This should clarify how civil society participation in co-operation activities should contribute to the Organisation's overall policy/strategy for civil society participation and include concrete measures to fully benefit from the opportunities co-operation activities provide to connect with local and national civil society and strengthen civil society's role in contributing to the fulfilment of, lobbying and advocating for, and monitoring of the fulfilment of standards and conventions. (High priority)

Recommendation 2: CSOs should be more informed on a regular basis on how they can be involved in Council of Europe work beyond projects (including making use of the specific section on co-operation activities of the policy/strategy for civil society participation once it is available) through concrete means such as newsletters, group e-mails, communiques, etc. (High priority)

Recommendation 3: The DPC should develop the stakeholder module of the PMM IT tool to act as a CSO database to better collect and update information about civil society information in all the geographic areas in which co-operation activities are taking place. (High priority)

Recommendation 4: The DPC should build Council of Europe project staff capacity to engage CSOs in co-operation activities and, in a wider sense than participation in individual projects, to build stronger connections with civil society and contribute to the Organisation's overall policy/strategy for civil society participation. This should include guidance on dealing with national authorities that are restrictive towards civil society. (High priority)

144. The selection of CSOs to participate in co-operation activities is fair and transparent, but it is not as inclusive nor does it lead to as great a diversity of CSOs as it could do. Greater inclusiveness and diversity would increase the contribution of civil society participation in co-operation activities to overall aims of civil society participation in the Council of Europe. In any case, the working processes of the Council of Europe for CSOs to participate in co-operation activities act as a barrier to inclusive participation, while communication and direct interaction with civil society could also be improved in the implementation of co-operation activities.

Recommendation 5: The Private Office of the Secretary General and the Deputy Secretary General, together with relevant MAEs, should explore alternative procedures that better enable a wider range of civil society participation, particularly those in precarious situations. These more flexible alternatives to existing procedures should encompass invitations, participant registration, translation and interpreting, travel and per diems, consultancy, and grants. (High priority)

145. Civil society participation in co-operation activities very successfully brings civil society closer to public authorities and services, which in turn strengthens the focus on citizens as rights holders, gender mainstreaming and the human rights approach. Civil society participation is effective when the broader aims of that participation are targeted, when there is an alliance of diverse CSOs, and when there is a more permanent basis of engagement beyond single projects. It is least effective when the political context is confrontational rather than co-operative, leading to polarisation and manipulation of civil society.

Recommendation 6: The DPC or MAEs responsible should include resources for support to civil society in all country-level and thematic action plans and programmes whenever possible, either through standalone projects or specific budgetary allocations across programmes. This funding would provide for concrete measures to be implemented in countries where there are external offices, more communication with CSOs, and greater analysis of civil society in countries where there are co-operation activities (see relevant complementary recommendations 2, 4, 7 and 8). (High priority)

146. Impact comes from ensuring that civil society participation in co-operation activities is cumulative, over and beyond one project, and that it creates networks of diverse CSOs. Competition and monopolisation of participation by CSOs that become gatekeepers reduces impact.

Recommendation 7: The DPC, together with MAEs and involving external offices where relevant, should develop concrete measures to increase synergies among CSOs in countries where co-operation activities take place, and prioritise working with CSOs collectively rather than isolated CSOs/civil society experts. Such aims should be explicitly explained in the policy/strategy for civil society participation. (High priority)

Recommendation 8: The DPC, together with MAEs, should integrate goals and indicators for civil society participation into individual project and programme design and include a section on civil society participation in co-operation activities in annual reports, including country action plan progress and final reports and evaluation reports. (High priority)

147. The Council of Europe's facilitator role in enabling to build productive relationships between civil society and national authorities and to work together is unique and brings great added value.

148. Civil society participation in co-operation activities naturally combines very well with the existing PMM and human rights approach. The PMM and frameworks for civil society participation are not fully embraced nor fully reported on. This results in cross-cutting approaches strongly considered to be important not concretely being put into practice, nor being prioritised sufficiently.

Recommendation 9: The DPC, through its external offices, should meet with other international organisations and donors on a regular basis to exchange good practices on civil society participation in co-operation activities. These meetings should be used by the Council of Europe to emphasise its added value and unique approach to complement other approaches and harness support from international organisations and donors. (Medium priority)

Appendices

Appendix I: Concept note

Link to the concept note: <https://rm.coe.int/eva-cso-appendixi-concept-note/1680abc76f>

Appendix II: Evaluation matrix

Link to the evaluation matrix: <https://rm.coe.int/eva-cso-appendixii-evaluation-matrix/1680abc770>

Appendix III: Methodology details

Link to the methodology details: <https://rm.coe.int/eva-cso-appendixiii-methodology-details/1680abc771>

Civil society participation in co-operation activities could contribute, in the words of the Reykjavik Declaration, “to further strengthening the work of the Organisation in the field” and to “further reinforcement of the Organisation’s outreach to, and meaningful engagement with, civil society organisations.” The evaluation found that the Council of Europe successfully manages politically sensitive relationships such as those between civil society organisations and authorities. Civil society participation in co-operation activities improves project results and reinforces civil society organisations’ influence over authorities regarding human rights. Areas for improvement were identified where more depth and breadth to civil society participation in co-operation activities would be desirable, while greater potential links at organisational level with local civil society organisations are not fully taken advantage of by the Organisation. Recommendations are made to further optimise civil society participation in co-operation activities, including in policy to be developed on civil society participation in the Council of Europe. The evaluation complements the previous evaluations, “Evaluation of the contribution of NGOs to standard setting and monitoring in the Council of Europe” and the “Evaluation of the Council of Europe’s Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations”.

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The Council of Europe is the continent’s leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member states, including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.