STRONGER ROOTS

CSO Networks Engaging Divergent Stakeholders for a Stronger Society

The Concept and Impact of Network Transversal Collaboration

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Introduction

Bridging gaps between various interests, approaches and views people have in current society is a challenge as acute as ever. It is even more urgent in countries of Central and Eastern Europe that have wrestled with the polarizing effects of the rising far right, authoritarianism and populism that tend to undermine not just civic space, but also human rights, foundational values and the democratic framework of European civilization itself.

Yet, we believe the response is not primarily political, but requires a longer term adjustment of organizational process as well as broadening of our mindsets – embracing diverse values and perspectives, acquiring new attitudes and skills. A transformation that civil society should undergo and lead. A transformation that needs to begin on a deeper, human level in our relations to the others around us.

This publication is an effort to introduce Glopolis' own concept of Transversal Collaboration to a wider audience of leaders, strategists, communication officers and donors interested in practical networking methods as a possible gradual and systemic response of civil society organizations (CSOs) to such cultural challenges in the region and beyond.

After 3 years of research, development and deeper reflection in the Stronger Roots program we can offer a more evidenced description of not only why a more collaborative approach is needed in society but also how we have blazed the trail and what results our financial, expert and peer support had in 9 different thematic, professional or political contexts.

The first pillar of the Stronger Roots program focused on social base (constituency) building of individual organizations in Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. In the second pillar we zeroed in on building the membership and partnerships of CSO networks – a key, but somewhat overlooked level of CSO activity.

Therefore, this more theoretical publication (complemented with another, much more practical one providing an overview of best practices and recommendations) lays out the theory of change, methodology and evaluation framework for various platforms, associations, coalitions and other types of civil society networks.

While far from claiming a resounding impact of this first, experimental phase of a new program, in the last section we tried to elaborate on three main avenues of results observed so far. Entering the second phase of the program along with the Stronger Roots consortium we would like to take this publication as an opportunity to share learning so far and invite other CSOs, their networks, partners and experts to work together on collaborative methodologies and their practical implementation.

We believe that increased collaboration with diverse, and especially divergent, stakeholders inside and outside CSO networks has potential to not only transform many civil society actors towards greater effectiveness and resilience, but also contribute to reversing the trend of fragmented and polarized societies.

1/ The Context: Fragmentation Shrinks Civic Space

The Stronger Roots program was developed in the fall of 2018 in the wake of various attacks on civil society in Central and Eastern Europe. These attacks strongly correlated with the so-called migration crisis of 2015–2016 and were more politicized in the CEE than in the EU-15 countries. In Czech Republic and Slovakia these attacks subsided somewhat during the pandemic; this was true to a much lesser extent in Hungary.

The trend of worsening civic space had already been observed in the aftermath of the financial crisis (2012–2013) across the whole of Europe (including countries such as France and Italy) and is not likely to go away completely in the post-covid recovery period.

1.1 Cultural Changes – Challenges for Society

The **media and political backlash** against certain groups of CSOs (esp. advocacy NGOs, human rights and environmental activists and democracy and government watchdogs – so called "political NGOs") and the corresponding deterioration of their image have translated into a worsening of the institutional framework and the overall operational (enabling) environment for civil society.

Several reports (EU HRA, EESC, EU Rule of Law, Civicus) repeatedly document the story. Critical CSOs with public visibility have always been a thorn in the side of the ruling powers and the targets of their attacks. However, with the populist backlash, these attacks spread to **a larger group of NGOs**, took on a personal or criminal dimension, and resulted in restrictions on their participation in public decision making, hostile regulation of their operations and more dramatic cuts in public funding for them.

Populism Uncovering Cultural Rifts

This has been accompanied by smear campaigns and efforts to undermine the legitimacy of particular groups (e.g. migration, LGBT+, gender and environmental groups) or the entire segment of CSOs in opposition (good vs. bad NGOs in Hungary), which in turn provided room for more restrictions and harassment. What was primarily a political tool of populist, ultra-conservative governments and extremist political parties became more of a **societal mood**

affecting how the media and broader public related to the civic sector at large. In such a climate, it is hard for publicly active CSOs to (re)gain respect and trust and support of certain segments of society for their advocacy objectives. But this shift in public opinion affected even small, rural and service-delivery NGOs with no political or public profile. They, too, felt attacks from their clients or communities and lost some of their private funding support.

The natural reaction of civil society organizations (CSOs) was to alter public perception of themselves, either broadly or more narrowly,) as well as that of the entire CSO sector and to reinstate their legitimacy. However, perception and legitimacy cannot be influenced solely by increasing transparency and improving external communication. The political attacks have saddled a **deeper critique** CSOs were facing well before the migration and financial crises related to insufficient understanding of CSOs by the public, limited communication by CSOs with their constituencies, dependence on government or EU funding and perceived detachment from the lived experience of the more fragile segments of populations.

This **perceived elitism of CSOs** has had much to do with the kind of agendas the professionalized activist organizations promote. As our research confirmed, the theme a CSO works on is the primary determinant of the opinion that most people will have about the organization unless it has strong, effective external communication. Even then, most people are critical or outright distrustful of CSOs promoting more substantial **changes to cultural norms** or habits. Many people in CEE countries still oppose adoption of children by couples of the same sex, inclusion of handicapped children in regular school classes, reduction of meat consumption or switching from petrol to electric cars.

While opposition to cultural changes does not constitute a clear cut segment in a society (people often have an affirmative opinion on one issue and a negative one on another issue), it is concentrated around 2–3 segments amounting to a large minority or even majority in some CEE countries. Thus the underlying emotions and discomfort related to the way these societies evolve can be – and very much is – politically harnessed. Clearly, the cultural challenge is connected to the broader transformation of societies everywhere driven by rapid technological and economic changes and the sheer diversity and complexity of life in the 21st century. The disconnect of large proportions of citizens with the (increasingly narrower and unclear) mainstream thus may not hinge only or mainly on different cultural preferences, but be part of much deeper uncertainties, anxieties and **crises of our identity** with various manifestations.

Polarization and Fragmentation

As a result of intensified cultural conflicts, mutual understanding, respect and trust have eroded between and among the opposing segments of society and with it the ability of the society as a whole to achieve consensus and take collective action in the most disputed areas. These principles, however, are helpful guidance for CSOs even in more stabilized and open countries or times (such as the Czech Republic after the 2021 elections). Our societies tend to be not only **polarized** about hyped topics of public debate (such as migration, pandemics, Green Deal or the war in Ukraine), they are **fragmented** along a range of other lines, less hyped and ideological. Governments, businesses and NGOs represent different cultures, based on slightly different sets of values, operating principles or the language used. The same can be said about the differences

between urban and rural areas, reflecting (but not limited only to) socio-demographic characteristics. And even relatively homogeneous socio-demographic environments include actors with different interests, approaches or views on a given topic (e.g. negotiation on transposition of an EU directive among artists, copyright holders, producers, publishers and others in a platform of the audiovisual industry).

Thus, the **liberal vs. anti-liberal divide** has been neither precise, nor helpful for identifying ways to strengthen public support and resilience of CSOs. It is one of the main cultural and political fault lines, but there is not one dominant approach of the public towards CSOs – various segments of society relate differently to particular organizations, groups of CSOs or the entire CSO sector. While there are some general guidelines that help to improve any organization's image (such as clear and transparent accounting of results and funding), each organization or group of organizations faces a slightly different set of gaps and challenges in effectively reaching out to their key stakeholders or constituencies.

External circumstances can only be changed by **multiple actors over longer periods of time**. There will always be groups antagonistic to organized civil society. Their relative power can change, especially in relation to political cycles. As the 2019 presidential election in Slovakia or the 2021 parliamentary election in the Czech Republic showed, different leading politicians can shift the atmosphere in the society in a more respectful and collaborative direction, benefiting civil society.

However, the deeper trends of fragmentation, mutual distrust and gaps between various parts of society don't go away so easily especially given the **intensifying trends** of technological, economic and cultural changes, let alone the **deliberate efforts** of various forces inside and outside the West to take advantage of the cultural rifts to further destabilize or even manipulate significant segments of our societies. The so-called „anxious middle" can be swayed in either direction (in the next election or next big societal issue): closer to mutual respect, solidarity and collaboration or closer to fear, isolation and hatred (or outright violence) in yet more and more societal „bubbles".

1.2 Embracing the Divergence – Challenges for the CSO Sector

Yet, mutual respect, solidarity and willingness to collaborate with others are not universally shared values. Not even in the CSO sector. There are limits to their application even with those who espouse them deeply. As humans we all tend to live our lives in **close groups** – families, tribes or nations. Where or when our existence or identity is threatened, these close groups still make sense. The border between our inner and outer worlds is often the point where we no longer provide solidarity or no longer risk trusting strangers. On the other hand, along with unconditional love these values represent deeply rooted human desires. With the exception of pathological personalities, the vast majority of people extend some tolerance, solidarity and trust towards at least their partners, children or family.

The political and cultural challenge therefore has an important **psychological** (or even spiritual) dimension. Can we expand the respect, solidarity and trust from closer, familiar circles to more distant, different – or as we call them, divergent – groups? And if we manage to widen the range of people who do so in their personal, organizational or community lives, will that lead to a societal framework more supportive of democracy, and hence of civil society?

Complexity Expands Our Perspectives

Both the theory and practical evidence suggest it should be possible. Theories of psychological, cognitive or spiritual development show that **expanding our understanding, perspectives and values** lies at the core of human evolution (e.g. Ken Wilber). It is not universal to all people at all times. Yet, as a civilization we have clearly moved from trusting only members of our own tribe or kin to creating nation states with shared public services and even to governing the globe through international treaties and institutions. Many recent and practical examples from different countries (such as the transition from apartheid or communist regimes to democracy) document that more open and participative approaches to complex challenges are the way – and maybe the only way – forward that allows bridging of deep gaps and creation of sustainable, new realities (e.g. Adam Kahane).

Civil society stands to benefit substantially from such societal evolution and at the same time has great potential to adopt – and pioneer – this more open, inclusive and participatory approach. Yet, many people and organizations in the sector still **remain in their own "bubbles"**. In issues that are important to us, we tend to dismiss the perspectives we don't like. In our relationships, we tend to avoid people we don't trust. In our collaborations, we tend to omit the actors we disagree with. In other words, as individuals, we often find it difficult to step beyond the boundaries we find safe and it takes a conscious effort to do so. But as CSOs working for social change, we have the opportunity (and some would argue, the responsibility) to take the lead in this ongoing cultural transformation; isn't it time to walk the talk?

Mindset Determines Our Operation

If we tend to have affirmative responses to all of these questions, then one of the most notable challenges in increasing the resilience of civil society – and one where we as CSOs can have an impact in any cultural, political, professional or thematic setting – is related to **our own values, mindsets and capabilities to shift them**: to what extent are we as representatives of the CSO sector willing to, and capable of, increasing the understanding and even the acceptance of different and in particular diverging views, approaches or interests around the issues at hand? And can we actually incorporate these differences more organically into **how we operate**: how we set our objectives, how we design the process of change we want to see, how we communicate our topics and how we assess and learn from the outcomes?

2/ The Program: Stronger Roots, Stronger Ties for Civil Society

The existence of a free and active civil society is an attribute of a healthy participatory democracy. Civil society organizations (CSOs) play a variety of crucial roles, such as protecting the environment, providing support to vulnerable groups and enhancing transparency and good governance. Yet, CSOs cannot work on societal issues effectively without being **rooted in society.** They need to reach out (more) to existing audiences and new, more diverse stakeholders, build networks among themselves and with partners around them and increase the number of actors involved in addressing societal challenges. These cooperating actors can help the civic sector become stronger, more professional, publicly acclaimed and sustainable over the long run. It is the people around them who help the CSOs fulfill their mission effectively and maintain their legitimacy and resilience.

Simply said, we believe that a lasting, systemic solution to the external challenges the CSO sector in CEE (and elsewhere) is facing requires a change in culture and mindset, i.e. **internal change**, that means not only an adaptation of our organizational processes, but also a shift in our perspectives and values.

Increased resilience can only emerge as a result of a further shift in our attitudes, skills and understanding especially in our relationships with the different people around us – a shift towards a more open, inclusive and participatory mode. In addition, a more collaborative mode of CSO operation based on increased understanding, respect and engagement with constituencies and stakeholders in and of itself helps CSOs to be **more effective** in achieving their strategic goals, no matter the impact on the external context.

What should follow from this transformation of the CSO sector is also a similar change in other actors and groups in society.

2.1 Resilience Through Transformation

With this in mind, Open Society Fund Prague, Glopolis, Open Society Foundation Bratislava and NIOK Foundation created a consortium and piloted the Stronger Roots Program in 2019–2021 to strengthen the roots and ties of civil society in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. The Program is continuing and aims to increase the **effectiveness and resilience** of CSOs and their networks, including smaller and more remote CSOs, and embed them in the communities and societies in which they operate.

The thematic focus of the program is virtually unrestricted, but contains democratic safe-guards. The supported CSOs include organizations and networks supporting human dignity and equal treatment of men and women as well as of various minorities, protecting independent media, promoting human rights or raising awareness of democratic values across various segments of society.

The Stronger Roots Program intensively empowers and builds the capacities of both individual CSOs and CSO networks through a combination of **financial, expert and peer support**. Individual organizations are strengthened in line with the concept of Social Base (Constituency) Building, which helps them create stronger communities and networks of supporters, donors, volunteers and partners. The network strengthening is based on the concept of Network Transversal Collaboration, which helps CSO networks reach out to new and often divergent stakeholder groups.

Social Base and Transversal Collaboration

While the concepts differ in several ways (e.g. in the degree of divergence, number of target groups or emphasis on internal processes) both concepts (or pillars of the program, as we call them) help CSOs to strategically (re)connect with the people around them, create stronger communities and partnerships, and engage various types of constituencies and stakeholders in service of the public interest. Both focus on creating a strong social, or rather **societal, base of the civic sector** through building relations with different people in the immediate environment.

CSOs in the Stronger Roots program also build their **long-term capacities** in a variety of areas (several are similar such as needs assessment, communication or facilitation of meetings). Eventually both individual organizations and networks consolidate their internal functioning and usually undergo a transformation of their internal processes and mindsets.

The transformation makes them both **more effective and more sustainable**. Stronger ties with a community of supporters or network of other external partners and thorough reflection of their needs and opinions contribute to their greater accountability and legitimacy. In turn, these actively engaged individuals or groups help them become more impactful in whatever cause of public good they focus on.

There is a strong need for, and deep interest in, an opportunity like this, demonstrated in the first phase of the program by the very fact that 266 CSOs and 76 networks from Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary applied in the first Call for Proposals in 2019. The Program, through tested methodology thus presents a **long-term investment** in stronger:

1. CSOs (by making the grantees more sustainable, effective and resilient),

2. civil society (by increasing participation in issues of public interest and creating a more supportive environment for the civil society sector in general) and

3. society as a whole (becoming more inclusive and collaborative by engaging the people and partners around CSOs).

2.2 Universal, Friendly and Long-Term Approach

Social base building and network transversal collaboration are **not entirely new ideas**. Social base building is more commonly known as constituency building and the methodology is already used in various contexts and countries. Similarly, there is a range of cross-sectoral collaboration approaches. They don't always focus on divergent views, but usually have some divergence built in because of differences between sectors (or between other contexts they try to bridge).

The reason we are using **specific labels** for our work has to do with two challenges. Firstly, neither of the concepts is very known and applied in the CEE region and more comprehensible vocabulary is needed in particular languages. Secondly, and more importantly, we aim to further develop and innovate the concepts to become more useful in the particular contexts of the CEE region. The Stronger Roots consortium emphasizes the following **unique features** of the program:

1. focus on **deeper transformation** of organizational processes and indeed personal mindsets to consciously tackle both fragmentation and polarization of societies

2. lexible **tailor-made and partner-like** approach, rather than hierarchical donor-grantee relationship

3. **long-term capacity development** by combination of financial grants supporting operational costs, individual and joint expert training and peer support and experience sharing

4. universal applicability to **different levels** (individual organization and networks) from local to national, across various topics and types of CSO missions

5. universal applicability in **different** political, cultural, geographical or professional **settings**

6. **low or adequate project administration**

To our knowledge, strengthening the roots of individual organizations and networks has so far been also a rather **rare strategy among grant makers** in the CEE region[1]. The EU and other programmes (such as other CERV, AMIF etc.) usually support specific activities (advocacy, watchdog, service provision, etc.) and topics (education, environment protection, empowerment of vulnerable groups, etc.), but not the internal development of the organizations or networks as such. Focusing on long-term internal development, effectiveness and sustainability, the Stronger Roots Program thus innovatively not only complements the topic- or activity-oriented donors' funding strategies – it can also multiply their impact.

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[1] The current EEA/Norway Grants' Active Citizens Fund with its support on CSO capacity building might be seen as an exception, however it is still more topic oriented and funds to capacity building mentoring and activities are rather limited.

Last, but not least, the Stronger Roots Program enhances experience sharing and networking not only among organizations in a single country, but also **across borders**, fostering mutual understanding and solidarity in the three countries. The three national contexts are simultaneously both similar and different, which makes for effective cross-fertilization and enables the development of more universal methodologies. We are hoping to gradually expand the program to other CEE countries.

Graph 1: Structure of the Stronger Roots Program

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                        │  STRONGER ROOTS PROGRAM     │
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                    ┌──────────────────┴──────────────────┐
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        │  Capacity building    │          │ Financial support (regranting) │
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                              │ Call for proposal 1 │         │ Call for proposal 2 │
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                    │ Individual  │  │ Network to │           │ Individual │
                    │ CSOs to     │  │ strenghten │           │ CSOs to    │
                    │ build social│  │ internal   │           │ match      │
                    │ base        │  │ and        │           │ crowdfunding│
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                    │             │  │collaboration│          │            │
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│ Thematic   │ │ Academy    │ │ Capacily   │ │ Capacily   │ │ Capacily   │
│ session on │ │ capacity   │ │ building   │ │ building   │ │ building on│
│ EU         │ │ building   │ │ on         │ │ on network │ │ crowdfunding│
│ rights/    │ │ program for│ │ socialbase │ │ colaboration│ │            │
│ values for │ │ non-       │ │ building   │ │            │ │            │
│ grantees   │ │ grantees   │ │            │ │            │ │            │
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3/ The Concept: Network Transversal Collaboration

So what is the concept of network transversal collaboration really about? The second pillar of the Stronger Roots Program supports rootedness and connectedness of **CSO networks.** We have defined the CSO networks as:

- civil society structures that **aggregate common interests** of multiple organizations (possibly including also individuals or other networks)

- having **various types of goals** (advocacy, professional development, capacity building, etc.)

- having either **formal** legal status **or** convening as an **informal** grouping, professional or spontaneous initiatives

- using v**arious descriptions** (such as platforms, umbrellas, coalitions, initiatives, federations, working groups and other network-like organizations)

- working at local, regional and/or national level

In order to safeguard the **pro-democracy character** and increase possibility of longer-term impact of the program, the supported networks must comply with the democratic principles and must have been established at least 6 months prior to the call for proposals. program participation to ensure that their level of functioning is ready for transformation. The networks are also encouraged to include small, grassroot and remote members, especially from under-served regions.

3.1 Networks Types and Needs

Networks in civil society act as a **natural bridge** between individual and collective action efforts, on local, regional, national, EU or even global level. Networks provide shared space for access to information, mutual support and more effective responses to joint challenges in given areas that particularly benefit the more fragile or marginalized CSOs. So far, we have been working with various types of networks as well as with various types of gaps they try to bridge.

Focus and Stakeholders

Networks can be described and categorized in various ways. Since we worked closely with only 9 networks in the Stronger Roots program and about another 15 in other Glopolis programs, we use a simple framework to differentiate their **size, formal status**, and in particular their **focus and stakeholders**.

These included networks with individual, organizational and even network members ranging from a dozen to several dozen members. Some are legally incorporated as organizations, while others are informal groupings. Some focused on advocacy or multi-stakeholder negotiations around a policy topic such as climate protection, hate crime prevention or remuneration in the audiovisual industry. Governments or municipalities are key stakeholders of these advocacy networks. Other networks reached out to and created dialogue with other groups in society, i.e. between liberal and conservative groups, urban and rural organizations or younger and older people. Yet another type includes networks that aspire to facilitate collaboration between NGOs and business. Quite a number of the networks also combined outreach to two or more of these groups.

While each network faces a different political, socio-economic, cultural or professional context and different mixtures of interests or approaches among its stakeholders, they all face similar challenges internally as well as in external outreach.

Internal Consolidation and External Action: Networks' Needs

Mapping studies and interviews done during the first phase show that CSO networks in the CEE region often remain formal, transactional and self-serving, and tend to suffer from internal conflicts or a disconnect between secretariats and members. Understaffed and underfunded, they lack capacities to enhance strategic processes such as problem analysis, planning, coordination and learning based on evaluation and experience. Unacknowledged by the outside world, they often fall short of reaching their potential as well as new members or new donors.

Even those networks which are internally consolidated, with established processes and a clear strategy, however, often **lack the ambition**, capacities or skills to effectively engage with other (or more) relevant stakeholders in exchange of information, basic coordination, let alone longer-term complex collaborative processes (such as collective impact) needed to effectively and sustainably tackle the societal challenges their members collectively focus on.

Various stakeholders can be relevant partners for given social change. According to focus groups, interviews and evaluation reports from two dozen CSO networks, however, the extent and quality of relationships with public officials, politicians, businesses or other civil society groups is insufficient. They lack **the capacities and skills** to communicate about common issues, analyze and respond to stakeholders' needs as well as facilitate sustained dialogue and coordinated, collaborative action.

3.2 Theory of Change: Civil Society Embedded through Collaboration among Diverse Stakeholders

Transversal Network Collaboration focuses on strategic engagement of CSO networks spanning various political, cultural and thematic contexts with stakeholder groups of diverging approaches, interests and/or worldviews in order to provide effective solutions to societal challenges, reduce fragmentation and polarization in society and thus contribute to a resilient CSO sector and sustainable democratic societies.

This network transformation has both micro and macro effects, potentially **results**. Engaging constructively with stakeholders around a topic that the CSO network focuses on increases the chance of finding a more complex and lasting, i.e. more effective and sustainable solution. We believe that on a larger scale – and in the longer term – when adopted by other networks, the bulk of the civil society sector and many stakeholders, the collaborative attitude can be successfully applied to find solutions to other challenges or tensions in a society.

How CSOs and citizens more broadly respond to this internal challenge over time is likely mirrored in the attitude to diverse views, approaches and interests of (at least some) external stakeholders, including politicians, government officials or media as well. Therefore, we may call it a **cultural transformation.** If CSOs show higher tolerance and respect to divergent, critical voices, wouldn't many critical voices find it harder to dismiss or even persecute CSOs for opinions they are voicing?

While the micro-level assumption has already been proven in certain sectors (for examples the collective impact results in education reform in Czechia), the macro-impact is still largely a hypothesis (with backing in theories such as that of Ken Wilber and Spiral Dynamics) that needs to be further tested, in particular in the CEE context.

Looking at the impact in the external environment (**external impact**), we attempt to support more **resilient** – i.e. more stable, legitimate, professional – **civil society** (organizations and networks) that are effective in addressing a range of societal challenges. Stronger CSOs are instrumental for both public interest goals, as well as for democracy at large (stronger CSOs are a value per se, but this must not happen at the cost of increased fragmentation or polarization).

Looking a bit deeper, however, at the **internal impact** (we also abbreviate it as the "inpact"[2]), resilience calls for a shift in not only activities, processes and skills, but also for **a shift in mindset and values**: from a closed, past or inward-looking to a more open, future- and outward looking worldview by both CSOs and the various constituencies the CSOs need to work with.

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2   An idea first crafted and discussed at the Porticus grantees seminar in Vienna in February 2019.

Theory of Change – Summary Infographics

Impact – Based on greater mutual understanding, respect and trust CSO networks collaborate with relevant stakeholders to find effective, long-term solutions to the societal challenges they focus on

Outcome – CSO networks have the capacity, know-how and collaborative attitude (open mindedness to diverse views, penchant for building personal relationships, etc.) needed to constructively engage with divergent stakeholder groups, undergo changes themselves and move on along the engagement – collaboration scale with key stakeholders (from communication to collective impact)

Outputs – CSO networks know the environment, the actors, their approach and needs, build/improve relationships and reflect on their own limitations, adjust their internal process and activities to achieve their particular strategic goal

Inputs – funding (grants), concept of transversal collaboration (methodology), sharing and reflection processes

3.3 The Methodology: Financial, Expert and Peer Support

The methodology is still being developed. Some parameters may slightly change for the second phase of the program. This chapter lays out the format used in the first phase. The process during which a CSO network reaches out to and engages diverse (or outright divergent) stakeholder groups in society to achieve its strategic (or broader societal) goals, usually takes **two steps**.

First, the network usually needs to review its strategy and internal processes, make sure it has clear goals and consensus among current membership for goals and types of engagement with the particular diverse (and especially divergent) stakeholder group or groups. We call this step an **internal consolidation**.

In the second step, network representatives try to improve existing and/or build new, longer-term relationships with stakeholder groups such as government administration, local authorities, business associations or other civil society groups (e.g. church groups). These groups can either become new members of the network or partners in collective (impact) efforts. This is the actual **outreach**. A more intense communication allows the network to learn about and understand the wider context of societal challenges at hand – the positions and thinking, limitations and needs of an/other stakeholder/s. This in turn leads to adjustment or expansion of network activities, or even processes and strategies.

As the network becomes more able to react to societal challenges and to address needs of others, it becomes more acknowledged and accepted as a relevant stakeholder, umbrella or partner, by other stakeholders and able to engage more actors and resources for social change. Supporting

network transversal collaboration thus has an impact on the overall **resilience** – legitimacy, effectiveness and sustainability of the organizations associated in the network, or even the whole CSO (sub)sector.

Just as with social base building, this can be quite **a transformative process** as it often requires and/or results in a new approach to identifying and implementing the CSO's collective goals and/or a new perception of its role or identity. Some networks may for instance shift strategic goals, involve stakeholders much more closely in decision-making or move from advocacy towards facilitation.

Impact of the Program inside the network, not just in the outside environment, is therefore an important element of Program evaluation (for more see chapter 3.4). Backed by grants and a support program, a network transversal collaboration project is designed to **create space and time** for such transformation – for the network team, secretariat and/or the member CSOs to find their own ways to consolidate the network and engage with the most relevant stakeholders.

Financial Grants

The Program includes a Call for Proposals on CSO network projects up to 18 month long ranging from € 10,000 – 30,000 each in the target countries. The grant provides the network with a basic financial cushion for these processes, which require extra time and energy.

The support program complements the grant by allowing tailor-made knowledge and skills building, peer learning and consultation support by the grant maker's team that shall benefit the network in the long run. The **knowledge and skills areas** typically needed for network collaboration include effective external communication, meeting and network organization, deep listening and facilitation, personal relationship building, organizational collaboration and learning, and can go as far as to the methodologies of collective impact.

Support Program

The **support program** has focused on three key elements:

- Continuous dialogue and consultancy: From preparing the application to final evaluation, the grant makers' team is in regular, close contact with the grantee network representatives. They develop more of a partnership relationship, discuss and reflect on important aspects of the project. The network receives continuous feedback and support in resolving issues that arise during the project implementation.

- Peer sharing and learning: The grantees regularly meet on both national and regional level, all together or in specific groups focusing on similar themes or types of activity (advocacy vs. public dialogue networks, etc.). The sharing sessions allow them to both share their knowledge and experience, learn from each other as well as receive feedback, inspiration or other types of peer support. Interactive sharing and learning modules are also part of evaluation activities (such as focus groups, mid-term and final conferences).

- Specific and tailor-made trainings: As the networks face both shared and specific needs, the grantees can select a joint training course or their own expert consultation, training or other capacity building activity tailor made to their particular needs.

Graph 2: Capacity Development

Training on Effective Colaboration with Miki Kashtan

Training on Comunication: Value, hope, action with Philip Doyle and Gesine Schmledbauer

Training on Deep listening with Rosamund Oliver

Extra expert consultations

Experience sharing: colaboration in covid times (CZ + SK grantees)

Pro-action Cafe – experience sharing session in Brno

3.4 The Evaluation Framework: Perspectives, Indicators and Levels of Networks' Development

There are **multiple perspectives** that can be used to evaluate such a complex program that seeks to enhance the capacities, skills and attitudes of a range of different grantees with the ambition to contribute to addressing large social challenges. Rather than distinct alternatives, however, all the perspectives are important and **complementary**.

Grantee's Perspective

The most immediate focus an evaluation can have is on the change for each network (**perspective of the grantee**) and how the grant contributed to a change in a particular theme in a specific (political, cultural, geographic, etc.) context.

This change usually has aspects of both internal consolidation and more effective external outreach. Most networks first undergo a phase of reviewing their strategic goals and processes before they can approach new stakeholders. Often, there is a back and forth flow to internal and external adjustments, where feedback from outreach translates into internal adjustments, which then leads to a change in the quantity or quality of engagement with external stakeholders.

We therefore need to discern between **shorter- and longer-term results**. In the short term, grantees can move forward with some activities and acquire certain knowledge and skills. Yet, their effect on both collaboration with stakeholders and internal development is only visible over a period of several years. Strategic changes in a given topical area occur as a result of more coordination and joint activities with more stakeholders. Our experience confirms that as a collaborative approach bears fruit, the mindset and values of a network and its members also shift.

Grantmaker's Perspective

A more ambitious objective of the program is change at the level of the whole CSO sector or even society (**perspective of the grantmaker**).The majority of the skills and attitudes acquired through the projects which are necessary for effective collaboration with divergent stakeholders are not specific to the given theme or context. They can be used time and again for different strategic goals, in different contexts.

Thus, impact is not just a matter of the **program's** duration, but also of its **scale**. That includes both the number of countries served, number of networks receiving grants, expert and peer support and the scale of stakeholders addressed by each grantee. What matters is also the quantity and quality of networks which are not supported directly, but also begin to adopt more collaborative attitudes to their work as a result of the program's other educational, awareness-raising or communication activities.

The **combined** longer-term effects of all the grantees – and other CSO networks undergoing similar change – can impact the **CSO sector as a whole**. Finally, our theory of change assumes that change in conditions for CSOs happens as a result of changes in the mindsets and values of other key actors in the given environment. It postulates that CSO networks need to become the examples and inspire and/or convince other actors – their stakeholders from civil society, business and government – to follow suit in adopting a more collaborative approach. If the program manages to run long enough and the concept reaches out to a critical number of various actors and contexts, the impact should transfer from the CSO sector to the critical mass of the **society**.

Naturally, we repeatedly stumbled over the question of what is the ultimate impact – and ultimate theory of change – of our program. Does society change more as a result of the combined strategic changes achieved by all CSO networks in their given themes and contexts (changed legislation, implemented proposals, joint sectoral strategies, etc.), i.e. what is the standard understanding of **(external) impact**?

Or does society change because of the capability of the CSO networks (as key civil society actors) to understand the nature of any given societal challenge, find a common denominator with any key stakeholders about ways of tackling the challenge and adapt their objectives and processes to effectively play their part,, i.e something we call the **internal impact** – **InPact**?

We believe that both are important and interlinked. The efficacy of the capability to collaborate is effectively demonstrated through concrete changes in particular contexts. If these changes are sustainable and replicable, then the capability to collaborate is what we need to support the most.

Results and Indicators

Given the 18-month maximum duration of grants, our evaluation framework for the first phase of the CSO network collaboration program so far has focused on shorter-term effects, a combination of grantees' and grantmaker's perspectives and is intended to reflect both internal and external results to the extent possible.

The evaluation tracks to what extent the project has changed attitudes and efforts regarding network collaboration among the networks' leaders (such as secretariats, steering committees, etc.) and member organizations, and to what extent the supported project has helped them to strengthen their engagement with selected stakeholder group/s, using the following quantitative, but mostly qualitative indicators. Aligned with the evaluation of the sister program on social base building, we also followed the logic of **awareness-capacity-performance**, but differentiating capacities for internal development and capacities for collaboration:

- Increased network awareness of the conditions for collaboration (with members or stakeholders)
  - change in the networks' understanding of their environment/topic
  - change in the extent to which networks assess and address the needs of their stakeholder/s or potential members
  - change in networks' perception of skills or attitudes they need for collaboration (with potential members or stakeholders)

- Increased network capacity for internal development
  - change in neworks' skills/attitudes and mindset/values
  - change in networks' internal processes and overall strategy

- Increased network capacity for collaboration (with members inside or stakeholders outside the network)
  - change in strategies/tactics or positions towards stakeholder/s or potential members
  - change in number of new members acquired or new stakeholders approached
  - change in relationships with stakeholder/s or members
  - change in quantity and quality of joint activities with members or stakeholder/s

- Improved performance in achieving networks' strategic objectives
  - change against networks' strategic goals and indicators selected for their supported grant project

Measurement Scales – Levels of Networks' Development

As the **starting points** as well as **ambitions** of the networks vary it makes more sense to use relative rather than absolute measures to mark the changes the program has brought about.

Each network's overall progress in both internal development and development of collaboration with members inside and stakeholders outside the network[3] has therefore been **illustrated on a scale**. The various levels mostly represent the stages on a path to more complex mindset and col-

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3   For the sake of evaluation, it does not matter whether the objective of the network is to turn stakeholders into new members or build some form of external collaboration with them.

laboration, but we call them levels because not all of them are relevant for all networks. Missions of some of the networks focus only on achieving a certain level and their ambition is not to reach the end of the scale. Each consecutive stage marks a more complex process.

For instance, for those who aim at complex, long-term kinds of collaboration outside the network, the first two levels are about laying the **groundwork** for collaboration and might be called "pre-collaboration". The third through fifth level are about **increasing the depth** of collaboration. The Program aims at moving each participating network further/higher on the scales considering what is their starting point and what is the ambition of their mission.

Each of the three scale, however, stands rather for an index **composite of particular aspects**. For instance, overall collaboration with diverse members inside the network depends on the depth of diverse members' engagement, quantity and quality of outreach for new members and other factors. For precise and nuanced assessment, each should be captured on separate subscale, but we have not managed that in the first phase of the program.

DEVELOPMENT OF COLLABORATION INSIDE THE NETWORK –
Levels of Engagement with Diverse Members

Level 1 – Limited Diversity of Membership – closed, not reaching out to diverse interests, approaches, views

Level 2 – Passive Membership – Diverse members only passively receiving info, voting at assembly, hesitant in further outreach

Level 3 – Partially Active – Diverse members included in working, coordination bodies, stratified membership, some wooing of other members

Level 4 – Fully-Engaged – Diverse members leading workflows, part of decision making, programmatic outreach

Graph 3: Transversal Collaboration Inside Scale

DEVELOPMENT OF COLLABORATION OUTSIDE THE NETWORK –
Levels of Engagement with Diverse External Groups

Level 1 – Network makes **contact** with the stakeholder, provides information or advocates for a cause and tries to find out more about the stakeholder's interests and needs.

Level 2 – Communication moves from one-way information sharing to a **dialogue** with the stake-

holder. More frequent, intentional communication often leads to some consensus, even if only around some issues.

Level 3 – Network builts on the agreement on some of the issues, identifies common denominators and **coordinates initial joint activities** with the stakeholder.

Level 4 – Collaboration develops into a **partnership**. Both the network and the stakeholder contribute repeatedly or continuously in order to advance their shared interests.

Level 5 – Multiple, diverse parties agree on a **joint vision and/or long-term strategy** on how to approach a complex problem collectively (possibly joint metrics or mechanisms). Their collaboration involves not only joint planning, regular communication and coordination, but also evaluation and reflection.

Graph 5: Transversal Collaboration Outside Scale

DEVELOPMENT OF NETWORK'S MINDSET
(individuals, organizations, network leadership)

Level 1 – Little effort to change understanding of the environment and reflect on one's own approach.

Level 2 – Basic awareness of external and internal challenges, improving tactics, operational processes and pragmatic skills.

Level 3 – Deeper understanding of the situation and network's role, changing strategies, decision-making processes and attitudes.

Level 4 – Profound reflection of context and own role/identity, broadening entire mindset, encompassing new values.

Graph 6: Internal Transformation Trajectory

4/ The Impact: Networks' Transformative Collaboration

The overall goal of the Stronger Roots Program has been to increase the effectiveness and resilience of CSOs and their networks in Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary, strengthen their social capital and embed them in the communities and societies in which they operate.

The Stronger Roots Program was started in May 2019. The Network Transversal Collaboration pillar provided grant, expert and peer support to 9 selected networks from September 2020 to March 2022. This publication was written in April–May 2022 and hence it was possible to evaluate only the individual and combined results of the grants over this 18-month period.

The short time range limits our possibilities to test longer-term effects. In addition, the focus of the Network Transversal Collaboration program underwent an evolution itself. The initial ambitions had to be reduced not only because of the relatively short time available, but also due to the complexity of the objectives and diversity of network types, states and needs.

Impact Summary

According to both grantees' and external evaluators' reports, the Program has contributed to achieving the strategic objectives of the CSO networks (**increasing effectiveness**) and to building their resources and ability to adapt to external changes (**increasing resilience**).

The focus was especially on extending or improving the relationships of CSO networks with the most relevant external stakeholders (**strengthening bridging social capital**) so as to engage with them (more) in addressing various societal challenges (**networks' strategic objectives**), embedding them in societies and ultimately reducing fragmentation and polarization in these societies.

The Program helped strengthen engagement of CSO networks with divergent stakeholder groups. A key contribution was funding, which brought **increased capacities, energy and commitment** to undertake activities focused on transversal collaboration and the networks' strategic objectives. Especially structured needs assessment, intense communication and facilitation of dialogue with divergent groups helped networks better **understand the needs of others** and develop the role and values of some of the networks.

Changes in infrastructure, processes or approaches influenced membership engagement and vice versa. These **internal changes** contributed to strengthening collaboration of each network with at least one target group. Around half of the supported networks experienced some quick wins on their path towards strategic objectives. Nevertheless, the established collaborations are likely fragile and dedicated capacities are further needed.

Obviously, **„depolarizing" or „defragmentation"of society** might not only take years, or rather decades to be achieved, but also this kind of change on the level of the whole society is very difficult to measure and expensive to prove. Even if such a trend could be identified in or more countries of Program's operation, it would be close to impossible to establish a correlation with our Program.

Yet, some hints about the **growing legitimacy of the CSO networks** (their embeddedness in communities and societies in which they operate) can be found in feedback on grantee projects gained through triangulation.

We divide the description of the program's impact into three subchapters. The first subchapter (4.1) is looking at the results from the grantee's perspective and evaluates the **projects' results** and contribution to networks' strategic objectives. Next we assess the **program results** from the grantmaker's point of view in terms of the manifested immediate results (4.2) as well as of the potential we see for deeper, long/term impact (4.3). Finally (4.4), the results are summarized chronologically to reflect the theory of change.

4.1 Network Project and Strategic Results

Specific goals networks set for their 12–16 month projects ranged from broadening and diversifying networks; fostering dialogue, shared goal-setting and collaboration among partners; and taking joint steps in the grantee's interest area (e.g. policy advocacy, improving the environment or services for particular target groups). All networks met their **project goals** fully or partially. One-third of the grantees reported that they had fully met their project goals. Another five grantees, all with multiple goals, met some of their goals fully and some partially. Only one grantee reported just partial fulfillment of its main goal.
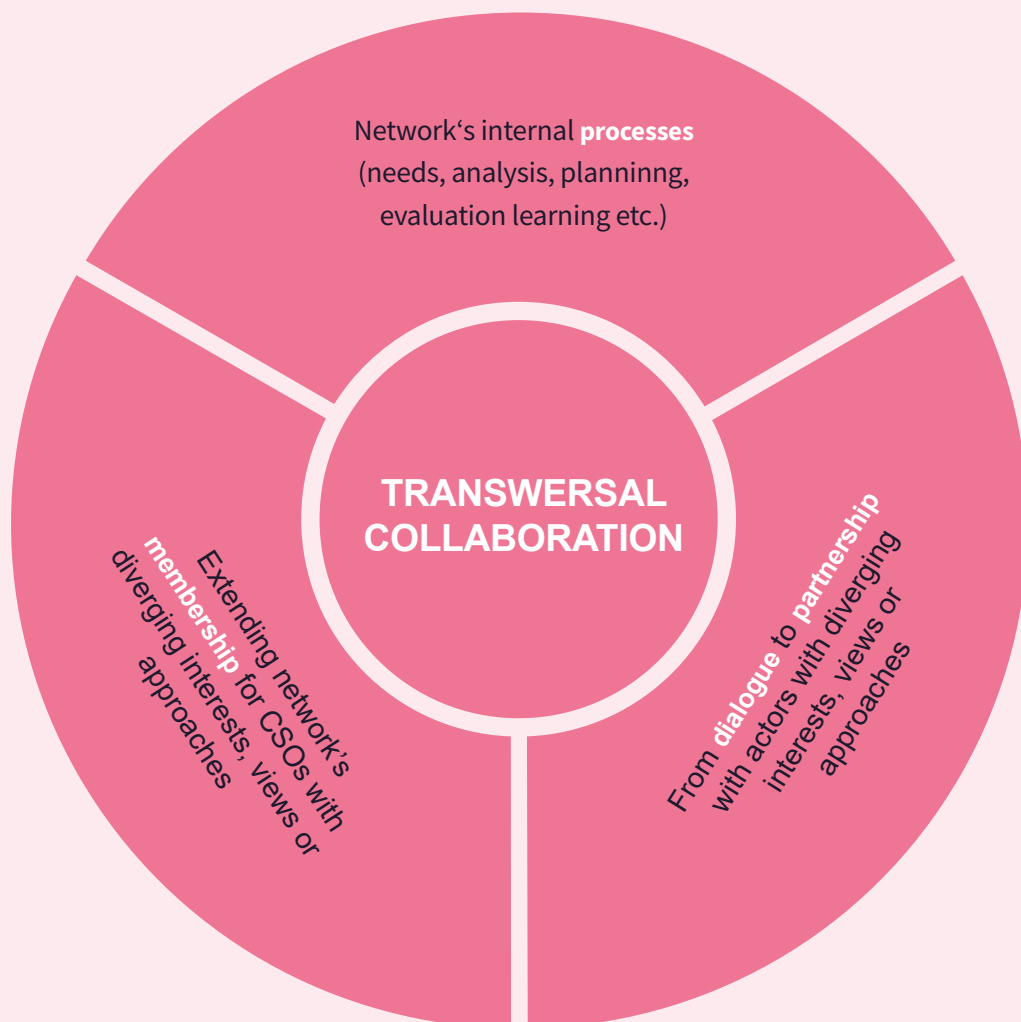
Goals centered around a very concrete common task, such as influencing policy, legislation or creating a specific tool such as a handbook, were **met fully**. Additionally, goals aiming to build cooperation or trust at an unspecified level, or develop a strategy for collaboration, were also met fully. Looking at the goals that were **met partially**, some that require more intensive collaboration such as developing a joint strategy or creating a network including external partners stand out. In other cases, the goal was only partially achieved due to obstacles that arose unexpectedly (e.g. attempts at dialogue among network members uncovered deep-seated differences of opinion).

All nine networks reported that the project helped them fulfill their **strategic goals.** In four cases, grantees broadened and/or diversified their networks in order to increase potential to achieve network goals. Three grantees created space for dialogue among stakeholders, which they consider the basis for developing suitable solutions. One grantee noted that collaboration and communication improved between networks, thus enabling more effective advocacy, and another reported that the project contributed to the strategic goal of increasing transparency and building trust between actors.

4.2 Immediate Program Impact: Taking the Outside In

Apart from having fully or partially achieved their project results each network experienced changes in one or more of the following 3 areas: network`s **internal changes**, **engagement with divergent stakeholders inside or/and outside** the network. Five networks reached a fairly advanced level of stakeholder engagement, three networks welcomed more members with divergent views and all made profound internal changes. In fact, grantees agreed that the areas are interlinked – internal changes influence membership as well as stakeholder engagement and vice versa. This iterative, spiral-like process of mutual reinforcement between internal changes and engagement with divergent internal/external stakeholders ultimately determines networks' achievement of strategic objectives.

Graph 7: Three areas of changes

Network's internal **processes** (needs, analysis, planninng, evaluation learning etc.)

TRANSWERSAL COLLABORATION

Extending network's **membership** for CSOs with diverging interests, views or approaches

From **dialogue to partnership** with actors with diverging interests, views or approaches

4.2.1 Inside the Networks: Strengthening Memberships

The networks focusing (partly or fully) on **collaboration inside** – on strengthened membership – saw either **new members** joining the network or **existing members** becoming more included and engaged. In some cases both. In fact, most networks (no matter whether focusing on collaboration inside or outside) were facing a gap between a core group of active members and the rather passive rest, or another group active in their field, but outside the network.

Therefore, the objective was often to first **include** the more distant (i.e. smaller, rural or remote) organizations, regardless of whether they are formal existing or potential new members, and then **engage** them in the network's activities. Some networks also modified their strategies to approach partners and acquire new members. Examples include:

- Switching from a purely tailored membership approach to a stratified approach.

- Shifting from persuading potential members to offering. This was in line with a new emphasis on humility in growing the network.

The Stronger Roots projects helped the networks increase their visibility and create new energy to engage members in their causes. Closer collaboration introduced (often hand in hand with increased transparency) during the project contributed to greater trust, **respect** among networks' members and their representatives (secretariats), including those with different views, as well as **motivation** to work together on network's strategic objectives.

For instance, **members with diverse views** joined new working groups, started collaborating with other members, were added to coordination or decision-making bodies or directly involved in strategic debates or key decisions that matter to all. Alternatively, new members were invited to co-organize the network's events.
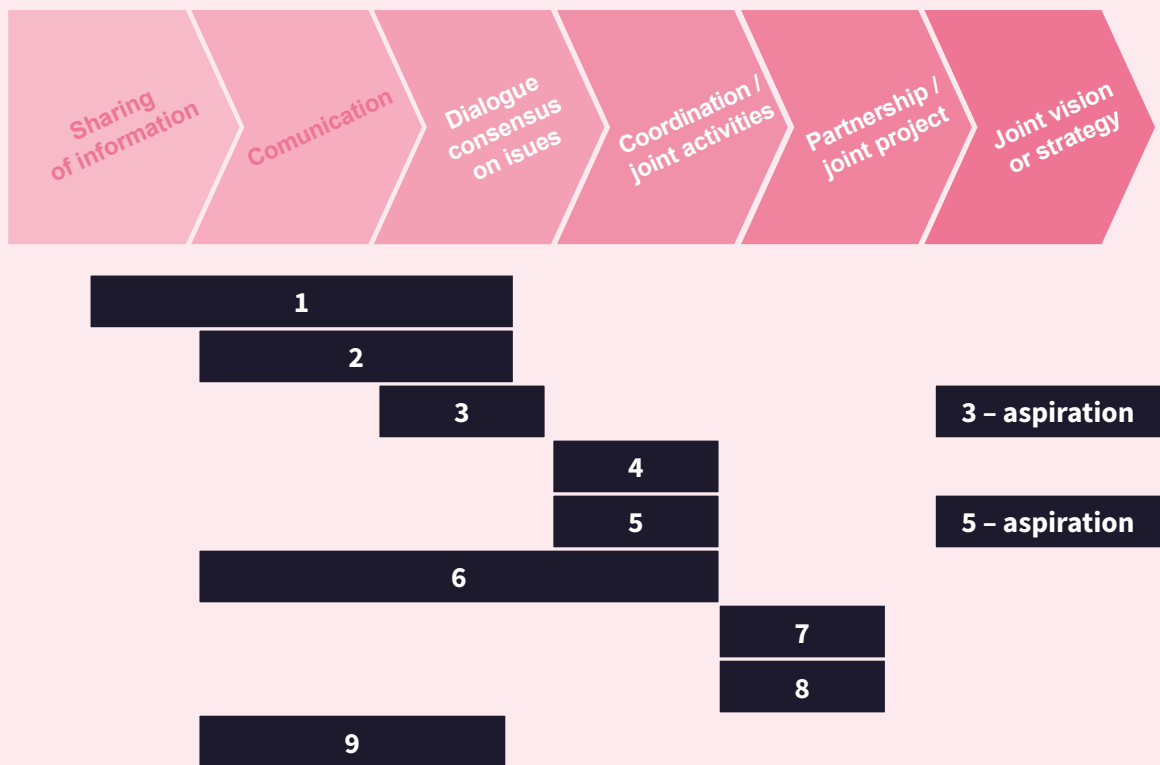
4.2.2 Outside the Networks: Strengthening Partnerships

Among those networks focused on **collaboration outside**, a vast majority admittedly had no direct interaction or just one-way communication with the selected stakeholder group/s at the beginning of the Stronger Roots projects. Only one network reported a dialogue and one coordination of activities. Over the 16 months, all these networks strengthened their engagement with **external stakeholders**.

Moving 1 to 4 steps from left to right on the scale below[4] networks **started a dialogue, coordination or collaboration on joint projects** with their „target" groups. The network who reported coordination of activities at the project beginning felt that they were even heading towards **collective impact**. Two or three aspire to create a joint strategy or vision with target groups in the future, while others aim at coordination, joint activities or partnership.

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4   The scale was developed by the authors of this report as per narrative reports and focus groups. The first 3-4 steps may be considered as pre-collaboration. Changes are complex and uneven in transversal collaboration. They were said to differ per actor and even individual representatives of these actors. So the scale should be used with caution (to facilitate reflection and planning, not to "measure" success).

Graph 9: External Stakeholders Engagement Achieved and Aspired

Each numbered rectangle refers to one project and shows the degree of engagement/collaboration achieved. The aspiration blocks indicate the level of collaboration that the grantee hopes to work toward in the future.

Nevertheless, **the degree of transversality, mutuality or continuity** of the engagement achieved varied. For example, joint projects were launched with some of the new groups outside the network, but not with those with divergent views. In another case, a grantee network found the new partnership unequal and willingness to cooperate limited to the areas of interest of the partner. Yet another network experienced a shift from ad hoc to continuous collaboration.

Three networks realized midway that their goals for outside collaboration were **too ambitious**. They either scaled down the goal or experienced more divergence inside the network than before the outreach. Nevertheless, despite **tensions and disputes** among members with divergent views that disrupted the both projects and the collaboration the strategic causes, all members hoped to resume the dialogue once tensions eased.

4.2.3 Network Transformation: Strengthening Process and Skills

All the five projects which reached a fairly advanced collaboration level of coordinating joint activities or joint projects actively work with their stakeholder group needs or, in one case, are planning to do so.

Several networks saw benefits of this new engagement such as that the (new) group with diverse views is able to **point out weaknesses** that the core group doesn't see. On the other hand, in one case (see Annex y), convergence and more engagement were achieved at the cost of some members leaving the network.

Needs of stakeholders

In an effort to strengthen collaboration with stakeholders inside or outside, all networks carried out **a needs assessment** among the respective groups, which most of them had not conducted systematically before. As a result of their grant projects, expert support or peer exchange, all of them highlighted a **shift in understanding and reflecting the needs** of members or external groups.

Graph 10: Target Needs Scale:

No collecting needs of other actors > Aware of needs of other actors > Understanding of needs of other actors > Actively reflecting the needs of other actors

Two-thirds gained **new insights** about the stakeholder groups' issues, positions, but also challenges and/or perceptions. Several grantees said they now **think more deeply** about the respective groups: accepting them more, being more sensitive to their issues, thinking critically about how the network labeled a particular group. Several others discovered that whom they often called target groups were willing or even eager to engage and share their experience.

The networks have also all **reflected** their stakeholder groups' **needs in their work** or plan to do so in the near future for instance by:

- providing requested information to them or more transparency overall

- being ready to respond to their concerns

- aiming at non-confrontational approach, more careful language and framing or focusing on shared values

- reflecting or anticipating their specific needs in communication, policy proposals or advocacy strategy

- organizing more in-person meetings, including them in planning and other activities

- offering new, more flexible forms of membership or partnership

- redesigning existing or introducing new services

That does not mean that all networks have reflected all needs of all their stakeholders, but as a principle, all supported networks are committed now to reflecting the stakeholder needs in their work in the future.

Organizational processes

Networks **organizational processes** include needs analysis, planning, monitoring, evaluation, learning as well as internal communication, members support and development, fundraising, rules setting or strategic and operational decision making.

At the beginning of an engagement process, each network (or organization) typically undertakes several steps before the first contact such as clarifying goals, learning about the stakeholder. After establishing initial contact, further engagement is built through a set of steps. All these steps along with experiences and recommendation from the grantee networks, including tips for effective meeting and what to do if you run into hiccups, are summarized in the other publication (How to Engage with Divergent Stakeholders: Experiences and Recommendations for CSO Networks).

As a result of seeing their stakeholder groups and **the broader operating environments in new ways** the following key changes in internal structures and processes were introduced or planned:

- formalizing governance structure (e.g. differentiating regular members, voting members, board and coordinator)

- streamlining workflows and data collection

- integrating reflection and planning

- extending coordination, consultation or decision-making bodies to incorporate stakeholder groups more directly in key processes such as strategy development

- introducing new communication strategy or guidelines

- engaging an external facilitator or mediator in an effort to ease tensions

- establishing a paid coordinator for a similar workload / future project.

Collaborative skills

Adjusting internal processes have usually called for acquiring or refining corresponding skills. What proved important to grantees in order to effectively engage with stakeholders apart from systematic (in fact, ongoing) assessment and analysis of the stakeholder needs was in particular:

- careful listening and ongoing **reflection** of their perspectives

- identifying and weighing **ways to respond** to stakeholders' needs and perspectives

- **communication** with very different people, both about what we have in common as well as about what divides us, including avoiding jargon or loaded expressions

- **constructive facilitation** of the strategic dialogue and coordinated action, sometimes even **mediation** in case of deep disagreements or tensions

- **product/service development** – for the CSOs to be able to offer something useful and meaningful to the partners

- and practical skills such as effective **meeting and network organization**

Networks supported by the Program noted new skill development both in the core project teams as well as among representatives of member organizations. These included deep listening and facilitation, personal relationship building and organizational collaboration, skills covered by training workshops. The most frequently mentioned skill and also most appreciated workshop was **communication**, both internally (communicating with members, facilitating network discussions and mentoring) and externally (negotiating with partners, incorporating the needs of an external stakeholder into communication).

4.3   Deeper Program Impact: Mindset Opening Up the Society?

The methodology for the program evaluation was very intense: initial questionnaires, mid-term and final reports and meeting with grantees, focus groups and selected triangulation all processed by internal as well as external evaluators. However, a year and a half of interactions with representatives of nine networks can only provide **a glimpse into the potential** a long-term, scaled-up program could have.

However, deeper impact of all the grantee networks' projects combined with expert support, peer sharing, evaluation and reflection can be seen in commonalities between most of them in terms of advancing the longer term (or repetitive) capability of networks **to** effectively **engage with any stakeholder/s on any issue** that might arise.

This **capability** involves more than improved internal processes and structures, refined or newly acquired engagement skills. Or more precisely, the scale, depth, and quality of these internal changes seems to depend on how far perception and thinking evolved in a given network.

All of the networks changed internally to some degree. In four cases, the changes were more of a **technical** nature: streamlining of processes, creation of new working methods, expanding the network's approach from mediation to facilitation or formalizing its structure. One grantee forged closer collaboration between the two networks engaged in the project.

Four other projects brought about more **profound** changes to network strategies, decision-making processes or values. For example, representatives of the stakeholder group were engaged in decision-making, strategies were adapted to address stakeholder group issues, or the network incorporated the values of the stakeholder group or confirmed its own.

One network representative appreciated skill development in the member acquisition process as well as softer skills (or attitudes) like patience and a greater understanding of others.

Furthermore, the four grantees which collaborated on the higher level of joint activities were the same four which profoundly changed their networks internally. More in-depth examination of the projects would be required to analyze the linkages. The most crucial foundation for such ability to engage effectively and flexibly with the world around us as it is, as it will be, is the prevailing **mindset**.

Two specific categories we show as examples within this InPact center around how the CSO networks' **relationship to and with** the stakeholders changed and how their **attitudes** changed.

Cultivating Relationships

Regular exchange and Intense communication with stakeholders brought greater **understanding, legitimacy and trust**, more interest, depth and continuity in cooperation or collaboration with key partners. In several projects, relationships among members or partners developed in unanticipated ways.

In two projects, efforts to forge partnerships opened up **unexpected potential for collaboration** with specific stakeholder groups (Roma youth groups and people with lived experience from prison) that networks plan on cultivating further. One network was invited to join a new government working group due to the project. Another network became seen as an expert entity and was asked to comment on a new initiative. Yet, another was perceived as a platform for discussion around emerging issues, but had to admit it has limited capability to respond to some legal issues.

One grantee also noted that aside from collaboration with external partners, the project had unexpectedly strengthened relationships **among the core network members**. In contrast, in another project that had envisioned network members working closely together, the degree of divergence among members turned out to be greater than expected, which formed a formidable barrier to collaboration.

Evolving Attitudes

A number of grantees described how their **thinking on collaboration evolved**. In one project, there was a shift from ad hoc to continuous collaboration – both between the two core networks, and with the business sector and political actors. Better understanding of the stakeholder groups' needs and perspectives helped some grantees see their issues from a different angle. Even in a case where dispute over strategy that led four members to leave the network, long term cooperation and a non-confrontational approach were underscored as key values.
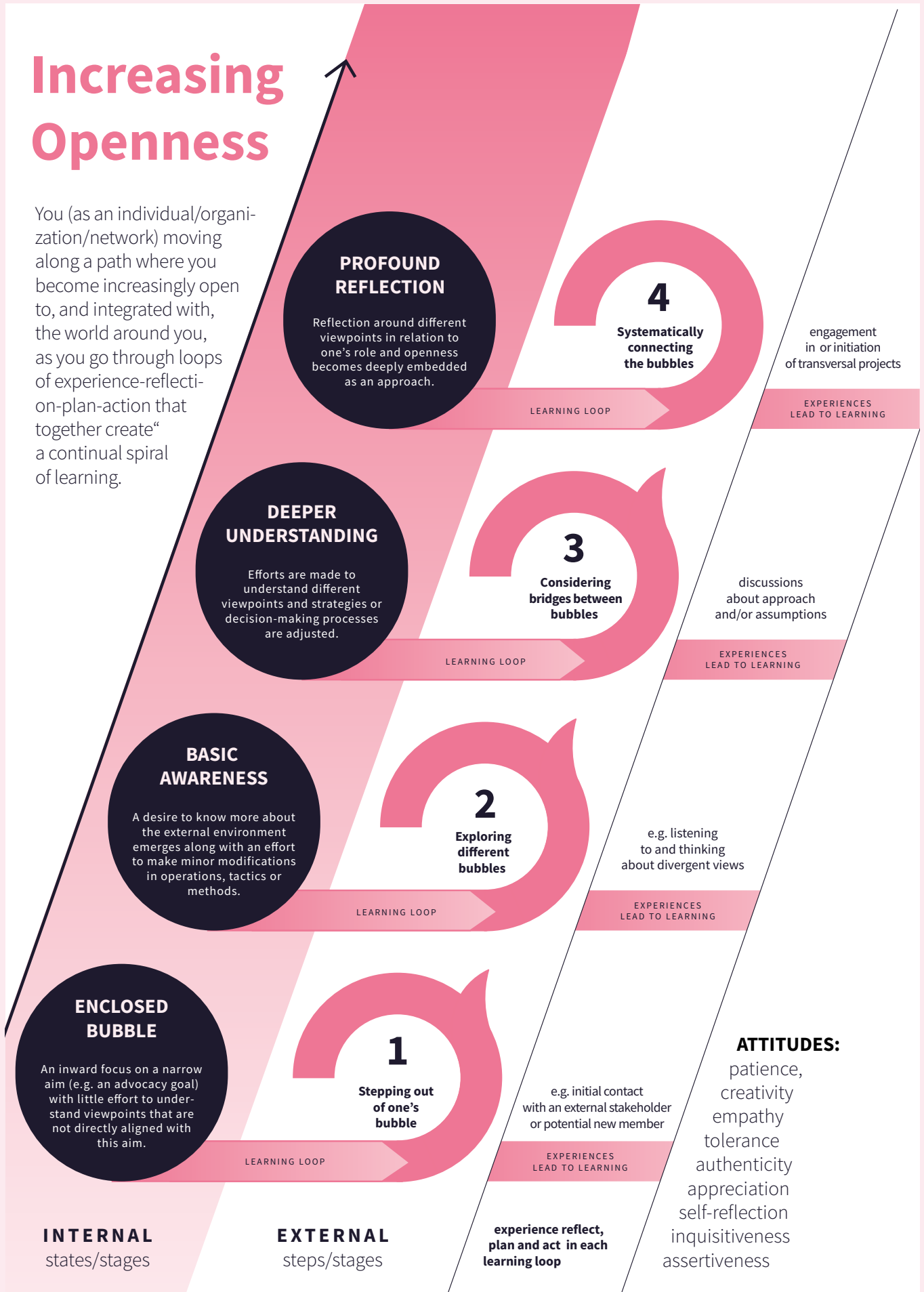
Ultimately, we have found out that transversal collaboration (on a network, but also organizational or individual level) brings about some degree of **transformation**. Depending on their ultimate ambition and readiness the process moves people and their structures from enclosed bubbles and basic awareness of the others to greater understanding, reflection of, and integration with, the world around them. Each experience of interaction with divergent views triggers reflection altering plans and resulting in different quantity and/or quality of action.

This increasing openness is not necessarily a straightforward or linear process. It can progress in such stages, but also in multiple loops whereby moving a step forward to a more complex relationship with external stakeholder/s can lead to pausing, reflecting internally or even stepping back again before next action. The infographics (Graph 11) below attempts to grasp development (or evolution) of both how increasing openness manifests on the outside (external) and what changes in the mindset, i.e. internal development. We also list the engagement attitudes representatives of the grantee networks observed as helpful in moving on towards more complex collaboration.

Increasing Openness

You (as an individual/organization/network) moving along a path where you become increasingly open to, and integrated with, the world around you, as you go through loops of experience-reflection-plan-action that together create" a continual spiral of learning.

PROFOUND REFLECTION

Reflection around different viewpoints in relation to one's role and openness becomes deeply embedded as an approach.

4
Systematically connecting the bubbles

LEARNING LOOP

engagement in or initiation of transversal projects

EXPERIENCES LEAD TO LEARNING

DEEPER UNDERSTANDING

Efforts are made to understand different viewpoints and strategies or decision-making processes are adjusted.

3
Considering bridges between bubbles

LEARNING LOOP

discussions about approach and/or assumptions

EXPERIENCES LEAD TO LEARNING

BASIC AWARENESS

A desire to know more about the external environment emerges along with an effort to make minor modifications in operations, tactics or methods.

2
Exploring different bubbles

LEARNING LOOP

e.g. listening to and thinking about divergent views

EXPERIENCES LEAD TO LEARNING

ENCLOSED BUBBLE

An inward focus on a narrow aim (e.g. an advocacy goal) with little effort to understand viewpoints that are not directly aligned with this aim.

1
Stepping out of one's bubble

LEARNING LOOP

e.g. initial contact with an external stakeholder or potential new member

EXPERIENCES LEAD TO LEARNING

INTERNAL
states/stages

EXTERNAL
steps/stages

experience reflect, plan and act in each learning loop

ATTITUDES:
patience,
creativity
empathy
tolerance
authenticity
appreciation
self-reflection
inquisitiveness
assertiveness

4.4 Impact Over Time

In the short-term, we have seen that supported networks (better) develop relationships with, and understand the needs of, their (existing and/or potential) members and stakeholders, and begin to address these needs more systematically. The networks identify and build some of the skills (communication, meeting organization, deep listening or facilitation) as well as consolidate internal processes (analysis, planning, evaluation learning, etc.) needed for more effective internal and external collaboration.

In the medium term, we can already see a trend of actual joint activities organized by the networks that engage (new) members and/or (new) stakeholders in addressing joint challenges. This begins to slowly alter networks' understanding of the broader context, possibly even perception of their own role, leading to adjustment in strategies, positions, formats of activities. There are light traces of this also triggering changes on the part of the stakeholders, over time being more ready and able to contribute to collective efforts.

Finally, **in the long-term**, we have little evidence so far, but we believe transformed organizations and evolved mindset will allow more effective solutions to more complex problems in the three countries. The collective efforts will bring more sustainable and democratic solutions to challenges of these and other societies if the program is replicated. The more inclusive, relevant and accountable civil society subsectors become acknowledged as relevant partners by the larger society, and the stronger public support, the more effective voice in decision making and more stable resources – the stronger roots – they will have. This will increase public participation in civic activities and strengthen civil society and democratic values in the CEE region and Europe reducing their fragmentation and polarization.

5/ The Conclusion: Thinking and Language in Evolution

The concept of transversal collaboration based on Glopolis long experience of working with networks was in the making for several years before the Stronger Roots program began. Having gone through the **full cycle** of designing, implementation and evaluation of this rather innovative program we are glad that most of the assumptions from 2018 hold.

There is a lot of learning to be reflected and acted upon in the next phase of both specific program and general methodology development.

It is interesting to note for instance that **advanced collaboration levels** have been paired with attention paid to stakeholder group needs, more profound changes in the processes and attitudes of the networks, but also with the degree to which the strategic goals – and willingness to cooperate – were shared between core of the network and selected stakeholders.

One aspect we still need to elaborate on, therefore, is the **limits of the concept**. Another important observation relates to the rather **arbitrary border** between potential new members or new partners. What might be called internal vs. external stakeholders dilema is rather a scale of divergence in reality of transversal collaboration. Whether collaboration takes place hinges more on the above mentioned factors than on whether the stakeholders are involved with the network formally or informally.

Clearly, a deeper impact requires more in-depth examination of the projects and more time to see how they actually develop further. We definitely plan to stay in touch with the nine grantees and support them further to the extent desired and possible. We would also like to proceed in the next phase with **capacity building support for non-grantees** through a series of workshops, webinars and experience sharing sessions. This would allow to strengthen collaborative competencies of CSO networks that are not ready yet for, or do not need, a full-fledged program processes

The three years also pointed to the pitfalls of **evaluation**. While we walked a long way in giving the concept a concrete and fitting evaluation framework, we feel there is still a lot of work to do in terms of precising the scales, weight and interactions of different factors and making sure the framework captures key developments in various particular contexts and types of networks.
In fact, scale as the main type of measure might be better replaced by a spiral or system of double or triple loops.

The hardest, but very exciting part of impact measurement is by all means the quality of **transformative change**. We need to pay more attention especially to the shifts of mindset. We believe

the broadening of values, perspective and attitudes in individual as well as institutional minds holds the key to cultural wars we have been witnessing in the past decade all over the West.

A very important, but tricky factor to watch is the **language** we use to talk about us and the others. It is not just WE and THEM versus US TOGETHER. We could see the slight shifts in vocabulary during the whole program period on a number of more subtle fronts. Let us give three examples to demonstrate the mindset shift is really happening: a changing perception of stakeholders more as potential partners (two-way interaction) rather than a sheer target group (one-way interaction); change becoming more of an evolution (process) rather than abrupt new quality (state); and advocacy (convincing) turning into negotiation and facilitation of a joint process (invitation or offer).

We believe that you find transversal collaboration also an exciting journey, relevant well beyond effectiveness and resilience of CSO networks, and will join us in further collaboration on advancing collaboration. :-)

STRONGER ROOTS

The Stronger Roots Program is jointly implemented by a consortium created by Open Society Fund Prague (CZ), Open Society Foundation Bratislava (SK), Glopolis (CZ) and the NIOK Foundation (HU). The Program aims to increase the resilience of civil society organizations and their networks in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, strengthen their social capital and embed them in the communities and societies in which they operate. Within the Program, the concept of transversal collaboration was developed and tested on 9 networks of civil society organizations.

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Glopolis is an analytical and networking center with an 18-years long outstanding think-tank experience in research, policy monitoring, advocacy and campaigning, relationship development, resource mobilization and facilitating collaboration at the Czech, CEE and EU-wide levels. Glopolis mission is to support transversal collaboration beyond the non-profit sector towards resilient civil society and sustainable democracy. Therefore, it seeks out and expands the field of shared aspirations of the CSOs, governmental and business representatives and engages them in solving common, societal challenges

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