

## **The Macro-Regional Agenda for Civil Society and Local Actors**

### **1. The macro regional approach:**

MRS were developed to respond to specific needs of so-called ‘functional’ regions and bear an important capacity to establish sustainable links between the regional, enlargement, and neighborhood policies of the EU as well as respective sectoral policies. Therefore, MRS can play an important role in delivering on the targets of the EU2020 strategy and respond to specific territorial needs beyond the national scope and below the supranational threshold. Furthermore, MRS foster and improve multi-level governance as well as governance as such, as they are catalysts for institutional change. Hence MRS have, on all levels, great potentials for promoting democracy, peace, European Integration and wealth for an ever closer Union. Moreover, concrete MRS can contribute to foster the processes of Europeanization, democratization and reform within and outside the Union, be it on the Balkan Peninsula or in countries of the former Soviet Union.

The unique approach of MRS is that they are cross-sectoral strategies, which combine territorial cohesion and the place-based approach. MRS can narrow the social and political gaps as we can see in existing examples (Baltic, Danube, Adriatic –Ionian, Alpine), however in different pace. Furthermore MRS can ease the accession of new member- and accession states to the EU by building up joint capacities, competences and structures. MRS have great potentials for enhancing regional and trans-border cooperation, implementing multi-level governance approaches and introducing good examples for the fight against corruption. Furthermore, MRS have the necessary strategies and tools for fostering social and economic development, better governance and improved living conditions in outer border areas of the EU with enhanced European integration and a durable overcoming of nationalistic and ethnic conflicts. The idea of better governance includes the participation of civil society, which can be seen as a pre-condition for the success of macro-regional strategies.

Despite the promising potentials and opportunities over the past years, MRS face challenges in accomplishing both the core tasks in regional and cohesion policies

and the wider aims to foster European values and integration. Some key shortcomings:

- the emphasis on formal structures in the implementation of MRS
- the inadequate funding instruments for most of the stakeholders,
- the persistent unsatisfactory implementation of the placed-based approach as key of the functional region and
- the inability to mobilise media and the public having significantly hampered the fruitful implementation of MRS.
- the deficient inclusion of the local actors of regional, municipal levels and civil society, especially of young people
- The political support on European and national level for a stronger development of Civil Society and Local Actors involvement in the governance at all levels, although recommended in almost all reports of all EU institutions in the last years, is still missing, probably because it would, especially for the transition countries in the Danube Region and the West Balkan, mean a thorough change in the political cultures. However, there will be the no successful macro-regional strategy without Civil Society and Local Actors support and involvement.

## **2. The role of Civil Society and Local in the MRS**

In the context of the financial, economic, political and social crisis shaking up the foundations of the European Union, the decline of trust in political systems at the European, the national and the local level, hindering a stable and sustainable social and economic development is evident and its consequences are dramatic.

Macro Regional Strategies could be testing grounds that promote democratization and participation approaches by intercepting the needs and demands of exact territorial areas. The in-depth involvement of broad groups of citizens and local actors into the decision-making and implementation of such strategies might be part of the solution to current social and economic crisis of the European Union, strengthening

democratic systems and rekindling the trust of citizens in the political and administrative systems.

Sustainable quality growth and strengthened institutional and administrative capacities, together with a well-developed multi-level governance that reflects European coordination and cooperation on all levels and with a broad participation of non-state stakeholders including civil society contributes significantly to fostering European understanding and cooperation and to introduce and anchor the European idea and values on all levels and among all stakeholders in Europe and its neighboring regions.

Civil Society, empowered Local Actors as well as Cities and Regions are key partners for the stabilization and development of the European Project as well as MRS. They can make an important difference in finding solutions for common national or transnational challenges, if they are included in the governance at all administrative levels in the Danube Region.

They are a main stakeholders in forming a common MRS but also European consciousness and identity, in which intercultural dialogue and solidarity are key features. The fact that the EU MRS also include non-EU members and candidate countries makes it an important instrument at the interface between European integration and EU enlargement.

To fully exploit the potential of Civil Society and Local Actors, European policies and rules should be more in line with their potentials, challenges and needs. This does not entail new or more competences for the European Union, but better working methods, focused on cooperation, multi-level and participative governance between and including all relevant stakeholders.

### **3. The aims of the Agenda for Civil Society and Local Actors in the MRS**

- The Local Actors/Civil Society Agenda for the MRS aims to ensure maximum utilisation of the potential of Civil Society and local actors to successfully tackle

political, economic and social challenges many member countries of the four European MRS share. It aims to promote multi-level and participative governance as well as cooperation between member States, regions cities, and civil society, which are the relevant stakeholders in MRS development. International research has revealed that Civil Society and Local Actors are the backbone of European development.

It has repeatedly been stressed, as in the Commission's report to the European Parliament 2016 on the development of macro-regional strategy, that the stronger involvement of Civil Society through consultative networks and platforms, leading to the institutionalized cooperation at all levels between the political level, administration, local actors, Civil Society and the Social Partners is a precondition to true European integration. While this is of relevance for all member countries of MRS, some have made significant progress in establishing structural participation, while others are just starting the process.

- It is therefore essential to further the exchange at all levels on the practical implementation of participative governance. Huge progress has been made on the networking and cooperation level in all MRS: transnational networks and platforms bolstering existing institutions and networks of the civil society, of cities, regions and universities, linking them to a European level, show the profits of working at a macro regional level.

Civil society must be actively and institutionally involved, and relevant stakeholder dialogues involving Civil Society and Local Actors on the national as well as macro-regional level have taken place in the development of the MRS. Innumerable small and medium projects involving Civil Society Organizations, Civil Society and Local Actors have been furthered and show the importance of their participation.

- However, European programmes and ESI funds are not suitable for the financing of smaller projects, events and cooperation, and are therefore unable to enhance the implementation of macro-regional strategies on the ground by a relevant group of its stakeholders- Civil Society and local actors.

Regulations are especially difficult to implement in the territorial cooperation programmes. In practice, this means that many local administrations, small and medium cities as well as large parts of civil society organizations are unable to participate in these programmes and cannot profit from exchange of knowledge, pilot projects, peer to peer learning, and cooperation. Moreover, it seems that the formulation and particularly the implementation of EU funding for public administration, local governance and civil society has not furthered ownership of the measures, and thus not improved the quality of governance in the medium term.

Using all possible funding sources on national, regional or local level and building stronger synergies between EU Macro-Regional Strategies, regional multilateral agreements and EU Programmes directly managed by the European Commission (alignment of Funding) is crucial to establish and safeguard adequate financing of MRS. This is of particular importance for Civil Society and Local Actors, especially - but not only - in countries with low levels of cohesion there is a need for tailor-made instruments, e.g. small project funds and seed money.

#### **4. The Agenda for Civil Society and Local Actors in the MRS will work towards:**

- Promoting the involvement of Civil Society and Local Actors in MRS policy making at all governance levels
- Promoting the development and implementation of European funds adapted to the needs of Civil Society and Local Actors in the ongoing planning of the European Cohesion Policy +2020, specifically the development of easily accessible and manageable funding instruments for smaller projects, which would strengthen the involvement of local actors and civil society in the development of all MRS
- Improving the knowledge base in macro-regions through...

- Furthering the sharing of best practices and cooperation between Civil Society and Local Actors as well as between the MRS in joint frameworks and platforms
- The introduction of national and macro-regional hearings as structured dialogues between all stakeholders
- The development of new formats between the key decision-makers/ implementers and civil society together with local actors
- To encourage, via the EUSDR governance, a notable change in the member countries political and administrative culture, furthered top down by adequate leverage through EU funding and political support and bottom up by the strengthening of Civil Society and local actors.

### **How the Agenda shall be implemented:**

- Through the instrument of “ Participation Days” in the MRS as well as of National Participation Days, thus showing willingness to truly engage, in the spirit of the European treaties, in new ways of participative governance for the benefit of the whole Danube Region and it’ s citizens.
- Through regular reports about progress made in the implementation of participative governance in the member countries of the EUSDR as well as in its own governance.
- Through the development of a range of macro-regional partnerships. Within these partnerships, MRS Stakeholders will work together to ensure that participation of Civil Society and Local Actors is strengthened in the MRS governance. The partnerships will focus on specific implementation levels of participation and multi-level governance- local, regional, national, MRS....

## Calendar:

2017		
March	Final Outline	CEI RIO
April		
May		AF EUSAIR
	Final Draft Presentation	
June		AF EUSBSR
July	*consultation with important stakeholders	
August		
September	Finalization	
	*07.09.2017 ECOSOC consultation conference	
	*EU MACROREGIONAL STRATEGIES CONFERENCE ON MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION - KNOW THY NEIGHBOUR end Sep 2017	
October	Presentation	AF EUSDR
November	Presentation	AF EUSALP
December		
2018		
January		
February		
March		