

DANUBE SOCIAL SERVICE & EDUCATION CLUSTER

Joint Position Paper

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The DANUBE SOCIAL SERVICE & EDUCATION CLUSTER comprises a network of NGOs and Federations in the Danube Region which was formed within a one-year project funded by the START Danube Region Project Fund of Priority Area 10 “Institutional Capacity Building” of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR). The network includes AGAPEDIA ROMANIA FOUNDATION in Brasov, FEDERATION OF SOCIAL NGOs IN BULGARIA in Sofia (as lead partner), FEDERATION OF SOCIAL NGOs IN TRANSILVANIA in Cluj, FOUNDATION LIEBENAU in Meckenbeuren, Baden-Württemberg, CIVIL SOCIETY NETWORK EUSDR in Stuttgart and CONCORDIA Social Projects in Vienna. Further participants from Serbia and Moldova joined during the project implementation on a voluntary basis.

Overall goal of the project is to interconnect bottom-up networks of social NGOs in Romania, Bulgaria, Baden-Württemberg and Austria which developed over the last years, absorb the experiences of their members in the area of social service delivery, health and education of the last 10-25 years in the Danube region and to enlarge their perspective into the macrostrategical setup of the EUSDR by establishing a cluster. Among this overall goal the project aimed to focus on central aspects of the relation between NGOs and governmental actors and institutions. The involved stakeholder focused on improving in constructive manner and dialogue the cooperation between them and the state actors in order to achieve better social security conditions, sustainable social service provision and prevention of human rights violation in a series of national workshops. The position paper at hand reflects on that and is one of the central outputs of the project.

1. Introduction

The EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) combines in a unique way most diverse countries in this particular Macroregion: EU member states, EU-accessing and candidate countries as well as countries part of the Eastern Partnership of the EU. The central common

legacy of the Danube Region is its fascist and communist totalitarian past (until 1945 in the Western parts and until 1989 in the Eastern parts of the region). Thus the EUSDR currently links some of the most developed West European states with the socio-economic least developed East- and Southeast European countries. For instance the highest shares of people facing the risk of poverty and social exclusion within the EU are in Romania (40.3%) and in Bulgaria (49%). Early school leaving and youth unemployment rates especially in rural areas and among the Roma community are increasing over the last years.

Following article 174 on territorial, social and economic cohesion of the Consolidated version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union: “In particular, the Union shall aim at reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the least favored regions“. Further the EUSDR includes as one objective the improvement of the coordination between relevant actors and programs and the reinforcement of existent EU policies such as Europe 2020. Within the EUSDR eleven priority areas (PA) were defined in which social and human rights issues, thus the field of activities of social NGOs, are directly addressed. PA 9 “People and Skills” focuses on the improvement of the labour markets and the social inclusion in the region, PA 10 “Institutional Capacity Building” on all levels of institutional developments within society as well as on the participation of civil society.

As mentioned in a policy non-paper by Stefan Lütgenau, the “active and open involvement of Civil Society participation creates a higher level of transparency and fosters stronger compliance with the basic principle of subsidiarity in all EU actions”¹. Our NGOs as part of the particular civil societies share with local and national authorities a common executive role and bring **specific, locally embedded experiences** as well as **competences** for the enhancement of social inclusion and the reduction of poverty and marginalization in the Danube Region. Among these competences we consider transcultural competences, competencies in management of projects, but also people and relationships, competencies, related to our specific target groups, competencies in working with specific laws, regulations

¹Danube Civil Society Forum: Participation in the EUSDR. Principles - Formats – Procedures. Policy Paper/Non-paper/... proposed by Stefan August Lütgenau, DCSF



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and standards, especially to marginalized groups as well as knowledge of their life conditions of overall importance and constantly seek to improve them in our partner organizations. As part of this project for instance we developed tool for self-assessment of the competencies and challenges in their application. Due to these experiences and competences, our NGOs and federations can also contribute to social policy and project development.

On the other hand due to our concrete experiences and tacit-knowledge we are facing in our everyday work and engagement specific structural challenges and barriers with systemic nature, which are identifiable only through a process of exchange and dialogue as we foster it as part of this project.

The position paper at hand aims to point out the added value of the inclusion of the experiences of NGOs on all levels of the management cycle of social security and prevention systems as well as insights in structural problems of exclusions in the EUSDR which are opposed to the attainment of the Europe 2020 aims.

Finally, with this joint position paper the project participants and NGO networks want to express our willingness and openness to cooperate with governmental authorities on local, regional, national and EU levels in order to contribute to the attainment of the Europe 2020 aims and the goals of the EUSDR.

2. Background

The members of the DANUBE SOCIAL SERVICE & EDUCATION CLUSTER, many of them starting already in the early 1990s, operate in diverse social fields, among these in the prevention of homelessness, vocational training, alternative care for children, care for older people, to name but a few. Our daily experiences in these areas of work confirm that social problems and exclusion processes as well as poverty reduction can only be solved in a common effort of civil society and the public sector. Yet, the potentials of collaboration of NGOs, which work directly with vulnerable groups and governmental actors, are not fully realized. In the present section we want to present hindering factors for a fruitful collaboration from the perspectives of the NGOs involved in the DANUBE SOCIAL SERVICE & EDUCATION CLUSTER.



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2.1 Implementation and practice of existing laws

One of the most challenging hindering factors for NGOs to realize their contribution for social inclusion and protection concerns a widespread gap between existing laws and their implementation and practice. Whereas the laws in most of our countries conform to legal frameworks of the EU, they are in many aspects not realized according to the interests of social protection and security of vulnerable individuals and groups. Examples for gaps between laws and its implementation and practice at national levels concern the rights of children and women of adequate protection in cases of domestic violence, the rights of non-discrimination of Roma and migrants in education systems or limited access of vulnerable groups to health insurance and social security systems – often because of a lack of resources and / or of missing documents of the persons at stake.

In addition, from the perspective of our members, social integration and inclusion has to be based on a human rights approach, where equality is promoted and all inhabitants, including all vulnerable groups as minorities, migrants and children are recognised and respected as rights holders. Thus, we consider a common effort for the realization of existing laws to combat and prevent discrimination, racism and administrative barriers in order to prevent poverty and social exclusion as urgent.

2.2 Basic service provision and social protection

As stressed by the European Council, “social security systems are one of the most powerful institutional expressions of social solidarity and an important means by which to ensure an adequate standard of living for the people of Europe”² They cover access to health care and sickness allowance, children’s allowance, old age pensions, sufficient unemployment and disability benefits - all preconditions that play a decisive role in human development and social inclusion.

Under human rights law, states are legally obligated to establish social protection³ systems. This duty flows directly from the right to social security, which is articulated most

² <http://www.coe.int/en/web/turin-european-social-charter/european-code-of-social-security>

³ Following the definitions of UN-organizations and the ILO we use the terms social protection and social security interchangeable.





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prominently in Article 9 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR)⁴. In the General Comment No. 19 on the right to social security, the CESCR mentions the key features of this right and the content of states' obligations. According to the Committee, the right to social security implies two predominant categories of measures: social insurance models (where beneficiaries are obliged to contribute financially) and non-contributory social assistance models.

Despite the legal obligation of states for social protection, in practice, NGOs in many countries of the Danube Region work in the field of basic provision of vulnerable persons and groups in a supplementary way, thus, fulfilling the demand for basic services left unsatisfied by the existing social security systems. Example for this supplementary work of our NGOs is the provision of alternative care for children without adequate funding or the accommodation and health care for homeless or disabled persons.

We consider the supplementary character of the services of NGOs in two regards worrying: Firstly, the right to social protection is in practice in many cases not realized, thus there is again a gap between laws and their implementation. Reasons for this gap are in many cases not only a lack of resources, but also in administrative and physical obstacles individuals face in accessing social protection (e.g. missing documents of Roma). Secondly, supplementary measures in the field of basic provision and social protection implemented by NGOs without the financial cooperation with public authorities are not sustainable due to the lack of predictable continuous funding. In other words, there are higher risks that the services will not be sustainable and may terminate – leading to an abrupt loss of support for beneficiaries - if sustainable resources are not ensured by the states.

Thus, as social NGOs working with vulnerable groups in need of social protection we consider a complementary collaboration with national and EU institutions as the most sustainable form to secure the supply of fundamental, essential needs of disadvantaged persons and groups. In the complementary view, NGOs are seen as partners to governments

⁴The Universal Declaration of Human Rights refers directly to the right to social security in Article 22 and 25.



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and public authorities, helping to carry out the delivery of public goods implemented by long-term public funding.

In addition, the design and implementation of social protection services should take into account economic, administrative and physical obstacles that individuals face in accessing these services, giving particular consideration to the needs of those groups which face added obstacles, including women, persons with disabilities, the elderly, people living with HIV/AIDS or people without literacy skills. For the design of social protection services (public or private) we consider the consideration of the experiences of NGOs with vulnerable groups as important in order to overcome barriers and to reach groups that are particularly vulnerable or excluded.

Thus we see an urgent need in extended collaboration between NGOs and public authorities not only in designing and implementing basic social supplies but also in the field of prevention as early intervention in childhood and family care or the prevention of homelessness and early school leaving, especially in Roma Communities and other minorities.

2.3 Quality assurance for social services

All the European Member States have embarked upon modernisation of the social services in their respective countries. Without doubt, the challenge is to tackle the tensions between quality, effectiveness and financial sustainability. The members of our DANUBE SOCIAL SERVICE & EDUCATION CLUSTER working with vulnerable groups act constantly on improving the quality of their services on all levels of quality management and are in all countries in some way dealing with quality requests from public authorities both on local and national and on EU level. We consider quality assurance as an important aspect of social organizations. Still, we see the need of improvements how public quality assurance systems are implemented and oriented.

Quality assurance proofs and certificates required by public authorities and EU-funds are focusing dominantly on formal and material aspects and on output indicators. Without denying the importance of these quality indicators we see a high need to include process-relevant quality aspects and the dimension of organizational and project-specific learning in





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quality measures. While many of the current quality management measures neglect the quality dimension of processes, social services are „interactive services“. Thus, quality in social services includes always the quality of interaction between social service provider and beneficiaries, among those for example processes how target groups are reached and how needs are assessed and communicated, how learning and participation is activated and how results are evaluated and used for further project planning and implementations. Such activities and interactions are at the core of those processes – as well as the competencies and working modes of the involved experts. In addition, the “products” of social services are only partly quantitatively measurable; many outcomes are only visible by using qualitative indicators.

In this respect we consider capacity building measures on the level of process- and outcome-related quality assurance as well as increasing the competencies of social service providers as necessary steps to improve the quality of social services on all levels.

In addition, to enable learning, some flexibility in project implementation and the dialogue with different stakeholders (sponsors and target groups) are needed. In this respect, we consider the inclusion of the perspectives also of target groups of overall importance to ensure client-oriented measures and an adequate access to the services. Thus, additional funding for evaluation research including the subjective perspectives of vulnerable groups and qualitative measures would improve assurance of high quality level services in our countries.

Finally, we suggest an intensified dialogue with public authorities considering quality processes on all level; on the same time a clear differentiation of roles and responsibilities has to be realized. Besides financial and legal aspects this concerns also structural aspects as the avoidance of conflicts of interests e.g. due to the employment of public authorities in NGOs.

2.4 Participation

The participation of civil society is a main objective of the EUSDR. Yet, we consider the potentials of participatory processes in the cooperation between NGOs and public authorities in their common effort for social inclusion and reduction of poverty as limited as



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long the supplementary model of cooperation is dominating in many of our project countries. Supplementary forms of NGO engagement in the social field includes the risk of limited communication between public authorities and NGOs concerning problem analysis, planning and implementation of services as well as the risk of existing social parallel structures. As consequence, “grass-root” experiences in many cases are not considered in the planning and implementation of national public social services as well as in funding strategies on the European level. Thus, we see a need and a great potential in an intensified intertwining of perspectives between NGO-experiences, public administration and policy makers as well as scientific institutions and applied research.

Concerning the accessibility of EU funds, we consider targeted and amplified measures of overall importance as the experiences show, that especially small NGOs working with the most disadvantaged people in Europe often do not have the capacity to make use of funding.



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3. Recommendations

3.1. Securing basic service provision

In order to improve the quality and the scope of basic service provision in the Danube Region the members of the DANUBE SOCIAL AND EDUCATION CLUSTER propose, that:

- The provision of funding for basic service provision (as the alternative care for children or disabled people as well as health care) should be guaranteed by the national governments within the broader EU-Framework on social policy;
- Basic service provision by national states should be subject of an EU-wide process of synchronization and best practice benchmarking toward the member-states and the active involvement of the NGO-sector;
- Basic service provision should be fostered through increasing transnational cooperation and best practice transfer e.g. dual education system;
- EU-funds should be reorganized in order not substituting national funding and replacing the basic service provision by the national governments.

3.2. Enhancing complementary forms of interaction between third sector and state actors

The complementary forms of cooperation between NGOs and government and its agencies on national, regional and local level, should be enhanced including a perspective of NGOs not as competitors, but as partners. The complementary approach of interaction between third sector and state actors could be operationalized and implemented in different ways, establishing for instance mixed governing bodies and different consultation processes, but also different mechanisms to enhance the trust between state actors and NGOs. In addition, we consider it as important that EU-funding mechanisms include forms of monitoring regarding transparency in funding mechanisms on national level as well as regarding the participation of NGOs and civil society in the project management cycle.

3.3. Strengthening impact orientation in social service provision

To guarantee the long-term quality assurance of the social service provision in the Danube region we suggest establishing a quality system, which should be oriented on the long term impact of the social services based on a more qualitative approach.



3.4. Increasing the transnational cooperation through a cooperative approach

In order to bring more quality of social service provision, international cooperations and benchmarking have a crucial role. Even if social systems in the EU have different history and national specificities, we consider transnational cooperations and exchange as fruitful tool to enhance mutual learning based on a detailed analysis of communalities and differences. Thus, the effects of different structural conditions and historically grown social practices (as the lack of social infrastructure in many post-socialists societies or intransparencies in funding and cooperation processes have to be analyzed.

3.5. Enhancing participation of NGOs

In many cases social policy formulation and long-term strategy development is prepared without the active involvement of the third sector. The state actors are often not informed or unaware of the progress and good practices of the NGOs. This is mainly due to the supplementary way of interaction, low trust and sometimes rival atmosphere. Accordingly, the potential for enhancing social solidarity and social innovation is not fully realized. Thus, we suggest

- An increased exchange between NGOs and governments on different levels of governance - local, regional, national, macro-regional and European including policy making, social service planning as well as exchange of best practice examples.
- Development of specific procedures for the collaboration between NGOs, government and local institutions in order to address on the one hand the individual cases and to ensure on the other hand the quality of the social services provided by regular exchange and mutual feed-back processes. The model should contain a clear division of responsibilities of the various stakeholders.

As mentioned already in 2009 by Fabrizio Barca, the EU is getting more and more important to improve social inclusion. In other words, the crisis has shown that an economic union is impossible without a social union⁵.

⁵ Allmendinger, Jutta; von den Driesch, Ellen (2014): Social Inequalities in Europe: Facing the Challenge, Berlin Social Science Center (WZB), Discussion Paper P2014-005, pp. 1 ff.





Further Barca requests in his agenda for a reformed cohesion policy that there must be a clear and explicit distinction between policy interventions aimed at increasing income and growth (efficiency objectives) and those aimed at reducing inequalities (social inclusion objectives) using a *place based approach* for interventions which combines action across three levels of government: “the EU, setting the general strategy, priorities and objectives, supervising, promoting measures aimed at results and learning and mobilising actors; the national and Regional levels, adapting the strategy and objectives to specific aspirations and institutional contexts and selecting projects; and the local level, designing the projects to the particular needs, knowledge and preferences of places”⁶.

The Danube Social Service and Education Cluster (DSSEC) has comprises local knowledge, direct access to disadvantaged target groups and long term practical experiences in the Danube region in both its eastern and western parts and can contribute to the social dimension on all three levels of government. Accordingly we call for clear and transparent procedures for civil dialogue on all levels and address the EU institutions to provide further guidance and guidelines on civil dialogue to member states to set up a framework for the structural involvement of NGOs.

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⁶ Barca, Fabrizio (2009): An Agenda for a Reformed Cohesion Policy – A placed based approach to meeting European Union challenges and expectations, pp. 123 ff.; http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/archive/policy/future/barca_de.htm

