

Black Sea NGO Regional Networks: Challenges, Opportunities and Models of Engagement. Elements of Reflection from ChildPact.

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Introduction

Strategies aimed at bringing social change imply innovation and cooperation as fundamental elements which are also the bases of all the networks created by civil society organisations, as the best way to accomplish social change is by joining efforts with others.

Challenges

But 'joining efforts' is easier said than done - particularly in our intricate region. There are many challenges to regional networking and maybe the first such challenge comes from a low level of 'regional awareness': the geo-political limits of the Black Sea region are not clearly determined and the people of the region rarely 'see' the region, in spite of our common historical and cultural legacy. Civil society is still thin and feeble in many countries and their leaders only rarely go beyond the immediate need to consider joining efforts at a transnational and regional level in order to accomplish a more ambitious and geographically extended social change agenda.

A second challenge, connected to this low level of regional awareness, is the scarce knowledge about the work and the role of the regional bodies such as BSEC or PABSEC. Very few NGO professionals (let alone the average citizens) are aware that BSEC is the only treaty-based inter-governmental organisation in the region and very few are ready to tap into its potential. Therefore, the support and involvement of this organisation and of its related bodies is rarely harnessed to regional projects, so that its potentially valuable presence in the region is inadequately weighed and it is far too often under-utilized.

Thirdly, the level of cooperation among the regional actors themselves is, for opaque reasons, rather limited. The only treaty-based organisation in the region (BSEC) is somehow (but not strategically) related with the only Black Sea NGO Forum in the region or with the only dedicated donor for regional projects (the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation), while the only inter-parliamentary assembly in the region (PABSEC) remains largely disconnected from civil society and citizen movements. Each of these actors might have its own vision for the future and its own means to lead the way towards that vision, but the lack of strategic cooperation among them is a challenge that needs to be... challenged.

Finally, an important challenge faced by regional networking is the very weakness of the civil society organisations in the area, defined in terms of: institutional sustainability beyond foreign donors'

support and their power to influence public policy through systemic advocacy mechanisms that go beyond the personalized efforts of a few civil society leaders.

Opportunities

It is important to acknowledge the challenges, but there are also many opportunities that should be harnessed to the efforts of strengthening the regional networks. One of these opportunities is represented by the emergence of a new 'breed' of European donors, the so-called 'new EU donors' (the 12 countries which joined the EU in 2005 and 2007). These new donors join the donor community at a particular time in the history of development thinking when many analysts raise their voices against the dominant development discourse and claim that 'development is dead' or it should be so. Moreover, they themselves have been, until very recently, recipients of development aid and these two factors combined (along with others that space does not allow to be mentioned here) make them profess different (if not new) development thinking. Equally important, the priority countries of the new EU donors are in our region and they are willing to help creating a stronger bridge between the EU and the region, at a time when the EU is the biggest collective donor and perhaps one of the most democracy-oriented donor in the world. A second opportunity is represented by the growing network of young 'Black Sea region' experts created through the Black Sea Young Reformers Fellowship program, as well as a growing European political will to engage the region (ex. the Black Sea Synergy and the Eastern Partnership).

A model of engagement

ChildPact – the Regional Coalition for Child Protection in the Wider Black Sea Area¹ - is a vivid example of what joint efforts can lead to. Having a membership basis of over 600 NGOs from Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Kosovo², Moldova, Romania and Serbia, ChildPact aims to represent the interests of more than 500,000 vulnerable children in the wider Black Sea area in policy debates at national, regional and international levels.

ChildPact is a coalition of coalitions and its model of engagement in the region is based on three innovative aspects: collaboration with the regional bodies and initiatives (BSEC, PABSEC, ICBSS, the Black Sea Young Reformers Fellowship Program); the acknowledgement that investment (and more than that: strategic investment) is needed; the effort of reaching out to a wide range of regional, national and European actors.

From its early beginnings, ChildPact aimed to collaborate with the regional bodies, in particular BSEC, as the only treaty-based intergovernmental entity in the region. The Black Sea NGO Forum, an yearly event taking place in Bucharest (with support from the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the European Commission), offered a very useful platform in this sense: it was in this context that ChildPact leaders had an opportunity to learn about BSEC, its related bodies and the influence that these bodies have in the region. At the 2011 gathering of the Forum, the ChildPact leaders learned about PABSEC's forthcoming Recommendation in the field of child protection and took the

¹ ChildPact's official website: www.childpact.org

² This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UN Security Council resolution 1244 and the International Court of Justice's opinion on Kosovo 2008 declaration of independence.

opportunity to present the PABSEC Secretariat with ChildPact's position in this field³. As a result in March 2012 ChildPact was invited to participate at the 37th meeting of the PABSEC Educational, Cultural and Social Affairs Committee in Sofia (Bulgaria). At this meeting the ChildPact representatives (George Bogdanov as Executive Director of the Bulgarian National Network for Children and Mirela Oprea as ChildPact Secretary General) argued that: a. the next phase for child protection reform in the region should be based on a regional effort to scale up successful services and to expand expert cooperation to build jointly on lessons learnt; b. investing in the future human capital (i.e. children) is not only a moral duty, but a very tangible prerequisite for economic growth and social stability across the region.

The Recommendation 127/2012 on Child Protection in the BSEC Member States acknowledged ChildPact's contribution and it was adopted at PABSEC's General Assembly in 2012⁴. For ChildPact this was the beginning of a series of activities meant to build awareness about the Recommendation and build on its progressive ideas (such as: building a regional trust for children). At the 2012 gathering of the Black Sea Forum ChildPact convened a special panel to analyse the options for the actual implementation of the PABSEC Recommendation 127/2012, and in particular the idea of strengthening regional cooperation for child protection in the region and building a regional trust for children to make such cooperation possible. BSEC's Deputy Secretary General⁵, four members of the BSEC Parliamentary Assembly (PABSEC)⁶ and various representatives of the diplomatic and civil society community participated at this panel, discussing the role (or potential roles) of national parliaments, civil society and BSEC in improving children's lives across the region. The panel reached consensus on the need to strengthen regional cooperation in the field of child protection, based on the shared legacies from the past as well as current trends of child vulnerability⁷.

Acknowledging ChildPact's role in promoting Recommendation 127/2012 ChildPact was extended an invitation to participate and address the 40th PABSEC General Assembly in one of the very few occasions (if not the first one) when a representative of a regional network had the privilege to address the General Assembly⁸. In its speech, ChildPact's Secretary General emphasized the need for PABSEC Recommendation 127/2012 to be implemented and made reality⁹. The ChildPact Secretary General showed that the principle of regional cooperation in the field of child protection and the idea of creating a funding instrument to support it are commendable, but only if they acquire implications

³ ChildPact is grateful to Ambassador Traian Chebeleu and to PABSEC Secretariat staff (in particular Mrs. Evgenia Strati) for their wonderful support through the process.

⁴ PABSEC Recommendation 127/2012 on Child Protection in the BSEC Member States: <http://www.childpact.org/2012/12/18/pabsec-adopts-recommendation-1272012-on-child-protection-in-the-bsec-member-states/>

⁵ Ambassador Traian Chebeleu.

⁶ Namik Dokle, Member of the National Assembly of the Republic of Albania; Aram Manukyan, Member of the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia; Zhalya ALIYEVA, President of the PABSEC Cultural, Educational and Social Affairs Committee, Member of the Parliament of the Republic of Azerbaijan; Elvira KOVACS, Member of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia.

⁷ More information and a video from ChildPact's panel at the 2012 Black Sea NGO Forum are available here: <http://www.childpact.org/2012/11/09/black-sea-ngo-forum-2012/>

⁸ ChildPact is thankful to the PABSEC Secretariat and Mrs Zhalya Aliyeva President of the PABSEC Cultural, Educational and Social Affairs Committee and Member of the Parliament of the Republic of Azerbaijan for inviting ChildPact to address the General Assembly.

⁹ The audio file of ChildPact's Secretary general presentation at the PABSEC General Assembly is available here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FZe5PTJceUo>

beyond the discursive level. Consequently, ChildPact's Secretary General urged the PABSEC members to support ChildPact's efforts for strengthening the regional cooperation in the field of child protection.

Encouraged by this initial success, ChildPact developed a policy brief bringing solid empirical and academic argument to show why successful child protection reform demands a regional response¹⁰ and developed the idea of building a Regional Cooperation Mechanism for Child Protection, based on examples from other regions. This Regional Cooperation Mechanism for Child Protection is the focus of a new ChildPact panel at the 2013 gathering of the Black Sea NGO Forum, in an attempt to build a sustainable and viable infrastructure for strengthening regional cooperation in this field.

Another trait of ChildPact's model of engagement is represented by the acknowledgement that strategic investment is needed should a strong network be built. Based on ChildPact experience, at least two areas of strategic investment are needed: on one hand, there is the need to build solidly and sustainably the capacity of the regional network in case, and on the other hand, there is a need to build trust-based partnerships with relevant stake-holders (including donors). Building trust, reaching consensus and a making joint, democratic decisions are crucial to ensure the active involvement of all network members, but these are not only a matter of goodwill and negotiations skills existing or not within the network. To build trust, reach consensus and work democratically requires resources that very often are difficult to raise, particularly in a risk-averse philanthropic culture where individual and institutional donors require instant results of the kind that go way beyond their investment. Shaping relevant partnerships with donors, civil society representatives and political bodies requires a long-term strategy that involves face-to-face meetings, participation to regional and European conferences, and event organization. If a regional network aims to be relevant regionally relevant it needs to constantly reach out to a wide range of regional actors. For ChildPact such regional actors are: the BSEC and its related bodies (PABSEC and ICBSS), the European Commission, the national governments with a policy orientation towards the Black Sea region, the new EU Member States (in particular Romania), the Black Sea Young Reformers Fellowship program, etc.

Advocating for regional cooperation: creating a regional cooperation mechanism for child protection

In the past 20 years, governments in the wider Black Sea area have worked to reform their child welfare and protection systems. With the help of donors and members of civil society, governments introduced new legal frameworks, built institutional capacity and tested new community based services. However, reforms have been incomplete in all countries throughout the region. In countries yielding substantial economic growth or in those recovering from situations of conflict, significant numbers of children still fall vulnerable to institutionalisation, trafficking, labour, exclusion, violence and neglect. Nowadays, recent reports and empirical evidence show that in the wider Black Sea area the number of vulnerable children is increasing while the number of children in the general population has decreased sharply in the past 20 years.

¹⁰ This brief is available at: <http://www.childpact.org/2013/07/01/regional-cooperation-in-the-wider-black-sea-area-why-successful-child-protection-demands-a-regional-response/>.

Across the world, regional cooperation started to impose itself as a necessity to tackle regional challenges that one nation cannot solve on its own. Examples of collaborative efforts include food and health regulations to prevent the spread of disease and joint capacity building programs to enable cross-border responses to natural and man-made disasters. Similarly, ChildPact believes that if employed correctly, regional cooperation can change the lives of millions of the most vulnerable children across the wider Black Sea area. Because the combination of knowledge, resources, capacity and ambition are necessary to significantly help the most vulnerable children in our region are not found within one state, a cooperative approach could change the story for our most cherished and yet most vulnerable class of citizens.

For these reasons, ChildPact supports the idea of a regional cooperation mechanism to be established. Such a mechanism is proposed with a view to: (1) reduce the number of children exploited through various forms of child labour (including illicit activities such as begging, scavenging, drug dealing, etc.) – because child labour robs children of educational opportunities, creating generations of illiterate, unskilled adults; (2) decrease the number of children who live in residential care institutions (orphanages) because children who grow up in institutions face serious difficulties to integrate socially and most of them are likely to become consumers of social services and law offenders (begging, stealing, drug abuse/dealing, prostitution, trafficking, crime); (3) reduce the negative effects of migration on children “left behind” by parents who move abroad in search of better opportunities - children who are left behind become vulnerable to abuse, exploitation and trafficking, with short and long term negative consequences, often requiring the complex intervention and support of specialized services; (4) increase the number of disabled children who go to school and end their discrimination in any educational and social setting – these children are entitled to lead a normal life.

At the same time, regional cooperation for child protection is likely to take advantage of economies of scale since it provides a platform for small states to share scarce resources and to access capacity and expertise unavailable at the local level. Given the pressing needs, similar situations and limited resources for child protection, regional think tanks and training centres could provide high value for countries not able to fund or establish such centres on their own. Thus, the opportunity to leverage the national assets and resources through regional cooperation should not be wasted in a time of economic hardship and growing need.

Furthermore, when cooperating at a regional level, there is an obvious comparative advantage in pooling expertise and resources. Thus, the ability to create effective strategies to respond to region-wide issues that face children becomes an essential asset for impact. At the same time, each country possesses a comparative advantage on the way it responds to child vulnerability; its political system, infrastructure, capacity, resources or even progress-to-date all impact and individualize a government’s current response to child protection. Consider all these advantages replicated at a regional level – once again, the impact of change is meant to be more efficient.

Considering the fact that child rights and their protection is the most uncontroversial issue in the region and that every government in the wider Black Sea area has signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, regional cooperation for child protection can build trust for greater collaborative engagement. As a non-sensitive issue, regional cooperation on child protection opens the door to

new relationships and trust between governments. Opportunities to pursue peace and greater security in the region should start with children.