

REPORT

**Co-operation between NGOs and National Authorities
in the field of Drugs in South East Europe
Belgrade 10 May 2018**

On 10 May 2018 a meeting between representatives of National Authorities responsible for Drug Policy in the Countries of the South East European Region¹ and NGOs working in the drugs field in these countries, took place in Belgrade, Serbia. The meeting was organised by Diogenis, Drug Policy Dialogue in co-operation with the Drug Policy Network in South East Europe (DPNSEE) and the Office for Combating Drugs of the republic of Serbia.

The aim of the meeting was to discuss about the cooperation between authorities and NGOs at the national level, open up the possibility to exchange information and experiences of good practices and reflect on perspectives of future cooperation. This meeting was part of the activities of the action plan 2018 of the project “Strengthening NGO capacity and promoting public health and human rights oriented drug policy in South Eastern Europe”, financially supported by the European Commission, Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) D5: Western Balkans Regional Cooperation and Programmes and the Open Society Foundations (OSF).

The main issues discussed at the meeting were:

- a. The current situation of cooperation between National Authorities and NGOs in the field of Drugs. Positive experiences and challenges that require action in the future.
- b. Mutual expectations of good cooperation between NGOs and national authorities. What is the benefit of a good relationship between NGOs and State authorities? Which models of NGO participation in decision making exist in the countries of the region? Which conditions are required for a meaningful participation?
- d. The developments in drug policy in the coming years and in particular the implementation of the recommendations of the UNGASS 2016 “outcome document” and the co-operation between Civil Society and national authorities. Which are the areas of co-

The countries we refer here are: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Greece, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia and Slovenia

operation between NGOs and the competent authorities that can contribute to a more humane and effective drug policy?

e. Which structures of co-operation between the states of the South East European region can be used to promote the drug policy issue as a priority on their agenda?

The meeting opened with a welcome word of the of the organisers; the director of Diogenis Association who chaired the meeting, followed by the director of the office for Combating drugs of the republic of Serbia and the director of DPNSEE. Special thanks were expressed to the office for drugs of the republic of Serbia that hosted the meeting and offered hospitality in this historic place in Belgrade. Thanks were extended to all participants who accepted the invitation. Representatives of the national authorities responsible for drug policy from nearly all countries of the region (Bulgaria and Greece could not participate) as well as NGO representatives (Bulgarian and Croatian NGOs were not present) participated at the meeting. The chair explained that this is not a formal meeting with the intention to take decisions. He invited the participants to participate in the discussions with the aim to identify ways of co-operation which will be beneficiary to the state authorities as well as the Civil Society organisations.

Co-operation between National Authorities and NGOs in the field of drugs. The current situation.

All representatives of the State Authorities took the floor presenting shortly the situation in their country. **Croatia** regretted that there were no representatives of NGOs from Croatia. Croatia is supporting, also financially, civil society organisations activities. The response on calls for proposals from NGOs is rather poor and that is an issue of concern for the co-ordination office. The available budget of the state for activities of NGOs is under-spend due to few submissions of good proposals. There is also no co-ordination structure among the NGOs, something that could make the relationship with the authorities more stable. A challenge is the setup of qualitatively good harm reduction services. The co-ordination office would like to financially support initiatives in this area of work. **Romania** has long experience of working with NGOs. The NGOs are actively participating in formulation of Drug Policy and contribute with proposals in legislative initiatives. The NPS law is adopted with support of the NGOs and the co-ordination agency on drugs in Romania is consulting NGOS regularly. There are also tensions in the co-operation especially in the field of financial support of the activities of NGOs. There is a budget available but there are difficulties and legal barriers for making it operational. There are, however, new applications of NGOs that can be awarded. In **Slovenia** there is good co-operation with the Non-Governmental organisations. Activities of NGOs are financially supported by the national government, the municipalities and the private sector. At the national policy level the NGOs are represented in the National Commission on Drugs with 2 representatives. This organisational structure for the co-operation between authorities and civil society is conducive to the discussion of new developments in the field of drugs and the support of projects carried out by NGOs. The drug policy co-ordinator in **Bosnia Herzegovina** has good contacts with the NGOs in the country. The NGOs that are working in the field of harm reduction have participated in a workgroup that prepared the document: 'Policy of harm reduction in the field of addictions in Bosnia and Herzegovina". This document is submitted

to the Federal Government for adoption. The general picture regarding the contacts between Authorities and Civil society is positive, taking into account the complicated administration of the country. In **Montenegro** there is co-operation with different NGOs active in the field of drugs. At the National Office for drugs of the Ministry of health is functioning a contact network that consists of representatives of the competent ministries and representatives of institutions of the healthcare system. Besides this body the government of Montenegro established in 2010 the National Council for Drugs, which is chaired by the President of Montenegro and has as members ministers as well as representatives of local governments, the police and health institutions. The NGOs have a seat in this body and are represented by a person chosen by the NGOs themselves. There is funding for NGO activities. The drugs strategy aims to strengthen the relations between government and civil society. **Albania** has a paragraph in the draft National Drug Strategy on the co-operation between authorities and civil society organisations pointing out the importance the government attaches to cooperation with the NGOs. The approval of the draft strategy will be important for a more structured relationship between NGOs and government. In practice, however, there is already good cooperation between the Ministry of Health and NGOs working in the field of drugs. Positive developments took place in **Serbia** after 2014 when the government established the multi-sectoral Committee for Psychoactive Controlled Substances and the Office for Combating Drugs. The intension of the Office for combating drugs is to develop close co-operation with civil society organisations. In January 2018 a memorandum of understanding was signed between the office and 11 civil society organisations confirming the importance of civil society organizations and the need for their active involvement

The NGOs contributed in the discussion by pointing out some additional points which are considered to be issues that should have to be resolved. The **Romanian** NGO referred to situations regarding the relationship between NGOs and the drug co-ordinating agency, which in the past have led even to temporary suspend their contacts. The Romanian NGOs are of the opinion that the legal framework of their relationship to authorities has to be improved. The **Serbian** NGOs see the memorandum between the Office on Drugs and the civil society organisations as a positive step in the right direction. Their concern is whether the memorandum will be implemented in the everyday practice. More transparency about financing of projects and action plans is needed. Funding in the drugs filed is too much supply reduction and law enforcement oriented. There is no balance between law enforcement and Health in the drugs issue. **Slovenian** NGOs have a good co-operation with the authorities in the country and are supported in their work with funds of the state. Several NGOs are disappointed that drug consumption rooms are still not legally established. **Bosnian** NGO had hoped that by acquiring accreditation for their organization, they would guarantee financing for their harm reduction activities by the state. This has not happened yet. This is an unexpected setback. The **Albanian** NGO referred to efforts done to get support from the state for their work. The proposal to make available for activities that address the drug problem, confiscated criminal assets imposed for violations of the drug law, was an idea that could contribute to costs made for treatment of drug users. Unfortunately, despite an initial positive reaction of the ministry of finance, this opportunity is not used to support harm reduction and treatment services delivered by NGOs. The only rehabilitation centre in Albania is closed due to lack of financial resources. Creative suggestions like the above mentioned spending of confiscated assets have not to

be ignored by governments. In **Greece** NGOs in the field of drugs seek to be recognized as partners in the debate on drug policy. They have public support and good media coverage, but the authorities do not yet support civil society participation in decision making bodies and there no provisions for financial support of NGO activities. The NGOs organised in the “NGO Platform on Psychoactive Substances” have submitted a request to be represented with one permanent and one alternate member in the “National Planning and co-ordination Commission for addressing the drug issue”. It is to be seen whether their proposal will be accepted. NGOs in the **Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia** are organised in a platform that functions as a discussion partner with the authorities. Currently the desired cooperation with the authorities there is absent. The government has however, after a good campaign of the NGOs, decided to continue the support of the activities and services of the NGOs in the country. The NGOs in **Montenegro** are supported by additional funding and have on the operational level good contacts with the responsible authorities. The National Council for Drugs is more a structure on paper, than a co-ordinating body.

The implementation of the recommendations of UNGASS “outcome document” and the UN “Sustainable Development Goals”(SDGs) 2030.

At this session the participants discussed about the recommendations of the UNGASS “outcome document” and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030 with a view to possible cooperation between NGOs and national authorities in areas that can contribute to a humane and effective drug policy. In the note that was sent with the programme of the meeting the following Sustainable Development Goals have been considered of great importance for the issue of drugs. SDG: **a. Goal 1 “end poverty in all its forms” b. goal 3 “ensure healthy lives and wellbeing for all” c. Goal 16 “Peace, justice and strong institutions” and d. goal 17 “Strengthening implementation and revitalize global partnerships”**. The realisation of the 2030 SDGs creates opportunities to approach drug policy in relation to issues of peace, the rule of law, human rights, development and equality. The discussions in this context may have a positive influence in the process of modernisation of the drug control system. The discussion about drug policy in the context of the Sustainable development Goals will also enhance the co-operation among the UN agencies in relation to the drugs issue.

For the situation in the region in South East Europe it is important to prioritise the promotion of healthy life styles, to ensure treatment and harm reduction services in order to prevent drug users from further negative consequences for their health and wellbeing and in particular to reduce disease transmission among people who inject drugs.

Another priority is the reduction of the negative impact of incarceration through the provision of medical treatment and access to public health. Harm reduction services in prison settings remains a challenge that has to be effectively addressed by governments. NGOs can play in this context an important role.

The goal related to issues of poverty, un-employment, poor education and social disadvantage has to be addressed with actions that improve the situation in these areas and avoid problematic drug use that can lead to further poverty and marginalisation.

Conclusions and recommendations

At the last session of the meeting a general discussion took place reflecting on the input from national authorities and the NGOs.

There is a need for a more structured dialogue between National Authorities and NGOs.

From the contributions of the representatives of both the National Authorities and the NGOs can be concluded that there is mutual appreciation of the efforts made for proper consultation between National Authorities and NGOs. In a number of countries cooperation has been structured in regular consultations through participation in National Committees on Drugs. This is the case in Slovenia and in Montenegro. In these settings NGOs have the opportunity to express their views on drug policy and to exercise their influence. In most countries there are no institutionally established consultative structures. This is a point that needs to be arranged between NGOs and the National Authorities in their respective countries. Anchoring the consultative status of NGOs in national legislation would be the best guarantee for the continuity of the cooperation between NGOs and the national authorities. The formal regulation does not, however, guarantee that co-operation will properly function in everyday practice (this is the case in Montenegro). Formal agreements must be checked against their practical implementation. External evaluation is necessary

Cooperation among NGOs at the national level strengthens their position in the dialogue with their government.

In several countries in the region, NGOs are co-operating in platforms or formal networks in order to co-ordinate their advocacy work. NGOs in Romania and Slovenia are working in a formal setting of an Association or network. In Greece and The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia NGOs work together in an informal Platform. Both forms can function properly, provided that they have clear internal rules. In order to be successful in advocacy work, training of NGOs is necessary. Training possibilities can be facilitated by governments through small grants.

Quality Standards for NGOs is a required condition for the implementation of projects and activities.

It goes without saying that NGOs that want to be recognized as partners for authorities must meet minimum standards for ethical governance, effective resource management and quality standards for their programs and activities. The discussions during this meeting underlined the need for NGOs to improve quality standards. The authorities rightly demand good proposals to provide funding for programs and activities of NGOs. NGOs state that requirements are sometimes too high and cannot possibly be met by small organisations. A certain flexibility would be good. This means that consultation must take place with the NGOs. In any case, NGOs need to be trained to meet qualitative standards. On the other side, state authorities must be consistent. They cannot just rely on good intentions in protocols and memoranda of understanding. Agreements must be accompanied with budgetary commitments that will secure implementation of the

activities. Evaluation of funding programs and openness and transparency about awarded projects and their results can contribute to the improvement of proposals.

Evaluation of the meeting and the way forward

Participants appreciated the initiative for organising this meeting. It was a good example of dialogue about cooperation between national authorities and NGOs. It was also a contribution to mutual understanding. Often, both governments and NGOs are critical to each other and often they stand opposite each other. Repetition of such meetings is desirable in order to find ways of mutual understanding and improve co-operation.

There has been a suggestion to organise such meetings in different countries. The organizers noted that this meeting could be held within the framework of the project "Strengthening NGO capacity and promoting public health and human rights oriented drug policy in South Eastern Europe". This project runs until the end of 2018. It is uncertain whether the financing will be continued by the European Union. It has been suggested to check whether small financial contributions from the countries in the region jointly could make the continuity of this activity possible.

Finally thanks have been expressed to all participants for their cooperation and to the organizers and the office on drugs of Serbia for the program and the friendly hospitality.

Thanasis Apostolou

July, 2018

