

CSO activities in response to Covid- 19

Final report

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The proclamation of a pandemic and the measures of the Government of Serbia to combat the Covid-19 virus also had an impact on the work of civil society organizations. Civil society organizations have faced a number of difficulties that have hampered their work, but at the same time they have made a significant contribution to overcoming the consequences of this crisis. In addition to the objective obstacles faced by all citizens, the insufficiently responsible relationship between the state and local governments in some cases jeopardized the activities of a number of CSOs and their beneficiaries, although the Government Office for Cooperation with Civil Society called on local governments to mitigate the effects of the crisis include civil society organizations on a partnership basis. A negative example refers to the city of Bor, where during the state of emergency, the City Headquarters for Emergency Situations of the City of Bor adopted an order ordering all citizens' associations and voluntary societies to make all their human resources available to help the oldest citizens to deliver food and medicine. Following media coverage of the case, the order was renamed as a recommendation.

During the state of emergency, and even after its abolition, the organizations in some way faced even more the problem they had faced before, and that is the narrowed space for their action. The consequences of this will only be felt in the future, given the further collapse of institutions and the large number of recorded cases of human rights violations. The trend of GONGO organizations continued with the aim of discrediting the work of independent civil society organizations that have many years of experience in certain areas. An example of this is the recent case of the attack on the Belgrade Center for Security Policy, which was the target of an organized campaign by the National Avangarde. This GONGO organization often discredits the work of the BCSP in its public appearances. This time, they addressed the public with a statement calling on the BCSP to engage openly in politics, and the reason for that was the BCSP's analysis of the "Emergency Security Sector". A few days after that, they released a video entitled "Is Sasa Djordjevic endangering the safety of the president's son with his statement?", in which they target Sasa Djordjevic, a BCSP researcher. Also, the portal Prismotra published a video, in which the BCSP is accused of being a NATO lobbyist and of "endangering the security of Serbia and calling for riots", which was synchronously broadcasted on several local televisions.

Through this report, the monitoring covered 145 civil society organizations from all over Serbia. The methodology of collecting information for the report included desk research on the activities of organizations (including publications on social networks and in the media) as well as direct contact with organizations by e-mail or telephone. The reports were published on a weekly basis and the monitoring included a total of 11 reports on the activities of civil society organizations in response to Covid-19.

The activities of organizations can be grouped into five areas: humanitarian aid, monitoring, advocacy initiatives, psychosocial support and information. Most of the organizations covered by the monitoring carried out activities in the field of humanitarian aid (88), followed by monitoring (22), information (18), psychosocial support (12) and advocacy (5). It is important to note that some of the organizations carried

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out activities that fall into several areas. When it comes to individual activities within these areas, they are: providing legal assistance, monitoring human rights, providing psychological assistance, dealing with health care, networking, education and fundraising. Slightly less than half of the organizations covered by monitoring are active in Belgrade, and other organizations are deployed throughout Serbia.

Most civil society organizations, after declaring a pandemic caused by the Covid-19 virus and introducing a state of emergency, followed the recommendations of the Government and officially announced that they would organize remote work during the state of emergency. As a result, organizations have significantly improved their capacity to use a variety of online platforms and other tools to stay in touch with their partners and beneficiaries. A number of organizations continued to conduct field activities, which were mainly aimed at responding to the increased humanitarian needs of the most vulnerable groups in local communities.

Although the state of emergency was officially lifted on May 6, the epidemiological situation remained unfavorable both worldwide and in Serbia, so the organizations generally continued to carry out activities in accordance with the changed circumstances. In the short term, the epidemic still has an impact on the work of organizations that adjust their activities, while the impact of the pandemic in the long run will only have the opportunity to be seen in the future. The consequences that will have an impact in the long run are primarily those related to the economic crisis and will be reflected in the possibilities for supporting civil society, both nationally and internationally. During the state of emergency, there were informal announcements by state officials about reducing the amount of budget funds intended for financing civil society organizations by the end of the year, and the transparency and effectiveness of state funding is a problem faced by CSOs before the crisis. Some international donors responded quickly by awarding emergency grants to organizations that dealt with the most pressing issues. Also, civil society organizations were partially recognized as beneficiaries of direct benefits under state aid measures from the Regulation on Fiscal Benefits and Direct Benefits to Economic Entities during a state of emergency under the same conditions as other legal entities.

The annual survey of the Catalyst Balkans Foundation on the state of philanthropy since the onset of the pandemic crisis shows that citizens and companies together have donated 8.9 million euros. This amount of donations, collected in a period of 6 weeks, is equal to the value of donations made on a quarterly basis during 2019. The companies contributed to the suppression of the pandemic with 69% of the total donated amount. Half of all financial donations collected during the crisis were directed to the purchase of medical equipment. The findings of this report indicate that the total amount of donations will increase in the coming period, but the funds will continue to be mainly directed to support the health sector and mitigate the consequences of the pandemic. The Coalition for Charity, Food Bank - Belgrade, Civic Initiatives and NALED submitted to the Prime Ministers and the Ministries of Finance and Agriculture a proposal to extend the VAT exemption measure on goods and services for all donations, primarily food and consumer goods, in order to create more favorable conditions for support to socially vulnerable categories of the population. The state ignored this proposal of civil society organizations and thus once again showed the lack of essential understanding of the role of these organizations, especially in the protection of the most endangered social groups, although they were recognized in the Law on Associations and the Law on Foundations and Endowments.

One of the best examples of joint and quick organization of organizations is collecting aid for Novi Pazar, Sjenica and Tutin at a time when these cities were the focus of the epidemic and when they needed help.

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In this joint action of several civil society organizations, through the platform donacije.rs and direct payments to the account of the B92 Fund, nearly two million dinars were collected in seven days, donations from over 400 individuals and companies and organizations, while a number of direct donations were collected on the premises Don't let Belgrade d(r)own.

It is especially important to emphasize the work of a large number of organizations that provide various services to vulnerable social groups, which in this period carried out a large number of activities, although in difficult circumstances. Special mention should be made of the difficulties in obtaining movement permits during curfew, bearing in mind that none of the instructions of state bodies directly concerned civil society organizations, but only companies and possibly individuals who cared for people with disabilities, the elderly and children. The process of obtaining movement permits is not organized in an adequate way either, in the sense of quick reaction and finding a systemic solution to the problem in response to the needs of organizations to enable them to move. In this sense, the process of obtaining permits was selective, so some organizations were able to obtain movement permits while others were denied them, which ultimately had the greatest impact on their users. The government did not respond adequately to the needs of the most vulnerable social groups, and local emergency headquarters set up various structures to distribute aid to the oldest and most vulnerable, often without any coordination with civil society organizations that had previously established field networks for this type of activity.

By monitoring the activities of civil society organizations in this period, the two largest groups of activities can be identified as well as the identified problems that accompany their implementation:

- **Humanitarian activities** in order to urgently meet the needs of various vulnerable groups. These organizations have taken on a significant part of the burden of direct social protection in the field, bearing in mind that the complete focus of the Government has shifted to supporting health institutions. During the pandemic and the state of emergency, they faced various difficulties (lack of staff, protective equipment, resources), and especially the lack of coordination with the local emergency headquarters. Some of the organizations that carried out the largest number of activities in this area during the observed period were: Ana and Vlade Divac Foundation, Caritas Serbia, Duga Sabac, Serbian Philanthropic Forum, etc.

- **Monitoring activities** of the various aspects during a pandemic and state of emergency. These organizations focused on various (thematic) aspects of the state of emergency in accordance with their core scope, monitoring government responses at both national and local levels, and monitoring the human rights situation in which a large number of violations occurred. They faced a lack of information as well as the non-transparency of the work of institutions. Some of the organizations that carried out the largest number of activities in this area during the observed period were: Belgrade Center for Human Rights, Committee of Lawyers for Human Rights-YUCOM, Initiative for Economic and Social Rights-A11, Belgrade Center for Security Policy, Foundation Center for democracy, etc.