

Understanding CSO Accountability in the Western Balkans:

Where Do We Stand vis-à-vis the Istanbul Principles?

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UNDERSTANDING CSO ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: WHERE DO WE STAND VIS-À-VIS THE ISTANBUL PRINCIPLES?



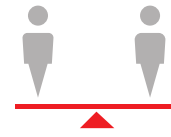
INTRODUCTION

Civil society organizations (CSOs) are a vibrant and essential feature in the democratic life of countries across the globe. CSOs collaborate with the full diversity of people and promote their rights. The essential characteristics of CSOs as distinct development actors – that they are voluntary, diverse, non-partisan, autonomous, non-violent, working and collaborating for change – are the foundation for the [Istanbul principles for CSO development effectiveness](#). The Istanbul Principles (IPs) guide the [work and practices of civil society organizations](#) since 2010 in both peaceful and conflict situations, in different areas of work from grassroots to policy advocacy, and in a continuum from humanitarian emergencies to long-term development.

BCSDN and its members have been monitoring the environment in which civil society operates through the Monitoring Matrix as the external environment in which we operate is the main precondition for development effectiveness. Our latest findings can be found [here](#). BCSDN also extended its research and efforts to further understand the CSOs' internal environment, practices and its own impact. Below are the available findings from the survey and interviews conducted in 2021 and 2022 as part of the research from the [EU TACSO Assessment](#) and BCSDN's Accountability research (link) demonstrating where organizations are vis-a-vis the Istanbul Principles. We also looked at the national Codes from recent initiatives in Albania ([Code of Standards for Non-Profit Organizations in Albania](#)), North Macedonia ([Civil Society Code](#)) and Bosnia and Herzegovina ([Code of Ethics for CSOs in BiH](#)) as well as our own [Code of Conduct](#) to showcase the local understanding and efforts towards accountable and effective Western Balkan CSOs. Finally, this document offers further guidance for Western Balkan CSOs on how to drive organizations change based on the Istanbul Principles. This is not an assessment of the implementation of the Istanbul Principles but rather a baseline, as well as a commitment and a pathway for our improvement.



ISTANBUL PRINCIPLE 1



Respect and promote human rights and social justice:

CSOs are effective as development actors when they ... develop and implement strategies, activities and practices that promote individual and collective human rights, including the right to development, with dignity, decent work, social justice and equity for all people.

BCSDN Findings

While the collected data does not give a detailed overview of human rights protection and promotion, the EU TACSO 3 assessment presents that CSOs throughout the Western Balkans pay greater importance to the organisations' role in protecting human rights compared to the previous year. CSOs provide regular services to vulnerable categories in society and support the protection of human rights, freedoms, and democracy despite the restricted funding. BCSDN accountability research demonstrates that various vulnerable groups are represented through the activities of grassroots organisations. In order to keep governments accountable, well-established CSOs during the COVID 19 crises reshaped their resources to engage in crisis management monitoring, notifying diverse human rights violations, and fighting disinformation. The accountability research also reveals that advocacy organisations, in their actions, strive to fully implement the international human rights agreements.

National Codes (Albania, BiH, North Macedonia)

The recent nationally agreed codes in the region commit CSOs to recognise the respect and the promotion of human rights as a fundamental and universal value, regardless of people's origin, nationality ethnicity, religious belief, socioeconomic status, age, sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, etc. The Code for Macedonian CSOs reflects that the human rights-based approach guides organisations' work, and they respect and promote national and international standards for their protection. The Code of Ethics of CSOs in BiH commits the human rights of members and employees to be respected by drafting internal documents, rules, and procedures according to relevant international and national documents. The beneficiaries' protection and promotion of human rights are directed by freedom of speech and expression, freedom of association, non-discrimination, and capacity building.

BCSDN Code of Conduct

BCSDN integrates the respect of human rights, rights of all citizens: men and women of all nationalities, religions, and cultures, as the main and universal value. It commits to promoting equal rights for everyone, addressing all forms of discrimination in respecting and promoting international standards for human rights protection. The Code also proclaims to help people recognise their rights and hold accountable the actors responsible for their compliance.



How to drive organizations change based on the IPs?

How to analyse relevant organizational aspects of your CSO.

- Think about your CSO, with its unique history, mandate, staff, and constituency. To what extent is there agreement within your organization about the definition and importance of human rights and social justice?
- What are your CSO's current objectives in relation to human rights and social justice? How does its commitment to human rights and social justice manifest internally in your CSO's organizational policies, practices and daily operations?
- How are the voices of marginalized people reflected in your CSO's objectives, activities and approaches?
- Which mechanisms of multidimensional accountability are you using? How will you advance multidimensional accountability in the light of your analysis?
- Which additional aspects of human rights and social justice do you identify as being relevant for your work?
- Where are the challenges and gaps?



ISTANBUL PRINCIPLE 2



Embody gender equality and equity while promoting women's and girl's rights:

CSOs are effective as development actors when they ... promote and practice development cooperation embodying gender equity, reflecting women's concerns and experience, while supporting women's efforts to realize their individual and collective rights, participating as fully empowered actors in the development process.

BCSDN Findings

The EU TACSO 3 assessment notes CSOs (particularly women organisations) as most sensitive to the necessity to engage in gender mainstreaming and the leader in establishing gender balance policies. It also shows that women's organisations were barely consulted in tackling the COVID-19 measures and that the gender gap was not of a particular focus during the pandemic. Internal acts such as gender policies, anti-discrimination, anti-mobbing procedures, conflict of interest prevention procedures, or occupational safety and health procedures are not a part of CSOs' regulations throughout the Western Balkans. Rather, these policies are relevant only to larger organisations. The majority of CSOs and networks are not guided by individual written policies on gender equality and diversity. Networks comprise gender equality as an internal practice and employ it as a cross-cutting issue, including at programme level. The organisations also report on a lack of awareness of gender issues, discrimination, and the absence of gender-sensitive language. Despite this, women's organisations' advocacy efforts during the pandemic, such as those against selective abortions based on gender; equal remuneration; drafting more favourable laws for women's positions, etc, are largely recognised. Well-structured women organisations are also considered counterparts to the governments regarding gender issues

National Codes (Albania, BiH, North Macedonia)

The National Codes aim to establish gender equality within CSOs and organisations' employees, remove barriers to women and girls' empowerment, and prohibit discrimination. The Code of Ethics for CSOs in BiH fosters gender equality and pluralism in employment, training, and professional development. In the code, organisations further commit to the equal participation of women in the highest management and governing bodies and commissions and fields where they are inadequately represented.

BCSDN Code of Conduct

In the Code of Conduct, BCSDN commits to applying and promoting impartial and rightful relations towards every individual, regardless of nationality, political, ethnic, or religious affiliation, language, sexual orientation, mental or physical ability, as well as gender. It also commits the organisations to establish policies promoting gender equality and participation of disadvantaged groups at all levels of the organisations, restricting every form of discrimination.



How to drive organizations change based on the IPs?

Think about your CSO, with its unique history, mandate, staff, and constituency.

- To what extent is there agreement within your organization about the definitions and importance of “gender equity” and “gender equality”? Are you going beyond “equal numbers” for men and women by taking into account the specific needs of women? Are you consciously considering the effects of power on gender issues?
- What are your CSO’s current objectives in relation to gender equity and gender equality? How will you advance them in the light of your analysis above? Which additional objectives do you identify as being relevant for your CSO’s work?
- How does your CSO’s commitment to gender equity and gender equality manifest internally in your CSO’s organizational policies, practices and daily operations?



ISTANBUL PRINCIPLE 3



Focus on people's empowerment, democratic ownership and participation:

CSOs are effective as development actors when they ... support the empowerment and inclusive participation of people to expand their democratic ownership over policies and development initiatives that affect their lives, with an emphasis on the poor and marginalized.

BCSDN Findings

The data gathered through the survey and the interviews provides information on CSOs' efforts to include constituencies in their actions. CSOs responses shows the perception that if constituency accountability is more evident during project implementation and target groups and beneficiaries are actively involved, they would be prone to take ownership of the actions and results, adding to greater sustainability. According to grassroots organisations, community influence has grown simultaneously with constituency support. Constituencies are involved in annual operational plans when these are in place. The constituencies' voices are embodied in the advocacy organisations' work. Service provider organizations believe mutual trust will increase if services include those involved in their creation. The findings examples the National Resource Centers in the region as crucial actors that, by evaluating and facilitating the exchange of good practices and lessons learnt, contribute to CSOs' empowerment. However, the findings also recognizes the absence of CSOs' awareness and practice in conducting the constituency's opinions into the organisation's work, a lack of a strategic approach to building constituency ties, and low CSOs' involvement in decision-making processes. The latest mainly triggers the grassroots organisations, which are excluded from the decision-making due to not being formally registered. Hence, the findings recommend that CSOs should (re-) establish close links with the constituencies.

National Codes (Albania, BiH, North Macedonia)

The Macedonian civil society code stipulates that organisations strive to encourage citizens' active participation (especially the marginalized and disadvantaged groups) in the local community development. The BiH Code of Ethics presents that organisations' programs are designed regularly with the local communities' representatives, ensuring the projects' enduring sustainability. It further reflects that CSOs will rely on the principle of subsidiarity, striving to make decisions on issues regarding the involvement of their members and constituencies. With regard to internal decision-making, the Macedonian Code explains that CSOs' non-executive and executive bodies have divided roles, rights, and responsibilities. Similarly, the Code of Standards for Albanian CSOs specifies that an independent, active, and informed governing body will manage the civil society members fairly and responsibly. The Code of Ethics for BiH CSOs adds that the competence of management structures assures the organisations' quality management and adherence to Code's principles.



BCSDN Code of Conduct

The Code specifies that active participation of citizens and the local community will be encouraged, including the involvement of disadvantaged groups. When necessary, organisations will empower other organisations to better perform in their future work. It further commits the organisations to guarantee that decision-making processes reflect on and respond to people's feedback.

How to drive organizations change based on the IPs?

Think about your CSO, with its unique history, mandate, staff, and constituency.

- To what extent is there agreement within your organization about the definition and importance of people's empowerment, democratic ownership and participation?
- What are your CSO's current objectives in relation to people's empowerment, democratic ownership and participation? How will you advance them in the light of your analysis above? Which additional objectives do you identify as being relevant for your CSO's work?
- Are you working with a broad range of people or particular groups in society (which may be the foundation for future conflict – or peace)?
- How does your CSO's commitment to people's empowerment, democratic ownership and participation manifest internally in your CSO's organizational policies, practices and daily operations? Where are the challenges and gaps?



ISTANBUL PRINCIPLE 4



Promote environmental sustainability:

CSOs are effective as development actors when they ... develop and implement priorities and approaches that promote environmental sustainability for present and future generations, including urgent responses to climate crises, with specific attention to the socio-economic, cultural and indigenous conditions for ecological integrity and justice

BCSDN Findings

While the findings do not explore the environmental aspect of the work of CSOs in the region, it notes that organizations that promote environmental sustainability and work on environmental issues that affect the local communities are notably successful in engaging more with their constituencies, and mobilizing citizens to support their advocacy efforts and take action, thus improving their accountability towards their primary constituencies.

National Codes (Albania, BiH, North Macedonia)

The protection of the environment and sustainability of the planet is part of the fundamental values of the national codes. The organisations are committed to implementing their activities in an environmentally sustainable way (The Code for Macedonian CSOs) and strive to promote and apply the highest international standards in this field (Code of Ethics, BiH).

BCSDN Code of Conduct

BCSDN Code of Conduct stipulates that organisations' activities will be conducted in an environmentally sustainable way.

How to drive organizations change based on the IPs?

Think about your CSO, with its unique history, mandate, staff, and constituency.

- To what extent is there agreement within your organization about the understanding and importance of environmental sustainability?
- What are the root causes of the environmental crises that your CSO aims to tackle?
- What are your CSO's current objectives in relation to environmental sustainability? How will you advance them in the light of your analysis above? Which additional objectives do you identify as being relevant for your CSO's work?
- How does your CSO's commitment to environmental sustainability manifest internally in your CSO's organizational policies, practices and daily operations?
- What influence do supporters and opponents have on your CSO's strategy?
- Where are the challenges and gaps?



ISTANBUL PRINCIPLE 5



Practice transparency and accountability:

CSOs are effective as development actors when they ... demonstrate a sustained organizational commitment to transparency, multiple accountability, and integrity in their internal operations.

BCSDN Findings

The accountability research presents that grassroots and service provider organisations are accountable when they provide services and help constituencies in a responsible way. On the other hand, advocacy organisations align accountability with drafting and designing organisations' programs. Some donors and capacity-building providers tie accountability with the work and supervision of primary constituents. The interview findings reflect that transparency precedes accountability. CSOs are transparent when establishing donors' trust by sharing monthly activities and financial reports, carrying out annual audit reports, publicizing critical projects and donors' details on their websites, sharing relevant and up-to-date information, promoting products, etc.

National Codes (Albania, BiH, North Macedonia)

The Code for Macedonian CSOs stipulates that accountability and transparency are supreme democratic values, characterized by organisations' openness, honesty, and professional integrity, where employees and volunteers have a strong sense of responsibility for their actions and impact. In the Code of standards for Albanian CSOs, the organisations, commit to transparent actions and sharing public information about their mission, creating spaces for constructive dialogue with parties to reach a shared understanding, and publicly sharing annual progress and financial reports. In the Code of Ethics, BiH CSOs commit to working in an accountable way with public institutions, partners, donors, and other stakeholders, investing resources in professional capacity building of employees, and measuring performance results.

BCSDN Code of Conduct

BCSDN Code of Conduct commits the organisations' affairs to be conducted with integrity and transparency and network's goals, programs, finances, activities, results, effectiveness, and governance to be disclosed to the public. It further commits to operating the network's finances appropriately, showing accountability towards donors.

How to drive organizations change based on the IPs?

Think about your CSO, with its unique history, mandate, staff, and constituency.

- To what extent is there agreement within your organization about the meaning and importance of transparency and accountability?
- What are your CSO's current objectives in relation to transparency and accountability?
- How will you advance them in the light of your analysis above?
- Which additional objectives do you identify as being relevant for your CSO's work?
- How does your CSO's commitment to transparency and accountability manifest internally in your CSO's organizational policies, organizational culture, practices and daily operations?
- Where are the challenges and gaps?



ISTANBUL PRINCIPLE 6



Pursue equitable partnerships and solidarity:

CSOs are effective as development actors when they commit to transparent relationships with CSOs and other development actors, freely and as equals, based on shared development goals and values, mutual respect, trust, organizational autonomy, long-term accompaniment, solidarity and global citizenship.

BCSDN Findings

The accountability research data shows that the partnership between grassroots organisations and local stakeholders is not established on standardised processes and clear strategy. Still, the mutual cooperation is built on strong ties and a significant level of trust. The constituency of grassroots and service-provider organisations is a partner and a source of information embodied in organisations' work that supports them to identify problems the community is not vocal about. Service provider organisations emphasize the importance of a collaborative relationship with beneficiaries where the services created include the ones concerned. Most advocacy and human rights organisations operating in the field reported building solid relations with the people they work for. The EU TACSO 3 assessment presents that the majority of networks and CSOs throughout the Western Balkans were relevant partners of the local authorities in mobilizing and helping them prevent the spread of COVID-19. The assessment also recommends that activists and CSOs from different sectors and backgrounds connect, cooperate, share knowledge, pursue joint advocacy and solidarity actions.

National Codes (Albania, BiH, North Macedonia)

In the national codes, the organisations are committed to working in partnership and collaboration to meet common goals. The Macedonian CSOs commit to always act with faith in solidarity when fulfilling a common interest and a sense of unity in encouraging social changes. The Albanian and Macedonian codes also stipulate the organisations' advocacy to be practiced in the spirit of partnership and joint responsibility based on concrete principles. In line with the partnership, the Albanian organisations are also committed to assisting other organisations, when applicable, to empower them and improve their performance in future work.

BCSDN Code of Conduct

In the Code of Conduct, BCSDN commits to conducting the network's advocacy initiatives and fundraising in partnership and joint responsibility with its members. It stipulates that BCSDN members will partner with and support each other in fundraising. Furthermore, after being confirmed by the network's board, joint statements and advocacy campaigns will be developed and implemented in partnership with local members and CSOs.



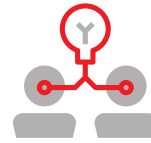
How to drive organizations change based on the IPs?

Think about your CSO, with its unique history, mandate, staff, and constituency.

- To what extent is there agreement within your organization about the meanings and importance of equitable partnerships and solidarity?
- What are your CSO's current objectives in relation to equitable partnerships and solidarity?
- How will you advance them in the light of your analysis above?
- Which additional objectives do you identify as being relevant for your CSO's work?
- How does your CSO's commitment to equitable partnerships and solidarity manifest internally in your CSO's organizational policies, practices and daily operations?
- Where are the challenges and gaps?



ISTANBUL PRINCIPLE 7



Create and share knowledge and commit to mutual learning:

CSOs are effective as development actors when they ... enhance the ways they learn from their experience, from other CSOs and development actors, integrating evidence from development practice and results, including the knowledge and wisdom of local and indigenous communities, strengthening innovation and their vision for the future they would like to see.

BCSDN Findings

The EU TACSO 3 assessment notes a lack of meaningful CSOs' engagement in monitoring and evaluating organisations' work due to the insufficient capacities and absence of operational (core funding) support. Due to the donor requirements, monitoring and evaluation are more common at the project level, which is not the case for the organisational level of CSOs and networks. Monitoring and evaluation are not conducted systematically and do not examine the lessons learnt. The assessment does not provide examples of particular improvement and awareness concerning evidence-based advocacy due to closed public decision-making, lack of political will for CSOs' inclusion in the process, the difficulty of carrying out fieldwork and surveys, etc. This especially triggers the smaller CSOs with low capacity and knowledge. On a positive note, the findings records many CSOs' improved in information sharing with a broader audience by publicly disclosing different information on CSOs' work, including progress documents and organisational structures and roles.

National Codes (Albania, BiH, North Macedonia)

In the recent national Codes, CSOs commit to permanently monitor and evaluate the results and goals of their programs and projects. The CSOs in Bosnia and Herzegovina are also committed to investing in short and long-lasting internal and external evaluation mechanisms. In the National Code, the Macedonian organisations are determined the advocacy initiatives to be based on evidence and serve communities' needs. The Codes also integrate public disclosing information on organisations bodies and employees, members, donors, and finances. The Macedonian organisations also engage to objectively and impartially share information, knowledge, and resources.

BCSDN Code of Conduct

In the Code of Conduct, BCSDN promotes peer learning and commits to sharing data, resources, knowledge, and collective decisions. BCSDN also commits to monitoring members' adherence to the minimum reporting standards to comply with the Code of Conduct and to report failures if the goals are not fulfilled. It assures network's advocacy will be established on members' partnership, principles, and evidence, taking into account the voices of the locals and people concerned and their experience and knowledge of the on-the-ground situation.



How to drive organizations change based on the IPs?

Think about your CSO, with its unique history, mandate, staff, and constituency.

- To what extent is there agreement within your organization about the definition and importance of creating and sharing knowledge and fostering mutual learning?
- How does your CSO create knowledge? What kinds of knowledge are considered most credible? Which groups' knowledge is more or less valued within your CSO? Why?
- How does your CSO share knowledge and learning?
- How does your CSO's commitment to shared knowledge and mutual learning manifest internally in your CSO's organizational policies, practices and daily operations?
- What are your CSO's current objectives in relation to creating and sharing knowledge and mutual learning? How will you advance them in the light of your analysis above?
- Where are the challenges and gaps?



ISTANBUL PRINCIPLE 8



Commit to realizing positive sustainable change:

CSOs are effective as development actors when they ... collaborate to realize sustainable outcomes and impacts of their development actions, focusing on results and conditions for lasting change for people, with special emphasis on poor and marginalized populations, ensuring an enduring legacy for present and future generations.

BCSDN Findings

The accountability research reveals that mutual collaboration empowers both communities and CSOs to more strategically engage in processes of common interest. While big and well-established organisations base their work on clear strategies, the grassroots organisations, on the other hand, cooperate with their constituencies on an ad-hoc basis, with no clear strategy established. The majority of larger organisations that participated in the EU TACSO 3 assessment reported having a clearly defined vision, mission, goals (VMG), and strategic plans. The networks in North Macedonia and Kosovo work under well-established strategies, but this is not the case in Albania. One of the gaps preventing organisations from operating more strategically is the donors' project funding level support. Additional challenges in this aspect are the current fragile political and economic circumstances, the changing legislation, socio-political tensions, polarisation, the pandemic's burden, etc.

National Codes (Albania, BiH, North Macedonia)

The Macedonian Civil Society Code proclaims that CSOs' work is based on a one-year or multi-year planning process to accomplish the organisational mission and satisfy the citizens' demands. The strategic planning and overall decision-making processes are also defined and impacted by the active involvement of CSOs' employees, members, beneficiaries/constituents, and supporters. Similarly, the national civil society codes of Albania and BiH also proclaim that organisations will ensure and promote the involvement of all employees in organisational planning and decision-making (as per their levels and responsibilities following the decision-making policies (Code of Standards for Albanian CSOs).

BCSDN Code of Conduct

In the Code of conduct, BCSDN commits to including people at all organisational levels in the planning and decision making and encourages leadership.



How to drive organizations change based on the IPs?

Think about your CSO, with its unique history, mandate, staff, and constituency.

- To what extent is there agreement about what it means to realize positive sustainable change?
- Which future trends does your CSO anticipate? How are they included in your objectives and strategies?
- What are your CSO's current objectives in relation to promoting sustainable change? How will you advance them in the light of your analysis above? Which additional objectives do you identify as being relevant for your CSO's work?
- How does your CSO's commitment to sustainable change manifest internally in your CSO's organizational policies, practices and daily operations?
- What aspects of organizational policy and culture help or hinder your CSO's realization of positive sustainable change?
- Which change agents do you include in your activities? Who do you exclude? Why?
- Which other stakeholders are already working on positive sustainable change? How can you collaborate with them? How can you utilize their good practices?
- Who is hindering positive change (i.e. "spoilers") and how can they be included to ensure sustainable change?

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