Contribution to the Call for Evidence on the EU Civil Society Strategy

Samaritan International (SAM.I.) is a European network of 22 non-profit non-governmental organisations from 20 European countries (full list of members organisations at the end of the document). We are politically and religiously unaffiliated and cooperate across borders within our network, on a regional, bilateral, and multilateral basis. Our members are active in the areas of social services, first aid and rescue services, disaster prevention and response, civil protection, humanitarian aid, youth work, and volunteer management. Our work is conducted with the support of about three million individual members and almost 150.000 volunteers.

Introduction

Samaritan International welcomes the European Commission's initiative to set up an EU Civil Society Strategy and the opportunity to give feedback to this call for evidence. Being an EU-level network of civil society organisations, SAM.I. considers the meaningful involvement of civil society at all stages of the EU's policy cycle, in addition to an institutionalised Civil Society Dialogue, crucial.

The main activities of Samaritan International's member organisations comprise various social services and civil protection activities, all supported by a significant number of structurally engaged and qualified volunteers. In that capacity, SAM.I. is raising the following points for consideration:

- **Adequate funding, unbureaucratic access to funding, funding security and a strong enabling framework are essential for a strong civil society;**
- **The value of structured and qualified volunteering needs to be better recognised, not only for the tasks the volunteers fulfil, but for its value to social cohesion through the promotion of civic engagement, democratic and social skills;**
- **CSOs in civil protection, disaster preparedness and response need a better European integration, as well as supporting national policies to use their full potential;**
- **CSO networks that bring together member organisations from the EU and its neighbours should be recognised for and supported in their important role for foreign policy.**

Adequate funding and a strong enabling framework

The European Commission has recently made a proposal for the next **Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)**, which will define the EU's budget lines and amounts for the coming years. In order to protect public funding for CSOs and to promote funding security for European civil society organisations and networks it is crucial that specific programmes, such as CERV and the ESF+, including their operating grants, are being safeguarded in the next MFF as individual programmes. Any funding from such programmes must not restrict the legitimate right of advocacy and must recognise the partnership of civil society organisations in the design, implementation and monitoring of EU policies.

In terms of a strong enabling framework, Samaritan International has advocated for many years for a European definition of a „**Public benefit status**", which would facilitate cross-border donations and enable CSOs to access existing favourable national frameworks, such as taxation, public procurement or state aid regimes, reduced bureaucracy, etc., once they have been classified. A harmonised European status would create certainty and remove the burden of continually having to prove the applicability

of exceptions for charitable organisations, therefore allowing them to focus their resources on their core activities and services to citizens.

The revision of the **Public Procurement Directive** is another pillar for a stronger enabling framework. While socially responsible public procurement (SRPP) allows public authorities to leverage their purchasing power to promote fairness, inclusion, sustainability, and innovation, the study "*The social impact of public procurement* "[1] and the Council Recommendations for Social Economy Framework Conditions[2] acknowledge that most tenders are still awarded solely on the basis of price.

- ⇒ **Safeguard the relevant funding programmes within the next MFF, including operating grants, for EU-level civil society networks;**
- ⇒ **Strengthen the enabling framework by defining „public benefit status" at the European level and use the revision of the Public Procurement Directive to promote a real shift to socially responsible public procurement.**

The value of volunteering

On the EU-level, the discourse around volunteering is often limited to the European Solidarity Corps (ESC). While the ESC is a very important programme to enable young citizens to experience European values first hand, **volunteering in general should be better promoted** as an essential pillar of European democracy and solidarity for people of all ages and backgrounds. Volunteering has a unique potential to bring together different generations, people from different social, economic, religious, ethnic backgrounds and thus plays an important role for inclusion and social cohesion.

To recognise the value of volunteering for the European project goes hand in hand with a revised **definition of skills**, which are too often defined only in terms of labour market relevance. Engagement in structured volunteering opportunities does not only provide the volunteer with the skills necessary to perform their task, but more importantly transmits civic and social skills: being a part of a democratic organisation, engaging in active citizenship and donating time in the public interest.

In the core activity sectors of Samaritan International, volunteers play a particularly important role. In the **social services sector**, volunteers cannot be seen as cheap labour, or staff replacement, but rather have to be considered as a complementing element to the social services staff, necessary to offer the width and/or depth of services. In the field of **civil protection**, including disaster preparedness and response, emergency services or first aid education, volunteers are a crucial element, without who services would not be possible. The long-term engagement of these volunteers will become even more key, as f.e. natural disaster continue to increase in frequency and magnitude.

[1] [1] Caimi, V., Sansonetti, S., 2023, *The social impact of public procurement*, publication for the Committee on Employment and Social affairs, Policy Department for Economic, Scientific and Quality of Life Policies, European Parliament, Luxembourg

[2] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:C_202301344

The **Niinistö report** stresses that the "participation of citizens in different roles, including through voluntary means is crucial also for social cohesion in crises", as well as that "preparedness requires common responsibility". He recommends to **"reinforce channels and opportunities enabling the active participation of young people in preparedness action by stepping up support to the voluntary sector."**

While the volunteers offer their time and engagement for free, the attraction, the management, as well as the retention of volunteers requires a lot of resources from the organisations. Therefore, CSOs offering such structured and qualified volunteering opportunities need to be recognized and adequately supported.

- ⇒ **Recognise the value of volunteering with regards to skill development and civic engagement;**
- ⇒ **Acknowledge the essential role of volunteers in the social service sector and in civil protection and involve the respective CSOs in all stages of the policy cycle, as well as for sector-specific strategies;**
- ⇒ **Follow-up on the recommendation of the Niinistö report to step up support to the voluntary sector;**

Disaster preparedness and response

The Niinistö report rightly recognises the key role of the individual citizen and civil society for preparedness. As mentioned above, disasters, both natural and man-made, continue to increase in frequency and magnitude. While civil protection is first and foremost a public responsibility, successful disaster preparedness and response is not possible without the complementary engagement of civil society organisations, based on volunteer commitment. **Public institutions and CSOs** active in the field need to work closely together, as the challenges can only be overcome through collaboration and efficient resource management, not only regionally and nationally but also cross-border.

On European level, CSO participation in the **European Union Civil Protection Mechanism** (UCPM) should be enabled at all operational levels—from prevention and preparedness to disaster response, including the planning of community and individual resilience and disaster response strategies, based on the involvement of volunteers. Experts from CSOs should be increasingly involved in the coordination efforts under the UCPM and included in crisis management trainings at EU-level. An EU-wide mapping of CSO civil protection capabilities and resources, as well as their relevant legal frameworks would enable better information exchanges and coordination when a crisis hits.

The whole-of-society approach to preparedness and resilience plans enshrined in the Niinistö report must be extended to consider the fundamental role of civil society organisations in enhancing individual and household preparedness, and community-based response strategies. In order to play their important role effectively, CSOs active in civil protection need a low bureaucratic burden to **access funding**, as well as enabling policies, as for example to free up the volunteers from their day job, where relevant.

- ⇒ **Closer cooperation of public civil protection bodies and CSOs active in civil protection;**
- ⇒ **Meaningful involvement of CSOs in the UCPM, including an EU-wide mapping of CSO capabilities and resources;**
- ⇒ **Lower burden to access funding and a better enabling framework for the volunteers.**

Connecting the EU and its neighbours

An important region of our network are the Western Balkan countries. Throughout the **accession process**, it has been important for Samaritan International to support our local member organisations' work and to foster the exchange with EU organisations. As the social dimension is not at the forefront of the accession negotiation chapters, it is even more important to increase the **capacity of local CSOs active in the social services sector**. These CSOs will continue to play an important role to reach the local population and demonstrate hands-on results of cooperation with EU partners.

Civil society organisations play a major role in delivering social services in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood but often struggle to receive adequate political and financial support. CSOs can make an important contribution in the social sector, if supported adequately. The IRIS network[3], which is the only regional network that brings together CSO social service providers in Southeast Europe, is a great example, as well as the Ukrainian Samaritans (SSU) who have been a focal point for the implementation of SAM.I.'s joint social projects in the Ukraine.

Against the backdrop of wide-spread strategic use of disinformation to influence political processes and influence public opinion, it has become even more important to strengthen **people-to-people contacts** between EU citizens and citizens in the Western Balkans and neighbouring countries. Cross-border civil society organisations bear a unique potential to reach the population effectively and to establish ties, by exchanging best practices and delivering tangible bottom-up results. Successful cooperation at civil society level is thus a key **foreign policy tool to continuously promote a pro-European stance** within the countries' populations. Cross-border civil society initiatives and networks should be supported accordingly.

- ⇒ **Recognise the importance of CSO networks active in the social sector for the accession process, especially as social policies take a backstage in the accession negotiations;**
- ⇒ **Recognise CSO networks as important foreign policy stakeholders, with a unique ability to create people-to-people contacts and reach the local population;**
- ⇒ **Increase the support to CSO networks connecting the EU with its neighbouring countries.**

[3] https://iris-see.eu

Member organisations of Samaritan International:

- *Alfar Centar (Ac), Montenegro*
- *Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund Deutschland (ASB), Germany*
- *Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund Österreichs (ASBÖ), Austria*
- *Asociace Samaritànú Ceské Republiky (ASCR), Czech Republic*
- *Asociácia Samaritánov Slovenskej Republiky (ASSR), Slovakia*
- *Associazione Nazionale Pubbliche Assistenze (ANPAS), Italy*
- *Secouristes Français-Croix Blanche (CB), France*
- *Community Development Institute (CDI), North Macedonia*
- *Dansk Folkehjælp (DPA), Denmark*
- *Federatia Samaritenilor Romani (FSR), Romania*
- *Inicijativa Za Razvoj I Saradnju (IDC), Serbia*
- *Landesrettungsverein Weisses Kreuz (WK), Italy*
- *Latvijas Samariesu Apvieniba (LSA), Latvia*
- *Lietuvos Samarieciu Bendrija (LSB), Lithuania*
- *Malta Rescue Corps (MRC), Malta*
- *Országos Szamaritánus Társaság Szövetsége (USB), Hungary*
- *Pompiers Humanitaires Français (PHF) (France)*
- *Sakartvelos Samariteta Kavshiri (SSK), Georgia*
- *Samarytanska Federacja Organizacja Pozarzadowych (SFOP), Poland*
- *Spilka Samaritian Ukraini (SSU), Ukraine*
- *Udruga Djece S Teškoćama U Razvoju, Osoba S Invaliditetom I Njihovihobitelji (SRCE), Croatia*
- *Žene Sa Une (ZSU), Bosnia And Herzegovina*