TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY CRITERIA

Strengthening Roma civil society as independent and transparent watchdog organisations

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> **The need for transparency in the internal functioning of associations is not specifically established in international and regional treaties owing to the right of associations to be free from interference of the state in their internal affairs. However, openness and transparency are fundamental for establishing accountability and public trust** (OSCE/ODIHR, 2015[1]).

The transparency criteria are accompanied by training materials that support organisations to implement the criteria in their structures and their daily work. You can order the offline version of the 'Transparency Board Game' from the ERGO Network secretariat and access the online training tool at www.ergonetwork.org/transparency

1) OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), Joint guidelines on freedom of association, 2015, p.62.

INTRODUCTION

ERGO Network together with its member organisations – Roma Advocacy and Research Centre (Slovakia), Roma Active Albania (Albania), Slovo 21 (Czech Republic), Autonomia Foundation (Hungary), OTAHARIN (Bosnia and Herzegovina), RROMA (Macedonia), Mladi Romi (Montenegro) and Zero Discrimination (Turkey) – developed a set of transparency and accountability criteria for grassroots organisations with the aim **to strengthen civil society organisations.** Using the criteria will give more legitimacy, better fundraising opportunities and more trust from both the grassroots level and institutions and ultimately reinforce the power of civil society organizations. Being transparent and accountable are important prerequisites for the effectiveness of civil society that is taken seriously by its institutional counterparts and other partners.

Furthermore, the members of ERGO Network agreed on joining their efforts and putting their thorough expertise together **to capacitate Roma and pro-Roma civil society in their countries in implementing the transparency criteria**. Organisations fulfilling them will then use a transparency label to bring attention to their quality in governance, management and performance.

Professionalization of Roma civil society in terms of transparency and accountability is a process aiming at fulfilling the following specific goals:

✓   To be a role model for other organisations in the field of transparency and accountability in promoting positive values and to support others with expertise
✓   To improve the effectiveness of CSOs through putting clear structures in place

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- ✓ To increase the impact of CSOs' work ensuring positive change and delivering long-term positive results
- ✓ To strengthen capacity to address Roma rights issues;
- ✓ To become equal partners with institutions
- ✓ To establish a better connection with the grassroots level
- ✓ To ensure greater sustainability of CSOs
- ✓ To support fundraising
- ✓ To create conditions for comparability of CSOs
- ✓ To ensure safety, i.e. by complying with national legislation.

Finally, fulfilling the transparency criteria means not only being able to show that Roma and pro-Roma civil society takes these very seriously, but also having the right **to demand the same from other stakeholders**.

We are aware of challenges grassroots organisations might meet in applying the criteria, such as complexities of local politics or lack of human resources. This set of criteria outlines the ways grassroots civil society organisations should be governed and managed. It focuses on applicable criteria in the fields of

1) **Governance**,

2) **Financial management** and

3) **Performance**.

PRINCIPAL VALUES

A civil society organisation should **recognise that all people are born free and equal in dignity**. It should **be sensitive to the moral values, religions, customs, traditions, and culture** of the communities they serve. A CSO should **not violate human rights**. It should **be honest and truthful** in its dealings with people whom they aim to empower, donors, staff, members and partners, governmental institutions and the public in general; it should not have a hidden agenda, and **should respect the law**. A CSO should **be accountable** to its staff, partners and constituency, but also to the public at large.

Even the most sincere CSOs can benefit from transparency criteria because of their systematically identified acceptable standards and ethical practices. They provide an ethical check, while also serving as a statement and a proof that the importance of **maintaining high standards** is taken seriously. Such criteria can also help stakeholders in identifying and avoiding irresponsible organisations.

Sustainable progress, peace, and justice require that all organisations **contribute to the common good**. Thus, a CSO should balance self-development and service to others. Fundamental to the very character of each CSO is that they are **not-for-profit**, **nongovernmental**, and **politically independent**.

GOVERNANCE CRITERIA

An effective governance structure and a strong, active, and committed governing body are crucial to an organisation's ability to achieve its mission and objectives.

The governance structure should reflect the core values and mission of the organisation. The governing body holds ultimate responsibility for all its activities and resources. This includes establishing the direction of the organisation, beginning with its mission statement. The governing body also determines the organisation's activities and monitors their compliance with the mission. It exercises responsibility for obtaining and appropriately employing the human and financial resources to carry out the organisation's mission and sustain the organisation, and oversees legal requirements. In order to fulfil transparency criteria regarding governance, organisations have to create conditions for and actualize the following:

Clear structure of decision-making bodies with defined responsibilities

Clear rules of procedures for decision-making bodies

Regular elections of the governing body by the general assembly (if no other official organisational structure in place, e.g. foundations)

Governance structures free from tokenism, nepotism and conflict of interest.

Meaningful target group participation in decision-making (at least one member of the target group must be represented in the governing body.)

Equal women's participation and representation of youth as well as age balance in decision-making bodies; geographical representation if applicable.

Procedure for nominating individuals to serve on the governing body known to members and other relevant parties.

Clear mission statement approved by the governing body to set forth why the CSO exists and what it wants to accomplish, periodically reviewed.

Democratic governance (non-authoritarian, taking the opinion of co-workers equally into account, internal voting system etc.)

Consulting/ open leadership (the confidence and humility to give up the need to be in control while inspiring commitment from people to accomplish goals)

Multi-annual or annual strategic work plan adopted by the membership aiming to fulfil the organisation's mission and a monitoring system to check its fulfilment

Code of conduct and child protection policy (to be signed by all staff members/volunteers).

Procedures for performance of staff roles.

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT CRITERIA

Civil society organisations should have proper financial procedures in place to assure all partners and the general public that investment in the organisation is safe. Organisations should employ internal financial procedures, maintain financial records carefully and make financial statements available to the public. They should also have their financial records reviewed periodically. To fulfil the transparency criteria regarding financial management, the organisations have to create conditions for and actualize the following:

Utilizing its resources in an effective and efficient manner towards accomplishment of its stated purpose.

Handling resources responsibly to reach the organisation's goals and serve the public good

Refraining from using illegal sources, resources from knowingly unfair companies, from companies using child labour and similar.

Refraining from misusing public money (all public assets are to be treated as a public trust); and opposing to corruption, bribery, and other financial improprieties.

Not spending more than 35% on internal matters (meaning spending at least 65% of its total expenditure on programme activities, and ideally more than 80%.)

Disclosing sources of funding (publishing organisations' donors, disclosing amounts spent for lobbying towards public authorities (if applicable).

Disclosing annual financial reports.

Respecting national legislation and deadlines (book keeping, fiscal declaration, contractual requirements for staff and volunteers etc.)

Financial decisions of chairperson or treasurer not taken independently of the governing body.

Internal regulations for payments, i.e. signatory system for payments and other financial and administration policies and the staff introduced to these.

System of checking books by the board of directors and/or approval by the general assembly.

Annual external financial audits, if possible.

Regularly updated books so financial situation can be provided on time.

PERFORMANCE CRITERIA

Committed and responsible staff is vital for the success of a CSO. It should seek qualified staff, offer them proper training and supervision, treat them with fairness and equity, and provide them with avenues for individual growth and development. On the other hand, the CSO should expect employees and volunteers to maintain the highest standards of professional conduct, use information and resources responsibly, and avoid conflicts of interest. To fulfil the transparency criteria regarding performance, the organisations have to create conditions for and actualize the following:

Activities consistent with the organisation's mission.

Critical periodical examinations of activities to determine their relevance to the mission, their efficiency and effectiveness, the value of the programmes.

Addressing root causes of issues the organisation is working on and advocating for fundamental change.

Knowledge sharing and exchange with stakeholders.

Making decisions responsive to feedback from the people affected by the organisation's work, partners, volunteers and staff.

Regularly seeking feedback on its activities from all partners.

Communicating vision, mission and strategic goals externally and internally.

Visibility of activities and results (through website, newsletter, flyers etc.).

Meaningful participation of target group at all levels (people-driven work and respectful partnership).

Provision of a communication channel for the public to make inquiries.

Investment in staff and volunteers to develop their full potential and achieve the organisation's goals by providing training, ensuring a quality process of inducting new staff and regular team meetings and appraisals.

Respecting expertise by choosing experts or expert organisations based on their knowledge and experience, not based on friendship or family ties.

Maintaining ethical, cooperative relationships with other CSOs and partners where possible and appropriate for the sake of the greater public good.

The Transparency Criteria were created by ERGO Network with support of the International Visegrad Fund under the 'Joint Initiative to Empower Roma Civil Society in the Western Balkans and Turkey' and 'Roma Included in Social Europe' programmes, together with the following partner organisations:

Slovo21 - Czech Republic

Roma Advocacy and Research Centre - Slovakia

Autonomia Foundation - Hungary

Roma Active Albania

OTAHARIN - Bosnia and Herzegovina

RROMA – Macedonia

Mladi Romi - Montenegro

Zero Discrimination - Turkey

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