

# Constituency Building:

## Insights and Ideas



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# Constituency Building: Insights and Ideas

How can organizations strengthen their links to active citizens and the public at large under the conditions of a shrinking space for civil society?

## Foreword

One of the primary reasons we are seeing civil society organizations under attack is because they are not sufficiently rooted in their communities. Over the past two decades or more, we have seen a growing professionalized civil society sector in many parts of the world. While this is to be applauded, the consequence is that people do not see the relevance of such groups in their day to day lives, which makes it much easier for them to fall prey to scapegoating by populist leaders.

It is for this reason, that "constituency building" alongside working on "narratives" emerge as key strategies in helping to create a more enabling environment for civil society and push back against closing civic space.

But this is easier said than done – organizations which may focus on the national level or international level will not necessarily have the tools, or indeed be best placed to broaden their constituency at the local level. They will need to adopt new skills – from learning how to tell stories to building a volunteer base primed to do outreach; collaborate with others, such as allies in other sectors, and of course, connecting the online and offline worlds, in order to make headway along this complex and challenging road.

It will also take investment and time, something which funders themselves will need to be aware of, as constituency building is often behind-the-scenes work which is not always the obvious candidate for grant-making. Constituency building is not a quick-fix solution to civil society woes, but it will be a critical pillar if we are to nurture a less antagonistic and more nurturing environment in which civil society can thrive.

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## Team

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## Introduction

In April 2018, a two-day workshop on constituency building was held in Prague. More than forty representatives of civil society organizations (CSOs) from all four Visegrad countries met to discuss the importance and challenges of inviting the public to participate in their endeavours.

Engaging the public is a goal in itself for those who believe that a robust and sustainable democracy needs active citizens who understand the world around them and want to change it for the better. However, the premise of the workshop and this paper is that there is at least one other reason why CSOs need to reach out to the public: With the surge of populism, CSOs in the Visegrad countries, and especially so in Hungary and Poland, have become targets of politically and culturally motivated attacks. We call this phenomenon “shrinking space for civil society”. CSOs cannot fend off these attacks without winning the support of the broader public and without some self-reflection.

In other words, not only do societies need CSOs to provide vital, yet non-profitable services, voice the needs of the disadvantaged and empower members of society for public participation, it is also the CSOs who need people’s support to maintain their legitimacy in times of abrupt social and cultural changes. Related to that, CSOs need to rethink their relationship to what we might figuratively call the bottom 60% – i.e., those who feel disadvantaged or marginalized and not represented or helped by the CSOs. Organizations need to learn to better listen to these people and to understand their fears and frustrations.

For practitioners who want to engage with these ideas and think about their implications for their own work, this paper offers an overview of insights extracted in part from academic literature and in part from the discussions held at the workshop. Specifically, we address the following questions:

1. What does constituency mean and how can organizations fruitfully think about constituency building in the historical context of the V4 countries?
2. How can organizations foster their legitimacy through transparency, accountability and self-reflection?
3. What are some effective ways of working with various constituencies?

The ambition of this paper is to help launch a process to strengthen links between CSOs and their sympathizers and diminish the gap between CSOs and those who are currently distrustful of them. This is a big ambition. At this stage, we hope to draw attention to some ideas, inspirational perspectives and a couple of examples of what we think is good practice. It is a working paper and we hope that other inputs will follow from across the civil sector and will result in having a nuanced discussion. It turns out that most organizations in V4 countries, if the workshop in Prague was representative, currently do not have developed strategies for constituency building. This paper is not a manual to devise such strategies, but we believe that it asks some important questions and may hint at possible directions.

The paper has three parts which can be read independently of each other. Part one digs into the definition of constituency and very briefly touches on the historical context of civil society building in post-communist countries. It addresses the first question above.

Part two mainly summarizes the most important insights from the workshop on constituency building held in Prague in April 2018 and adds some additional ideas and raises points for further consideration. Part three brings together a number of case studies of successful constituency building. Both of these parts address the second and third questions above.

In addition, we further elaborate on the second question about CSOs' legitimacy and self-reflection in a brief conclusion.

Part 1:

# Definition and context

## What is constituency building and how is it related to legitimacy?

Typically, the term constituency has been used to describe voters in a specified electoral area. However, in reference to CSOs, we use the term to mean CSOs' adherents and beneficiaries. But who are they exactly? Why is constituency building important? How can a constituency be classified? And what is the relation of constituency building to legitimacy?

Politicians draw legitimacy from votes. The source of CSOs' legitimacy is less clear-cut. On one hand, it may be the output that organizations generate. This is especially true for service organizations where the output is services delivered to clients. However, for political, advocacy or campaign CSOs, the medium of legitimacy has traditionally been the support from citizens. Such support can be expressed as money donated, time invested by volunteers, participation in demonstrations or other public actions, resonance of a cause on the social media or even in public opinion more generally. Supporters can be **themselves beneficiaries** of CSO's activity or they may **just sympathize** with a cause or a disadvantaged group, while not being beneficiaries themselves.

To lay a foundation for a definition, we start by saying that constituency of a CSO are all people who have vested interest in the CSO's activity, either because they share its values or because they are recipients of its services or would benefit from the advocated change.

To develop a more fine-grained framework, we draw on the work of Héra who distinguishes **direct constituency** (i.e., people directly engaged with a CSO) and **indirect constituency** (people who share its values or interests but are not directly engaged).<sup>1</sup> Combining these two perspectives, we gain the following matrix of constituencies (Figure 1).

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1 Héra, "OSIFE's Program on Constituency Building"

| Figure 1 – Typology of constituencies

	<b>Direct constituency</b> (examples linked to the 1964 Freedom Summer campaign)	<b>Indirect constituency</b> (examples linked to a random pro-choice organization)
<b>People who are themselves beneficiaries</b>	e.g., African-Americans who took part in the campaign to secure their voting rights	e.g., women who disagree with anti-abortion laws because they perceive it as their right to be able to opt for abortion.
<b>Supporter who do not directly benefit themselves</b>	e.g., students from elite universities who volunteered to promote African-American voting in the American South in the 1960s	e.g., men who disagree with anti-abortion laws because they believe it should be a women’s right to be able to opt for abortion

While an indirect constituency may provide a useful resource for a CSO such as supportive public opinion or pressure on political elites, it does not directly fuel the organization’s activity. Indirect constituencies, of course, are the most natural reservoir of potential direct constituencies if organizations find ways to address them effectively.

Of course, an organization can function without a direct constituency if its legitimacy is recognized by the state, which grants funding, or by some other institutional provider. However, such a practice has two weaknesses. First, institutional funding can be (and increasingly is) volatile in the sense that it may depend on just a handful of decision-makers and/or cumbersome public administration processes. Second, the practice results in organizations’ neglect of citizens as actors (rather than objects to be acted upon). In effect, CSOs which do not strive for building a direct constituency may lose one of their functions - i.e., the function of socializing citizens to political participation and providing them with means of expression and participation.

For these reasons, we take the position in this paper that CSOs should try hard to win direct constituencies. Again, we define direct constituency as providing direct support (money, time or something else) to the organization, and hence establishing a relationship of accountability between the organization and the constituents. Accountability is the key term here. It means that the organization responds to those whom it claims to represent. Accountability can be implicit or



explicit. Implicit accountability means that supporters who no longer like what the organization is doing may withdraw their support. Explicit accountability means that the organization establishes mechanisms to channel their constituency's opinions and preferences into the organization's action and/or gives their constituency some decision-making power (such as through membership rights). Accountability is closely linked to legitimacy when an organization can quote the number of members and supporters and their contribution.

## The context for constituency building in V4

In the 1830s, French thinker Alexis de Tocqueville brought to Europe his testimony of the ways how the young American democracy was sustained via citizen participation. He argued that citizen participation was largely enabled by CSOs such as associations, clubs and other organizations which gave people platforms to meet, have discussions and learn democratic procedures. However, in the V4 countries after the fall of communism, few such organizations existed and citizen participation and organizational membership were low.<sup>2</sup> Many western foundations and national embassies saw the deficiency in civil society organizing as a possible threat to the development of transitioning post-communist democracies and started to invest heavily into civil society capacity building. The access to foreign funding undoubtedly contributed to the quick increase in the number of CSOs in V4 and their gradual professionalization.<sup>3</sup> However, critics pointed out that the dependence on foreign funding (just as dependence on public funding) disconnects organizations from their grassroots or at least disincentivizes them from developing such connections.<sup>4</sup>

On the one hand, it was not easy for CSOs in V4 to attract direct constituency as people did not have much trust in public organizing, given the communist experience. On the other hand, engaging direct constituency was also unnecessary as the financial and ideational input was more readily available from foreign donors. The result today, many argue, is an ecosystem of many small professionalized organizations with narrow member bases and very limited public following or direct support from citizens.

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2 Howard, *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe*; Schreier (Ed.) *25 Years After: Mapping Civil Society in the Visegrád Countries*.

3 Císař & Vráblíková, "The Europeanization of social movements in the Czech Republic"; Schreier (Ed.) *25 Years After: Mapping Civil Society in the Visegrád Countries*.

4 Fagan, *Environment and Democracy in the Czech Republic*; Fagan, "Taking stock of civil-society"; McMahon, "Building Civil Societies."

A lot of research has shown that this model is to some extent viable. The foreign funding has, indeed, resulted in increased capacity of CSOs in V4 for cooperation, protest and even international action.<sup>5</sup> Some foundations have deliberately helped this by conditioning their support for organizations by their cooperation, dissemination of outcomes and sharing of know-how. However, the recent developments show that even a cooperating network of small organizations may be vulnerable in the face of the surge of populist politics. However, this does not mean that securing more funding from urban liberals would protect CSOs. Rather, it seems that CSOs will need to better understand the fears and motivations of those swayed by populism and find ways to convincingly address them, too.

Academics usually define populism as a political rhetoric which is based on the alleged polarity between ordinary people and corrupt elites. In this narrative, the elites engage in hypocritical moralizing while following their self-interest and often favouring variously defined minorities (e.g., lazy welfare recipients, ethnic minorities, migrants, etc.) at the expense of ordinary people. Since CSOs generally tend to be advocates of these minorities, they often end up portrayed as part of the elitist conspiracy in the populist narrative. Especially in Hungary<sup>6</sup> and to a lesser extent in Poland, we have seen open, large-scale attacks against CSOs by populist politicians. Even in the Czech Republic, where the situation is less escalated, there has been a decline in public trust in non-governmental, non-profit organizations. Specifically, according to CVVM, a public agency for public opinion research in the Czech Republic, the public trust in non-governmental organizations was long stable at about 45% (March 2012 – March 2015) but began to fall in 2015, the year of the EU migration crisis, down to only 33% in October 2017. In Slovakia, non-governmental organizations still rank high in public trust – right after local governments. CSOs across V4 countries have begun to understand that they need to rethink their roots to the broader society and secure stronger support from citizens. In fact, there are indications that this is not only a challenge for CSOs in V4 countries, but rather a more global phenomenon.<sup>7</sup>

On top of the challenges related to the global rise of populism, CSOs which will want to address and engage citizens, will face the general social trend towards individualism.<sup>8</sup> Individualism, the result of individualization, is the idea of significant

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5 E.g. Císař & Vráblíková, "The Europeanization of social movements in the Czech Republic"; Císař, "Externally sponsored contention"; Guenther, "The Possibilities and Pitfalls of NGO feminism"; Císař, "The diffusion of public interest mobilisation"; Brust & Vedres, "Associating, mobilizing, politicizing"; Císař & Navrátil, "Promoting competition or cooperation?"; Petrova & Tarrow, "Transactional and Participatory Activism".

6 Kingsley, "How Viktor Orban Bends Hungarian Society"

7 Poppe & Wolff, "The Contested Spaces of Civil Society". See also Brechenmacher & Carothers, "The Legitimacy Menu".

8 Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.

moral value of the individual and his/her needs, dreams and ways of life, which (often) override the needs of the collective. Individualism can be observed on the level of consumption, life style, family relations, work careers, political participation and elsewhere. Individualism has contributed to the extension of the realm of options which are accepted as normal by the society, and hence, freed people to pursue more diverse paths. In relation to political participation, however, it also means that people seem to be less willing to link their identity to one cause or one organization. Indeed, the organization membership seems to be going down globally. It may be necessary to look for alternatives to membership and new avenues to engage citizens who do not expect to be shown a path to walk, but rather get in their hands flexible tools to be individualized and used as a form of self-expression.

In recent years, the process of individualization has been transformed by social media. These introduced new ways of political expression for individuals which further erode organizations' importance in organizing public politics.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, many forms of political participation can be easily organized by the tools offered by social media without much need for organizations and their infrastructure. The evaluation of this phenomenon is still tentative, and we address it further in this text when discussing working with online constituencies.

To sum up, we seem to live in a highly polarized and antagonized/fragmented world where social media and internet-based news create a new public realm in which ideas which had seemed consensual are being contested, sometimes sincerely, sometimes by trolls or for propagandistic purposes. Fake news or highly partisan news is offered and consumed as serious information, facts are relativized and replaced by alternative facts (post-truth society). Rational discussion tends to be replaced by emotions and broad-brush generalizations. In this world, many see CSOs as instruments of hidden powers trying to disrupt the stability and political order. CSOs are blamed by populist politicians to be acting as illegitimate political actors negatively influencing public affairs. Part of the public seems to be swayed by this sentiment. This is the shrinking space for civil societies, and this is what makes constituency building so important. CSOs need to reclaim their public perception as essential actors in modern democracies. In doing so, they will need to better explain their contributions to society, but also re-invent the way they exchange information and ideas with the public.

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9 Bennett & Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action*.

Part 2:

**Practitioners' perspective** –  
insights from workshop

This part draws on the discussions held at the workshop in Prague in April 2018 and summarizes the current state of thinking about constituency building among practitioners.

## Defining and understanding constituencies

### Temporality of constituency ownership

Traditionally, many CSOs tend to see their supporters as primarily linked to the organization. However, they have begun to realize that many supporters are primarily drawn by a cause and are far from being permanently “owned” by an organization. Rather, supporters permeate and flow across organizations depending on their current situations and preferences. If organizations want to respond to this reality, they may need to offer some easy to opt-in and opt-out schemes for their supporters. Some organizations develop materials such as a “volunteer work cycle”,<sup>10</sup> which assume that participation is not permanent and it is legitimate for supporters to opt out from active support after some time.

### Measuring constituency

Before measuring constituency, it is important for every organization to clearly define the type of constituency relevant to them (revisit Figure 1 in PART 1 of this paper). Further, the organization should ask itself why it needs the numbers it wants to record and how these numbers should be used. Is it for communication? Decision making and prioritizing? Allocating resources? Easily (automatically) obtained numbers such as those pertaining to social media engagement, donors, etc., may be collected and stored even when their purpose is not (yet) known. On the other hand, when measuring takes time and effort (sending out questionnaires, manually going through unstructured material, etc.), the organization should first clearly see the benefit and purpose, and only then invest the time and resources. Special caution should be paid to the right method of collecting data about the constituency, in particular distribution of questionnaires. People tend to be overburdened by them already, so questionnaires should only be used when the expected benefit is high and the questions should be worded with care, ideally with the help of trained professionals. Once the data is generated, the know-how to use it effectively sometimes resides among the people from fundraising, who most frequently have access to decent quality data. Keeping and using data may

10 In Czech, there is such material by Junák, the Czech branch of the Scout Movement, see <https://krizovatka.skaut.cz/stredisko/lide/personalistika>

have costs (GDPR compliance, some form of CRM or data management system). Some organizations have developed Value-Based Segmentation (e.g., Greenpeace) reflecting diversity among their supporters such as for adjusting messaging.

## Principles of accountability and legitimacy

### Transparency

The first principle of accountability is transparency. This is especially true in the time when CSOs are accused of being behind-the-scene actors and agents of foreign powers. CSOs need to disclose their agenda and funding. For example, it seems a better strategy, both on the ethical and pragmatic levels, to explain why foreign funding is necessary and may even be beneficial, rather than to be vague about funding sources. In order to be able to quickly react in case of doubts being risen, it is recommended to maintain an "explanation toolkit" or a "counter narrative", ideally available online for everyone to read. A lack of transparency enables adversaries to attack the organization instead of the issue.

### Service vs. advocacy organization

Service organizations are often accountable directly to their clients and funders and their operation tends to be geographically bound. Their overall efficiency can be demonstrated when costs and provided services are compared. The quality of services can be directly evaluated through an evaluation questionnaire for clients or straightforward qualitative methods such as focus groups. In contrast, advocacy-oriented CSOs often don't have narrow geographic limitations and need to look for ways to connect to groups they claim to represent and devise ways to demonstrate that they truly have support of these groups, often citizens in general. In some cases, the best way to achieve this is to develop and communicate a know-how for certain issues which is robust and persuasive enough, ideally supported by rigorous research, so that policy makers and the public are persuaded simply by the logic of the argument.

### Inviting personalized participation

Some scholars claim that the most successful civil initiatives in terms of mobilization are those which offer tools and means for the personalized participation by individuals.<sup>11</sup> These tools may be platforms for easily contacting politicians with personalized messages, starting hashtags, which then take on their

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11 E.g. Bennett & Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action*.

own life, and other tools, some of which are yet to be invented. The advantage is letting the constituency talk with their own voice. However, the idea of personalized participation should still respect that many people are most likely to get engaged via low threshold activities. See the engagement pyramid below. For example, even clicking like buttons can allow for expression of individuality when used as a survey which allows the expression of one's priority or preference.

### **Evaluating and communicating impact**

Another way for an organization to substantiate its legitimacy is to demonstrate its impact. This is not a trivial task. Social change is often a combination of multiple factors, and each individual organization usually contributes only partly. Service organizations can more easily demonstrate their impact by showing clients' satisfaction, improvement between multiple measurements in time or ideally even demonstrating positive impact via randomized controlled trials with intervention and control groups. However, randomized controlled trials are costly and usually need to be planned from the beginning. They are extremely rare in CSOs' practice. Many organizations only remember impact evaluation as the end of their project approaches, which is often too late for meaningful evaluation because measuring only the final state without knowing the starting state is not very informative. Advocacy organizations advocating for better legislation usually cannot run randomized controlled trials. They can at best argue that they contributed to legislative change, once the desired change in legislation is achieved. For this purpose, it is important for an organization to clearly communicate what it works on and what it tries to achieve. This allows advocacy CSOs to be perceived as authentic when they claim impact. In other words, for advocacy CSOs, it is important to communicate "what", not "how many".

### **Collecting ideas from constituency**

It seems rare that CSOs in V4 countries provide easy ways for their constituencies to provide ideas and inputs. We think that supporters whose ideas are collected and adopted for realization may generally feel more ownership of the ideas and be more easily motivated to become volunteers to develop them. An example of this is "Ekovýzva" (Eco-Challenge), originally developed by a small local group of volunteers at Greenpeace. The challenge has by now become a national campaign in the Czech Republic which offers people an opportunity to challenge themselves to change their behaviour for one month (April). The fact that an idea by a group of volunteers became so broadly adopted sparked ownership feelings in the volunteers who have further helped develop it. Similarly, it is important to test one's assumptions before starting a new project or campaign, just as many companies test their ideas and prototypes with the public before launching them.

## Using relatable language

Practitioners also stress it is important to use language which is relatable for their constituencies. This is more easily said than done, but generally it is recommended to use stories, visual materials, personalization, and also to have robust analysis and empirical data in the background to substantiate the communicated claims. Organizations should not dumb down their claims and arguments. Active citizens tend to be thoughtful. But the arguments need to be delivered in a modern and straightforward form. "Layered" communication may be suitable for today's lifestyle – the basic argument is delivered in a very concise form, but the reader can continue to more detailed material which provide additional layers of understanding. When using graphs, complex infographics with several graphs might be outdated, at least as the first layer of communication. They are usually somewhat hard to navigate, and it takes time to discern the key message. One well-selected and polished chart which says the single most important thing is probably a better idea to raise interest and gain virality.

## Working with constituencies offline

### Formats of events

In working with direct off-line constituencies, CSOs use a variety of formats such as gala events, receptions, dinners, performances, competitions, auctions, flash mobs, networking parties, direct actions such as demonstrations, petitions, public meetings and happenings, marches, educational meetings, workshops, seminars, presentations, lectures, discussions, etc. These are valuable because they **create experiences that deepen engagement.**

Organizations should understand the variety of formats available and the choice of format should depend on the goals to be achieved. We do not think it is possible to make general recommendations, so we just raise some ideas: when the goal is to gain media coverage, an innovative, daring happening with good use of humour can win it more easily even with limited participation than organizing a demonstration. Demonstrations need to be relatively big to be considered successful and they are only suitable for limited number of issues.

When the goal is to strengthen the link to supporters, the main target group for that event are the supporters themselves and the event should mainly be valuable to them. For example, it may be conceived as a training in some useful skills for the participants while building attachment in the process. Sometimes, it may be easier to do offline activities in coalition. Some organizations differentiate between branded and non-branded activities. Both these types contribute to different goals.



## Going local

Significant focus in civil society capacity building has been on large cities, neglecting peripheral areas.<sup>12</sup> This is especially the case in Hungary where some 54% of financial resources used by non-governmental non-profit organizations is concentrated in Budapest.<sup>13</sup> The political divide between the country and cities calls for exploring ways to engage also people in rural areas. For larger organizations, opening regional offices may be a good solution.

## Recognition effect

Recognition in the social space has a powerful effect. Events establish the public space in which existing supporters can be appreciated, and feelings of usefulness and meaning can be strengthened. Again, off-line events should be largely about the supporters with whom the relationship is being built. In addition, giving awards to public figures (politicians) for supporting the cause can also be a good strategy. Politicians in V4 are more used to dealing with negative critique and are rarely publicly praised for their work. Therefore, they may react quite strongly to praise and be more open to hearing from your organization in the future.

## Ambassador effect

Volunteers can be motivated by being appointed ambassadors who themselves meet stakeholders including in some cases political representatives on behalf of the organization or the campaign. Ambassadors can not only extend the reach of a campaign, such as when they are active in regions and areas outside major cities, but they can also become a pool of potential recruits for the organization. Generally, ambassadors can become opinion leaders who amplify the message both offline and online. When an organization decides to appoint ambassadors, it is important to develop processes for how to work with them continuously, motivate them, appreciate their contribution and, above all, provide them with good materials they can use. Since an ambassador acts publicly, there is, of course, the risk that he or she may divert from the original direction and do things which may be perceived as damaging to the campaign. It is therefore important to establish clearly what values, methods or procedures are always to be shared and what is the space for individual modification by ambassadors. Celebrities can be exceptionally good ambassadors to gain media attention or promote virality. A closely related concept is that of Key Influencers, who may be celebrities, but also doctors, scientists and other experts, amongst others. Their role can be validating the cause or mission for the public or other stakeholders.

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12 Guenther, "The Possibilities and Pitfalls of NGO feminism"; Holland, "Social Entrepreneurs and NGOs for People with Mental Disabilities".

13 Schreier (Ed.) 25 Years After: Mapping Civil Society in the Visegrád Countries.

### Actively maintain personal contact to journalists

In order to gain broader public attention and reach indirect constituencies, it does not seem to be an effective strategy to just do things and hope to get noticed. Whether we like it or not, journalists are swarmed with press releases and ignore most of them. Maintenance of personal contacts seems to be much more effective. As one representative of the Czech anti-corruption initiative Reconstruction of the State said, it would be best to have one full-time position person devoted to just meeting journalists in person every day. Meeting journalist in person can also be a good source of feedback on an organization's public communication plans.

### Learn from the populists

Populists are often said to have a great sensitivity to public sentiments, especially fears. Whether this is a gift of intuition or there is a team of specialists behind the scene trying to understand these sentiments analytically and developing the right mix of communication to tap into them, the basis of populists' success seems to be reading these sentiments well and early. If an organization has ambitions to address public opinion, it is useful to learn this kind of reading. We are far from implying that organizations should then cynically use people's fears and spread half-truths to accomplish their goals. But understanding people's fears and their depth makes it possible to address them early enough and tread carefully. Cybersecurity professionals spend much of their training learning to think as crackers (i.e., evil hackers). This helps them see security risks and prevent them. Organizations which often need to face their populist opponents would do well to consider a similar approach. Most importantly, the people distrusting the CSOs today should not be seen as enemies. On the contrary, CSOs should make more effort to reach out to them and meet them with genuine interest in what they feel and think.

## Working with constituencies online

The Internet and social media offer a myriad of new ways how to engage people. However, these new ways are not merely additions to what was already there. They are responsible for a qualitative change in the environment for constituency building. Optimists stress the empowerment of people via social media. For example, in their book, *New Power*, Heimans and Timms<sup>14</sup> write about the potential of social media to stir activity and creativity by offering people the right tools. As examples, they cite campaigns such as the philanthropic Giving Tuesday (inspired by the consumer counterpart Black Friday), Ice Bucket Challenge

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14 Heimans & Timms, *New Power*.

or #BlackLivesMatter, but also recruitment for the Islamic state by Twitter influencers.

What they have in common, Heimans and Timms argue, are three features summarized by the acronym ACE: they are Actionable, Connective and Extensible. (1) Actionable refers to people's desire to participate and express themselves. Various "Like" or "Share" buttons on social media platforms are examples of actionable tools. Even a simple Facebook status can become a call to action when it ends with a question or a survey. (2) People also like to feel connected, today often more in a campaign (short-term) manner than long-term organization membership. (3) Finally, extensibility means that online tools can take advantage of the creative power of crowds. Expansion of Internet memes, which usually use an iconic image and add new words or elements to give it new meaning or nuance, is a good example.<sup>15</sup>

However, there are also pessimists. Some have decried these trends as leading to slacktivism (lazy activism without real-world impact)<sup>16</sup> or to clicktivism (hegemony of the marketing logic of maximizing clicks and likes without real-world impact).<sup>17</sup> It can also be argued that social media have contributed to the aforementioned rise of populism and even fuelled current culture wars and the tribalization of politics, a trend denying the idea of individualism.<sup>18</sup> Think also echo chambers, online bullying etc. In other words, the new reality is complex and not just rosy. One way or the other, social media have immense influence over contemporary society and have even shown significant potential for mobilization. CSOs need to take them seriously and learn ways of tapping into their potential.

### Main channels in V4

A majority of workshop participants use Facebook as their primary social network. This reflects the broader pattern in use of social media in the Visegrád region, where the most popular social medium remains Facebook. Twitter is used much less frequently. Electronic newsletters and websites are additionally two online channels widely used by the participating organizations. CSOs who have the capacity to operate a profile on multiple social media differentiate different

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15 Note that Heimans and Timms make reference to an older book by Chip and Dan Heath called *Made to Stick*. This book defines principles of sticky ideas which tend to stay with us. These are supposed to incorporate the following feature: simplicity, unexpectedness, concreteness, credibility, emotions and stories (SUCCES). Heimans and Timms acknowledge that these are the important principles to build a message, and add ACE principles to make the message viable in today online and interconnected society.

16 Gladwell, "Small Change".

17 White, "Clicktivism Is Ruining Leftist Activism".

18 See also Lanier, "Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now".

purposes: Facebook is good for fundraising, since its users are older and more resourceful, Instagram is good for creating brand love, Twitter is popular with key influencers. Knowledge of the functionality and “culture” of each tool is an expert area susceptible to rapid change.

### **Conversion from online to offline**

Many CSOs’ representatives perceive offline supporters as the most important asset, and think of the online environment as a tool for the recruitment of supporters who can then be converted to offline supporters or a tool for maintaining communication with those already converted. Is it possible to rethink this and consider online supporters as an important asset in themselves, even if they never engage in any other form of support?

### **Managing online presence**

Maintaining an online presence may be difficult. There may be some risk of overextending oneself on sophisticated online communication such as live-streaming or producing videos with little effect. We encourage organizations to try new forms, but they need to be part of a bigger constituency building plan and the benefits of such forms of communication should be measured and evaluated. Some CSOs’ representatives advise not to become a slave to a posting schedule, but rather use opportunities only when they arise. This pragmatic approach requires flexibility. Others suggest developing knowledge about the audience by using a variety of data analytic tools provided to users of existing services (Facebook, Google analytics). Conducting surveys may also be useful, but they need to be short and fun, and quick evaluation and feedback should be given to the audience when possible to show them the worth of their answers. Longer and more serious surveys easily become burdensome for respondents and may quickly exhaust their willingness to participate. Others suggest including all people in the organization in online communication and content development, not just PR managers. Inviting all people may lead to discovering hidden talents in online communication and it gives the staff opportunities to do something they enjoy outside of their job description. This can make them happier and more productive.

### **Inbound and outbound marketing**

CSOs may use two basic strategies to connect with citizens – either make it easier for them to find the organization or initiate the conversation with citizens directly. These two approaches in digital marketing are called in-bound marketing and outbound marketing as depicted in the digital marketing framework in the Figure below.



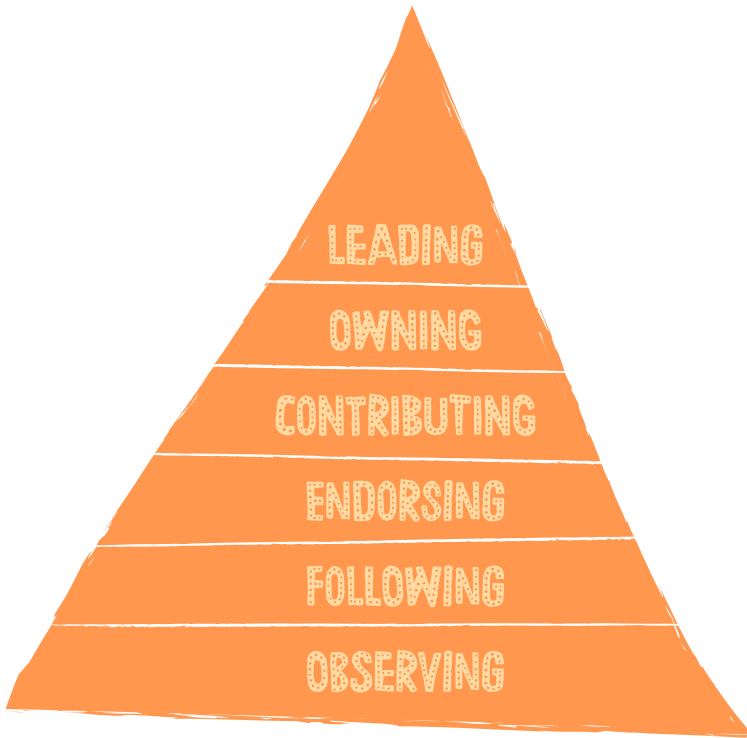
.....

19 Adapted from the original source using images under CC BY-SA license.

### Starting low, going up

The threshold for participation should be low. But once the attention of citizens is attracted, CSOs should offer them (not force on them) opportunities for deeper engagement. These can include “calls-to-action” such as signing a petition, signing up for an event, making an (online) donation, volunteering or using the organization’s material for further investigation or advocacy. One way to conceptualize such a hierarchy of participation is depicted in the figure below, which is adapted from Gideon Rosenblatt’s Engagement Pyramid: Six Levels of Connecting People and Social Change.<sup>20</sup> The idea is using the pyramid for each organization’s specific context and needs (see this blog post<sup>21</sup>).

| Figure 3 – A possible conversion process



Source: Gideon Rosenblatt’s Engagement Pyramid: Six Levels of Connecting People and Social Change.

.....  
20 The graphical design we are using come with permission from MobLab, see <https://mobilisationlab.org/resources/engagement-pyramid/>

21 More details about the pyramid and ways of working with it can be found here: <http://groundwire.org/blog/groundwire-engagement-pyramid/>

## Contents and style

Producing engaging content is very difficult. There are some generic ideas such as making the materials attractive and easily shareable, using stories, humour, and satire, using quizzes, games and other interactive features, and also being fun overall. In addition, organizations should be aware of the *Zeitgeist* or have a feeling for social momentum. If the opportunity presents itself, an organization which is ready to engage people may just make a little push to channel the existing energy. However, such advice may be hard to utilize. Of course, we would all want to be fun communicators and understand what is going on. But this is much easier in retrospect than in advance. A good way, other than being a genius of sorts, is to look for inspiration abroad. Many successful businesses in our region did just that: they saw what worked in the West and copied it. Success is not guaranteed, of course, but it may be a good source of inspiration.

## Online giving

Online giving is on the rise – globally and in the Visegrád region as well. Usually, at least a few online portals and services facilitate online donations to non-profit organizations via customizable widgets implemented on websites of nonprofits (Darujme.cz, darujme.sk) or crowdfunding portals (hithit.cz, startovac.cz, startlab.sk). Peer-to-peer fundraising using these tools becomes increasingly popular such as when people make birthday appeals to their friends to donate on their behalf. It is actionable, it connects people and is extensible for different individuals' purposes. There are also broader, online charity giving sites (ludialudom.sk, adjukossze.hu).

## Integrated Campaign

Many of the ideas above could easily be understood as stand-alone practices. But this is not how they are meant. The authors of this text, informed by some experienced practitioners, strongly believe that constituency building should be based on a complex plan and should be linked to all other organizations' activities. In fact, the very process of thinking about and discussing a constituency building strategy may be helpful to spark self-reflection in the organization. Some practitioners like to root their strategic thinking in what they call integrated campaign (i.e., a campaign which combines programme (issues), fundraising and communication into an interconnected whole). Constituency building could and should become an integral part of this framework. Just like CSOs' can look for inspiration for their communication practices in corporate and political campaigns, they can do the same in term of recruitment, community building and working with supporters.

## **Including constituency building in the integrated campaign**

First, identify the potential constituency. Realize that there are different groups that are potential constituencies and they need to be treated differently:

- There are the influencers who share the same values and vision, and could become potential partners. These people can help gather crowds. They usually spend a lot of time and energy building their personal brands and will want to participate if they feel it will help foster their personal brand. However, it should be made so that it does not hinder creation of the campaign/initiative brand.
- There are large pools of potential sympathizers who can be turned into direct constituencies. For this purpose, it is important to lower the threshold for participation and offer to the potential supporters some easy to use (frictionless), attractive and low investment ways to express support, while ideally also enabling them to remain self-expressing individuals (think hashtags – they enable users to express support to a cause while also adding individual content). Once people start participating, there should be offers for them available of more substantial participation.

### **Second, set processes to foster constituency building.**

- Collect contacts when you can and understand your contact database.
- Make sure everybody in the organization knows your constituency building strategy.

### **Third, know the known.**

- There is already a lot of knowledge related to different issues in constituency building. For example, due to events like Giving Tuesday, we know that giving is often impulsive and that people are willing to give once they get a good and trustworthy opportunity. Giving is one of the activities where many people think something like "I would like to give, but I can do it tomorrow." Giving them the reason to give today may be a successful strategy. There are plenty of international days to use as a call to action. (e.g., World Water Day, World Human Rights Day, International Autism Awareness Day, etc.). Very likely there is a day you can use for your issue, too. Other areas of constituency building have developed other knowledge. Share experience with each other.







To inspire dealing with the challenges of constituency building, we have provided a few examples of good practice from V4 countries.

## Examples from the Czech Republic

### **No. 1 (CZ) Building a constituency for advocacy: the example of Auto\*mat:**

Auto\*mat started as a radical group promoting cycling and fighting excessive car transportation in Prague. They earned the label 'cycle-terrorists' for blocking car traffic during their events. At current, the organization has professionalized and changed their approach. They no longer try to fight car transportation head-on, but support systemic changes to promote alternatives, most importantly cycling. They have succeeded in becoming a trustworthy partner to several municipalities in Prague and advocate for more sustainable and less car-heavy transportation. Like other organizations, they realized that relying on grant calls meant insecure and volatile funding and necessitated working on projects which they otherwise would not have considered to be a priority. The organization therefore started building a network of supporters. However, experience shows that fundraising for advocacy is difficult. Therefore, they have built their support base around neighbourhood festivities called 'Zažít město jinak', information services for cyclists and a campaign for companies called 'Do práce na kole' (Cycling to work). Today, the organization has over 500 regular individual donors (no tax assignation exists in the Czech Republic). As a result, about one third of the organization's yearly budget comes from individual donors.

### **No. 2 (CZ) Pooling adherents: the example of Reconstruction of the State**

Reconstruction of the State is a joint initiative of anti-corruption and good-governance

NGOs. First, the initiative selected nine laws to be implemented into the Czech legislation to reduce corruption. Then, before the parliamentary elections in 2013, the initiative ran a campaign addressing political candidates with a request to pledge to support these anticorruption laws in case they get elected. Due to effective pressure, many candidates signed the pledge. When the votes were counted, it turned out that 157 of the 200 newly elected deputies had pledged to support at least six of the laws. This success was achieved for multiple reasons including volatile political situation, mobilizing active ambassadors throughout the Czech Republic, but also because the initiative probably managed to tap into online adherents of individual participating CSOs. Specifically, the initiative's Facebook page gathered almost 20,000 followers by April 2016, while the biggest individual participating CSOs, such as Transparency International, Frank Bold and

Oživení (all active since mid-1990s), only had ca 4300, 4900 and 2800 Facebook followers respectively. This demonstrates the ability of social media to produce a wave of public attention around a successful campaign, which may not only help the campaign by boosting its legitimacy, but also help organizations to recruit direct constituencies. In this particular case, we also believe that the quick growth of the number of initiative's supporters was caused by the pooling of individual organizations' adherents.

### **No. 3 (CZ) Institutional donors: crowdfunding with matching**

A crowdfunding platform should ideally provide not only an online interface for individuals to donate, but also a means for amplification of CSOs' communication. In the model of crowdfunding with matching, the money donated by individual is then matched by the donor in a given ration – e.g., 1:1. Donors can, of course, pre-select campaigns which they let on the platform, but it is then the citizens who determine the CSO's success. We believe that organizations can be motivated to build and better involve their constituency by such schemes.

### **No. 4 (CZ) Taking advantage of what is going on: the example of Giving Tuesday**

Doing PR is expensive and exhausts a lot of resources. Sometimes, the most effective way can be joining an existing project or platform. For example, in 2016, Giving Tuesday took place in Czechia for the first time. This platform created an opportunity for CSOs to reach constituencies with minimum expenses. The most successful organization, Lékaři bez hranic (Médecins Sans Frontières Czechia), raised over 800 thousand Czech crowns due to this campaign and gained further visibility, while the expenses were largely born by the campaign's organizer (Asociace společenské odpovědnosti).

## **Example from Slovakia**

### **No. 5 (SK) Watchdogging compliance with legal standards by combining lawsuits with public campaigns: the example of BIOMASSACRE**

The transition to renewable energy sources should not include burning our forests for energy. The Biomassacre campaign, based on this claim and run by the Wolf Forest Protection Movement, launched in April 2014. It strived for legislation to exclude wood from subsidies-eligible biomass plants, except for wood from energy crops and waste from the wood-processing industry. In other words, no subsidies for burning forest wood for energy. The campaigned

managed to combine expertise and analysis with advocacy, legal steps and raising public awareness and support. The campaign prepared analysis for political representatives showing the state of affairs, and they also filed an appeal to the Regulatory Office for Network Industries (RONI) to examine the quality of wood burned at 14 biomass incinerators throughout Slovakia (only the lowest quality wood is allowed to be burnt). In December 2014, the investigation confirmed the movement's allegations – incinerators were burning up to 84% of the higher quality wood than allowed by law and were fined accordingly. In between, public protests took place which received coverage by both national and regional media (incl. RTVS, Markiza TV and many others). At the end of 2014, the BIOMASSACRE petition addressed to the Ministry of Economy counted 38,000 signatures. Further legal steps and public events followed, and the issue was even covered by the Guardian. However, the important milestone was the change to the legislation which would exclude forest wood from subsidies-eligible biomass plants. The proposal did not pass the first reading by 9 votes twice. The movement, backed by the public, continued the campaign and advocacy activities. Finally, the bill passed the first reading in June 2018. This case demonstrates the strength of combining legal expertise, including filing legal appeals, with manifesting public support in demonstrations and by petitions.

## Example from Poland

### **No. 6 (PL) Targeting supporters' needs: the example of Citizens Network Watchdog Poland:**

The initiative started as a single anticorruption organization. When its recommendations towards more transparency were ignored by the government in 2011 on the pretext of coming from just a single organization, the organization realized that it needed to build a movement. The rise of social media was a significant help. In the years 2003–2011, Watchdog Poland was able to reach out to some 5,000 people in the social media and it was in touch with ca 40 local activists. The organization was fully dependent on grants. In contrast, in 2018, the organization's reach is ca. 50,000 accounts across multiple social networking sites, it has engaged people in around 300 communities and is 50% funded by citizens. The test for embeddedness in the society took place in February 2016. The organization was attacked by governing political parties as inexperienced and biased. Thanks to earlier investment in internal reforms aimed at having better contact with constituency, the organization was supported by active people across the country. The organization was able to turn this into an opportunity and saw citizens' interest grow two-fold on social media and donations grew ten-fold on the back of this clash with government.

How did Watchdog Poland establish such links to their constituencies? In 2013, the organization started a campaign “Openness is on your side”. It aimed to show how different groups can benefit from freedom of information. The campaign included access to information on safety in schools (Openness is on Parent’s Side), treating medical misconduct in hospitals (Openness is on Patient’s Side), and whistleblowing procedures in public institutions (Openness is on Public Servant’s Side), etc. Looking at the issue of transparency through the lenses of specific groups of people enabled the organization to create relatable communication, including tapping into emotions about topics which are normally seen as rather dry and technical.

Watchdog Poland also managed to tap into an unexpected reservoir of support when it discovered the platform Wykop.pl in March 2017. This Polish platform is comparable to the American Reddit. Users share links, discuss a variety of issues and show appreciation/depreciation for texts, ideas or other users. Users are often very committed, spend a lot of time on wykop.pl, and have strong feelings of identification with the community, use specific language, and have strong opinions on public life, including transparency. This enabled Watchdog Poland to rapidly build a strong position on the platform. Many Wykop’s users now support the organization financially and sometimes offer their skills. To further use the potential of the platform, Watchdog Poland designed mechanisms for crowdsourcing based on gamification principles. These mechanisms are now being implemented.

Another group of important supporters are lawyers from small legal companies, usually the owners. The overall recipe of Watchdog Poland for constituency building is recognizing the specific needs of the people they want to engage, understanding their language, and way of operation. Somewhat surprisingly, the organization is more successful with recruiting constituency from small, clearly defined communities, offline or online, than from big cities or big business.

## Example from Hungary

### **No. 7 (HU) Providing tools for citizens: Atlatszo.hu, a watchdog:**

Atlatszo.hu is a watchdog NGO and a centre for investigative journalism attempting to promote transparency, accountability and freedom of information in Hungary. Atlatszo.hu is also evolving into a popular online news outlet with growing readership and a significant impact on the Hungarian public sphere. The organization builds its supportive base (i.e., its constituency) through providing people with online tools for self-expression. In 2014, the organization launched a blogging platform which includes the organization’s own blogs as well as blogs by others such as independent journalists, experts and other NGOs. Atlatszo.hu further runs a freedom of information request generator. It provides citizens

with an online tool to easily request information from any public body which is legally obliged to provide it. In additions, replies to these requests are recorded and shared through the website for everyone to see. Another tool provided by Atlatszo.hu is a crowdsourced bribe tracker (fizettem.hu) – an online tool for citizens to anonymously report their experience with everyday corruption. Yet another application is a discussion and voting platform (evoks.hu). It is designed for a more open and participatory government. Atlatszo.hu also developed an educational tool (alhirvadasz.hu) called Fake News Hunter. This interactive game is based on real examples (i.e., stories actually published by the media). Its goal is to help students learn how to differentiate credible news stories from misinformation. Atlatszo.hu is an excellent example of a modern organization which targets constituencies not primarily to be empowered by their support, but to empower them. Many of the tools provided by Atlatszo.hu are inspired by tools and initiatives from abroad, and since the code for online tools is often opensource, some of the tools are simply just Hungarian language mutations of existing tools from abroad. This demonstrates the potential of modern, sharing organizations.

Conclusion:

**Civil sector self-reflection**



Whatever the full answer to the present challenges may be, we believe that systematic constituency building is part of the solution which may help gain supporters, but also feedback and ideas for self-reflection.

Growing and maintaining stronger ties between CSOs and citizens has become one of the most heavily discussed issues in the civil sector. The discussion takes us to an underlying question about the role of civil society. We distinguish two positions on that issue. The critiques of the development of post-communist civil societies have raised concerns about foreign patronage and funding leading to co-optation, de-politicization and detaching civil society organizations from their roots – i.e., the community of citizens they wish to represent. The assumption behind this critique is that CSOs should be the mediators of citizens' voices. They should make sure citizens' concerns are continuously channelled to political representatives, even outside of electoral campaigns. This is the first position. The dissenting voices do not see CSOs' legitimacy simply in public support, but in disrupting unhealthy structures in society and bringing up important questions, even if unpleasant, about the environment, minority rights and other issues society and political elites might otherwise ignore. In this perspective, the role of CSOs is taking away from the majority their blissful ignorance and waking people up to new challenges. In this second position, CSOs are not mediators of somebody else's voice, they are the drivers of change.

We see merit in both of these perspectives and can imagine civil society balancing them both. Yet in the time of populist assaults on CSOs, it has been made manifest that large segments of society do not feel represented by CSOs and do not trust them or at least don't understand today's CSOs. These are often economically, socially or otherwise disadvantaged groups, culturally alienated and politically disenfranchised. Does it mean that the balance between the two roles for CSOs has shifted too much towards being society's conscience, striving for progress too fast (on too many fronts) and without regard to many people's fears and needs? Or is it just a matter of communication when CSOs are failing to explain their contribution, and a few of the most controversial endeavours are made most visible, overshadowing other CSOs' activities? We don't want to be the judges of that. But we suggest that CSOs might want to explore ways to engage in topics relevant to those parts of society which are now turning against them. These topics may include slowly rising wages, ineffective tax collection and tax evasion, high administrative burdens for small businesses (self-employed individuals), reviving local communities or specific local issues relevant to the majority of people. They might also not be specific topics at all, but rather some unfulfilled psychological needs such as the need to take control over one's life, find meaning and/or identity, and feel like one comprehends the world and belongs to a certain group. The recent

growth in membership in Junák, the Czech branch of the Scout Movement, may be a testimony of such needs in time of virtualization of our lives and disconnect from the natural environment. If liberal-democratic CSOs cannot offer fulfilment of such needs, other subjects will.

Whatever the full answer to the present challenges may be, we believe that systematic constituency building is part of the solution which may help gain supporters, but also feedback and ideas for self-reflection. Addressing this proposition was the main goal of this paper. We have discussed multiple ideas and examples of good practice, both general and case-study based. A key point is that these ideas are not stand-alone solutions. They should inform the development of systematic constituency building strategies, which are now very rare in organizations.

We have proposed multiple distinctions to enable more structured thinking about these strategies (e.g., direct vs. indirect constituencies; beneficiaries vs. non-benefiting supporters; influencers vs. the public; offline vs. online space). But the very process of thorough debate on how and why each particular organization needs to be rooted in the society may turn out more important than an actual strategic document.

In addition, it is important to clearly describe the goal of constituency building. Is it escaping grant-dependency via acquiring individual donors? Is it gaining legitimacy in the eyes of the public, the media and politicians? Is it acquiring volunteers? Or activating indirect constituency for action? Or is it perhaps all of this and more?

Some organizations try to rethink the nature of their relationship with constituencies. Jan Rovenský from Czech Greenpeace said to a student research team from Charles University in 2015:

**“I guess we don’t want to be seen as heroes anymore, saving the planet for those people, but rather as a support team, helping those people to save the planet themselves. [...] We move from being heroes to being heroes’ tutors.”**

Indeed, green organizations may be further than others with constituency building as they often decided to rely on small donors rather than grant funding. They could be an important source of inspiration.

A similar focus on empowering constituencies is also visible in the case study about Watchdog Poland. However, such shift requires a deep organizational change including changes in management, organizational cultural, communication

(in the case of Watchdog Poland, it now puts a primary emphasis in their online communication on presenting possibilities of engagement for people), etc. In addition, constituency building is not just about building, but also maintaining. It is a process of constant interaction, developing guidelines, processes and responding to people's needs.

If we could wish for any follow-up for this paper, either by our future selves or by others, we would like to develop/see more specific examples of functioning ideas, measures and more contextualization according to specific areas within civil society. If you know of any well-documented such examples, please, do contact us.

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