

ANNUAL PROGRAMME REPORT

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HR-ACTIVECITIZENS Civil society

2023

Executive summary

The Active Citizens Fund programme supports the objective of “Strengthened civil society and active citizenship, as well as empowered vulnerable groups” through financial support to civil society organisations (CSOs), technical assistance, capacity building for potential applicants in drafting project proposals, and a comprehensive capacity-building programme for grant beneficiaries.

The year 2023 was highly productive, and the processed data indicate that the agreed indicators will be fully achieved by the end of the programme implementation. All seven public calls for project proposals reflected the recognised role of the civil sector as a foundation of democracy, good governance, human rights, and social cohesion. A total of 157 projects were contracted out of 922 submitted project proposals, amounting to €7,614,876, implemented by 245 civil society organisations (project promoters and partners). By the end of 2023, 69 projects had been completed, with notable results. Almost all quantitative indicators in the Result Framework, an integral part of the Programme Implementation Agreement, have already been achieved, and some even exceeded. The qualitative results, including those “harder to measure,” should be seen as the “seed” for better activation of CSOs in evidence-based advocacy for all future advocacy efforts.

The citizen-centred approach in project implementation significantly contributed to achieving objectives beyond initial plans, such as the number of people involved in CSO activities (16,041), the number of volunteers engaged in project implementation (621), the number of victims of human rights violations provided with necessary support and assistance (635), and the number of vulnerable individuals supported (1,107).

Significant achievements in the area of strategic litigation were made by Zagreb Pride in cases of LGBTIQ rights violations. Some cases resulted in regulatory, protocol, and policy changes or have the potential to improve judicial practices in cases not yet addressed by the Croatian judiciary. For example, under the project “Enough of Brutal Reality”, legal actions were undertaken in cases such as the recognition of same-sex parental rights for children born abroad, which led to changes in the Guidelines for the Registry of Life Partnerships. Other cases included recognition of inheritance rights for informal life partners, setting a precedent for proving informal partnerships post-mortem when disputed by other potential heirs (initiated in 2016, judgment in favour of the party in December 2022), and the recognition of rights before tax authorities, despite informal partnerships having the same effects as extramarital unions under the tax system (resolved in favour of the party at the first instance). A criminal case for a hate crime was also initiated despite the principle of *ne bis in idem*, addressing the frequent practice of prosecuting hate crimes based on sexual orientation as misdemeanours. The Constitutional

Court ruled in favour of the party in 2023. The case was reported in the media: Jutarnji List. All cases by Zagreb Pride are recorded on the Rozi Megafon platform: <https://zagreb-pride.net/rozi-megafon/>.

The past year was marked by a large number of amendments or enactments of new laws and regulations relevant to the anticipated social changes. Project leaders and their partners influenced 28 legislative processes, such as those focused on social welfare and financial support for vulnerable groups, rising violence in schools and society as a whole, women's rights, increasing gender-based violence, labour law, growing poverty, and strengthening CSO capacities in implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights in Croatia.

In the area of strengthening the advocacy/watchdog role of civil society (Outcome 1), the Rehabilitation Centre for Stress and Trauma (RCT) successfully implemented the project COMMUNITIES INCLUDE – Initiative for Universal Access to Basic Social Services in the Community. In partnership with Einurð from Iceland and the Study Centre for Social Work at the Faculty of Law in Zagreb, the project achieved significant results that garnered attention from professionals, the public, and relevant ministries. Key achievements included the study Universal Access to Basic Social Services in the Republic of Croatia: Feasibility Model, which provides evidence and a scientifically based methodology for determining which social services are essential for life, health, and well-being, and a digital tool to facilitate planning and resource allocation for basic social services at all levels of government. More details [here](#).

The media extensively covered project leaders' public appearances and actions (reaching nearly 3 million citizens) through public awareness and advocacy campaigns addressing relevant social and legislative topics. These efforts enhanced the visibility of project results in various areas, such as women's rights, whistleblower protection, and patients' rights.

Interest in exchanges and learning with organisations from donor countries led to an unexpectedly high number of 45 bilateral partnerships (initially planned for 10) with 36 unique partners from donor countries (8 from Iceland and 28 from Norway). In 2023, a limited call for bilateral initiatives received 13 applications, resulting in five contracted initiatives, including study visits to build on completed projects or further strengthen capacities, and translations of significant publications into donor countries' languages. The final selection committee meeting for bilateral initiatives is planned for January 2024, where we expect additional initiatives to be contracted.

The project “Workwoman - You Could Walk in Her Shoes, but You Wouldn't Trade Places with Her”, implemented by CESI – Center for Education, Counselling, and Research, addressed the insufficient protection of women in the workplace. On the [Radnica](#) web portal, women can share their experiences, report discriminatory practices by employers, seek advice, and access information on gender discrimination in the workplace. A national campaign, “It's Not OK (in the Office)”, was implemented and received recognition and awards in Croatia and the region. Additionally, it was listed among the top 100 most effective global campaigns by WARC (World Advertising Research Center). As part of the campaign, more than 20,000 citizens recognised the issue and signed a petition to amend the Labour Act, specifically the article on the protection of pregnant women and individuals on maternity and parental leave.

The bilateral partnership with the Icelandic Women’s Rights Association (IWRA) further strengthened the existing collaboration through knowledge transfer and advocacy efforts aimed at achieving gender equality.

During 2023, significant progress was made in achieving the planned results for Regional Civil Society Initiatives. Eight new regional initiatives were established between Croatia and Slovenia, Romania, Poland, and other countries, involving 67 unique CSOs and 102 unique participants from Croatia.

A strong reach was achieved in underdeveloped areas (45 projects) and among various vulnerable groups, including Roma children and young women, victims of domestic violence, migrants, individuals with mental and physical disabilities, socially excluded groups within the LGBTIQ community, and many other target groups.

A comprehensive and accessible capacity-building programme significantly improved the capacities of CSOs, particularly among less developed and newly established organisations. For example, the SIDRO Association – educators advocating for children’s rights in kindergartens – was founded shortly before applying for an ad-hoc action project. Over a year and a half, they managed to mobilise more than 80,000 supporters and achieve legislative changes in the Preschool Education Act. With strengthened capacities, they successfully implemented a small project within the Active Citizens Fund, secured financial support for another project under the Impact4Values programme, and recently received institutional support from the National Foundation for Civil Society Development. [More details here.](#)

The Active Citizens Fund in Croatia is implemented in partnership with SOLIDARNA – Foundation for Human Rights and Solidarity (Zagreb), SMART – Association for Civil Society Development (Rijeka), and CNVOS – the umbrella organisation for NGOs in Ljubljana.

The programme is financed by Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway through the EEA and Norway Grants and runs from January 1, 2020, to December 31, 2024.

For more information on the Active Citizens Fund and examples of good practices, visit the provided links.

<https://acfcroatia.hr>

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