NGO MANAGEMENT CASE STUDY: CIVITAS FOUNDATION FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

As idealistic as it may sound, the truth is that NGOs act to make the world a better place. They often do that by taking action in areas where the government fails to succeed or does not do a very good job. In this context I would like to present a very special NGO: CIVITAS Foundation for Civil Society, evaluating its governance and services.

Introducing CIVITAS Foundation for Civil Society

CIVITAS was founded in October 1992, having the mission, as its name suggests, to stimulate the creation and development of local civil society. The reason I consider CIVITAS a special NGO is due to the way it understands to accomplish its mission: by working with local governments, since improving the quality of services provided by them will ultimately benefit the entire society, the citizens. It seems that this NGO understood that the government can be helped in its work not just by acting in the areas not covered by governmental services or where this services are of poor quality (thus replacing it), but also by helping it improve.

This foundation has two autonomous regional offices: one in Odorhei Secuiesc, in the heart of the Secui community (where the center is currently located) and one in Cluj-Napoca. The foundation is member of CIVITAS International, matter of great significance for expertise, as I will show later in my paper.

The level of development in the evaluated areas is that of an organization transgressing/shift the consolidation stage to that of durability – the only

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1 Secui – person belonging to a population speaking a form of Turk language assimilated by the Hungarian tribes it accompanied in the migration towards Europe, currently living in the eastern part of Transylvannia.
exception being in the sectorial expertise, found in the second stage, that is in the developing stage.

CIVITAS is not a volunteer-based NGO. The reason for that is the fact that its area of action requires a certain level of expertise, more valuable due to the scarce resources of expertise in this field, which makes it unlikely to be subject to voluntary actions. The result is increased program spending and a reduced number of NGOs providing services in this area.

CIVITAS is considered a Hungarian NGO, the reason being that it was initially financed by the Hungarian government* (although now financial resources come from other sources, such as the European Union, the government of Nederlands, Foundation of Civil Society Development), the board members and a great part of the permanently hired personnel is of Hungarian nationality (but also including among the program coordinators and experts persons of Romanian nationality). This may prove to be an advantage, showing to foreign donors openness to multinational collaboration (Hungarian, Romanian, Rroma, as some programs of the foundation show) and thus facilitating access to financial resources necessary for programs like “Better together”2. The same feature represents, however, a disadvantage from time to time, making difficult to obtain the collaboration of Romanian local governments where the mayor has nationalistic views. In order to avoid from happening something like this, it may consider including in the board members of Romanian nationality – thus increasing its credibility.

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* The presence of financial resources from the Hungarian government can be explained when taking into consideration the great number of people of Hungarian nationality living in Transylvannia.

2 The summer school with the theme “Rromans/Gipsies in today’s Europe took place at Isumuleu Ciuc in July 1999. The program was done in collaboration with IKV (Interkerkelijk Vredesberaad) from Hague. At this summer school, which is part of the seventh SIDU (School for Inter-Confessional-Cultural- National Dialogue and Understanding) summer school series, participated 80 young people from all over Europe, representing Rroma communities and other ethnic communities. CIVITAS had other programs for the Rroma communities, one of them promoting tolerance in communities where part of the population is of Rroma nationality and thus being oriented towards promoting management of conflict.
GOVERNANCE

A. Mission

As mentioned before, the mission of CIVITAS is to stimulate the creation and development of local civil society. The foundation understands that in order to accomplish its mission, as established in its statute, it must:

- Develop relations between local governments and population, support local initiatives
- Organize expert consulting for local governments in various fields
- Organize training courses for local elected and civil servants from local governments
- Organize information flow between local governments
- Support the formation and function of NGOs

These purposes are understood to be achieved through expert consulting, organizing and fundraising activities.

In the long run CIVITAS intends to develop programs oriented towards preparing local governments for the Romanian integration in the European Union. This is currently out of the question because small communities are not prepared yet, currently having problems in performing some basic functions due to financial reasons and lack of expertise in certain areas. Also CIVITAS intends to increase the percentage of joint projects of the two offices from 30% up to 60%.

B. Who makes the decision?

An interesting issue is who makes the decision. The board, consisting of five members, plays an advisory role. The explanation for choosing such a board is simple: Romanian experts in the public administration field are not many, the really capable ones do not have much time available. Also, when CIVITAS was founded, the only model available they had was the Soros Foundation, which also has an advisory board. Since the board is advisory, it is obvious that the director has great autonomy, having, among other
things, the right to sign contracts on behalf of the foundation (the president of the foundation also has this right).

The board, to whom he reports twice a year, supervises the director’s actions. The report of activity presented by the director may or may not be approved. In the latter case, the board can decide to withdraw some prerogatives from the director and eventually fire him. In order to make sure that his report will be approved, the director consults with some board members before making important decisions.

One problem that may appear is due to a certain legal regulation specific for foundations, regulation dating from 1924 which grants the board member life terms in the board. This results in the legal impossibility of reelecting the board. In this context, board members may act wrongfully, involving the name of the foundation in activities outside its mission and thus creating the possibility of losing credibility in front of its constituencies and of the society. This may prevented through lobbying actions to modify that law. Also, if such situation occurs, the statute should contain regulations showing the measures to be taken (at least to obligate the guilty board member to resign).

Another problem results from the fact that some board members working in the upper central government are politically appointed. This proves to be an advantage now, given the possibility of direct access to central government. But when corroborating this with the regulation I mentioned before, this access may be partially lost in the future when political parties change or are voted out of office (although partially kept through connections).

The Director and the program coordinators (who may be seen as a unit of managers) carry out the executive function who hold decision-making power for the program they coordinate.

C. Constituencies

CIVITAS aims to help local governments from small communities (villages, small towns). The reason for this orientation is the well-known fact that in such communities the level of expertise is quite low (students from public administration faculties and public administration experts being oriented mainly towards local governments of larger
communities and towards the central government) and their poor financial situation makes it difficult to remedy this problem.

Since the target group is represented by local governments and not by individuals, the foundation does not have to be located in the community. The reason for establishing an office in Cluj-Napoca may be that, if necessary, additional expertise can be accessed through collaboration with the county council and the Faculty of Political and Administrative Sciences.

SERVICES PROVIDED BY CIVITAS

In order to understand better the change this NGO intends to bring, one should look at the programs provided and evaluate its level of development.

The expertise

The expertise is the only aspect in the area I evaluated which is still in the second level of development (organization in development). The explanation may be that the number of public administration experts in our country is low and that increasing the level of expertise takes time.

One problem the foundation may face is in increasing its own level of expertise because of the lack of real competition, in this part of the country, in its area of activity (competition forcing them to reevaluate its programs and improve its actions). The research center of the Babes-Bolyai University Department of Public Administration does not represent competition for CIVITAS, since training programs provided by the latter are more practice-oriented, while those of the research center are rather theory based; these two cooperate – a training program carried out in collaboration (like SEDAP\(^3\)) will offer

\(^3\) In the SEDAP (Education at distance for civil servants from local governments) program CIVITAS has as partner the Faculty of Political and Administrative Sciences. The two institutions collaborate at elaborating, translating and printing didactic materials for counselors from local councils, mayors and civil servants. The second step of this program is to select tutors and participants to courses, working with pilot groups from the
the necessary theoretical background applied to concrete situations (a symbiosis between theory and practice). Another collaboration between the two organizations is the project concerning the analysis of the impact of laws regarding local public administration (laws concerning local public administration, local public finances, regional development and the statute of civil servants. The increase in the level of expertise can be achieved by using the international contacts the foundation has, of great help being here the membership in CIVITAS International (such as the director's participation at international conferences, collaborating with NISPAcee).

The location in Cluj-Napoca proves to be an advantage in what concerns the expertise, since the university located here allows easier and direct access to academic specialists.

Community participation

When having the first contact with CIVITAS, the civil servants have a suspicious attitude. But after discovering that there is no hidden reason for giving help and not asking for anything in return, the civil servants from local governments usually respond with great enthusiasm. They have the best reason for getting involved: nothing to lose, only to gain from participating. This is the case in Cojocna, where the community leaders participated in more than one CIVITAS program, such as the FoCoS program.

Sometimes, however, as I mentioned before, there is reluctance in participating, when the first stage of suspicion is not overcome and because of some personal attitude of the civil servant (this happened when trying to obtain the collaboration of a former Mayor of Zalău).

counties of Alba, Cluj, Covasna, Harghita, Mureș and Satu-Mare. The courses, involving collaboration with county councils, cover various fields: communication and public relations, strategic planning, project management, financial management, and human resources management.

4 The FoCoS (Pilot Project of Forming a Microregion in the Transylvannian Field) program intends to increase the professional performance of local public administration workers and of local counselors from a microregion of the Transylvannian Field – formed of the communities of Căianu, Cojocna, Suatu and Sic – in view of elaborating a strategy of common development.
Evaluating the impact

The people working at CIVITAS are well aware of the continuity of the programs - there have been various programs in the Cojocna area, and more than one program to help the Rroma community.

One of the program coordinators works in the sociology academic field. This proves to be an advantage when it comes to designing evaluations and identifying measurable indicators of success and impact. Also the fact that the director is very interested in European studies in an important advantage for the future plans of the fundation.

CIVITAS is an important NGO, its services, as stated in the statute are greatly needed. Its programs promoting ethnic tolerance and cooperation, as well as those meant to increase the level of expertise in small local governments are already a step ahead in supporting Romania's integration in the European Union. Its position of importance can be sustained by the fact that the director from Cluj represented Romania at some international conferences, such as the World Civil Society Conference held in Montreal in December 1999 - thus being recognized the significance of its activity in supporting the development of civil society.