Case Study
Governing Media Diversity Institute – Western Balkans

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

ABOUT CASE STUDY

Good governance of civil society organisations is essential for public trust and the sustainability of the civil society sector. Research reports on the state of civil society by the EU TACSO 3 project, and based on surveys of more than 1,000 CSOs, have identified CSO Governance in the Western Balkans and Türkiye as a challenge in recent years.

As a consequence, the EU TACSO 3 Project commissioned three case studies on the CSO Governing Bodies good practices from the Western Balkans and Türkiye region. The aim of the case studies is to provide an up-to-date understanding of current practices in governance in the Western Balkans and Türkiye region. These case studies provide the core evidence of good practice and challenges facing governance, to be used as material for training and development opportunities for members of governing bodies, and senior staff of CSOs in the region.

The case studies present a variety of practices in terms of governing bodies, including key roles and responsibilities as well as the reasons behind the chosen governance arrangements. The case studies shed light on perceived advantages and challenges in terms of governance from the people within in their daily operations.

These up-to-date examples provide inspiration and a basis for reflection on the issues and dilemmas faced by CSOs in real life, with practical lessons learned with a view to initiate and inspire organisations to strengthen good governance practices. The case studies may be used as reading for interested parties and as capacity building training material.

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OVERVIEW OF MEDIA DIVERSITY INSTITUTE - WESTERN BALKANS

Media Diversity Institute - Western Balkans (MDI WB) is an association registered in Serbia, bringing the values and programmes of the Media Diversity Institute, a United Kingdom based organisation. Instead of having an international (foreign) organisation working in the Western Balkans countries, an expensive and not workable concept in the view of the founders, it made more sense to establish an independent organisation run by local staff.

Thus, MDI WB operates in close cooperation with its sister organisations from other regions, such as the South Caucasus, Brussels, all (informally) under the umbrella of MDI registered in the UK.

The work of MDI WB combines research, advocacy, training, and direct collaboration with academics and educators, policymakers and young people. Its initiatives focus on promoting media and information literacy (MIL), improving diversity in newsrooms, supporting media-based advocacy, and enabling youth activism.

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE & DECISION-MAKING

MDI WB is governed by an **Assembly** as the highest and only governing body in the organisation. When setting up the organisation, the founders' intention was to establish a governing body that understands MDI's goals, values and processes. The Assembly consists of three members, including the standing Executive Director, with an equal right to vote.

The current President of the Assembly is the executive director of MDI UK. As such, she is highly familiar with the scope of work of the organisation.

The Assembly is responsible for approving general acts, like the strategic and financial plans. It oversees the finances, decides on major partnerships and elects the office of the Representative i.e the Executive Director.

The **Executive Director** is the person elected and authorised to implement the Assembly's decisions and deal with operational and financial matters of the organisation. The statute of the organisation does not provide an overview of the specific roles and responsibilities of the Executive, nor its interaction with other governing bodies.

As per statute, the Assembly meets once a year to conduct legal obligations such as to approve the financial reports and plans, and to discuss important topics and the strategic direction of the organisation. In practice, regular consultations and weekly formal meetings focused on strategic and operational matters take place. This is particularly because the Assembly brings together individuals that have collaborated closely in the past, the executives of the WB and the UK branches. The MDI UK director sits outside the Western Balkan media landscape, and so brings an unbiased perspective. Her membership in the Assembly as well as engagement in the organisation operational matters is viewed as a distribution of decision-making power and oversight over the work of the MDI WB by the UK branch.

MDI WB representatives recognise that fewer assembly members are convenient in terms of decision-making. Most decisions are reached through discussion and consensus. At the same time, they are aware that a small sized Assembly is one of the organisation's key governance challenges. While it facilitates efficiency, it also limits diversity on opinions, creates gaps in expertise and limits oversight.

Recognising the organisation's expansion and the increasing need for external expertise, two options have been discussed at MDI WB. Extending the number of members in the organisation is one - this option is in process of exploring as an approach but yet unlikely.

The more plausible option, related to the assembly members, is an ongoing discussion about forming an Advisory body. The student protests in Serbia have shed light on the need for a steady group of experts from the country and abroad to provide outside perspectives on dealing with crisis management and communication.

The scope of work of this body is not clearly defined – on one hand, it may primarily provide strategic support and independent advice, while on the other, it can have extended roles of control and oversight (functions now reserved to the Assembly).

Without such a (governing) body, MDI WB relies on internal expertise and its sister organisations.

The Executive Director discusses matters of strategic importance with the employees and participates at weekly meetings with all MDI sister organisations.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

MDI WB engages with multiple stakeholders, including media organisations, educators, institutions, and CSOs. The tools of engagement with stakeholders are directed by the organisation's strategy. In practice, it means participating in, or leading networks, and project-based collaborations.

The project management team (employees) with the support from the Executive Director are responsible for engagement with beneficiaries and other stakeholders. MDI WB make use of the MDI UK contact networks especially for mapping and cooperation with thematic experts. These interactions facilitate MDI's ability to influence stakeholders more substantially, and to a lesser extent, allow external stakeholders to have influence on its work.

Stakeholder engagement and feedback mechanisms are largely informal. While staff input is valued in internal decision-making, there is no structured mechanism for systematically incorporating external stakeholder views into governance decisions. When funding allows, MDI gathers stakeholder input through the evaluation of specific projects. In such cases, MDI WB takes report findings into consideration.

In essence, they try to implement recommendations from external stakeholders not only to improve project related activities in the future, but rather to learn and adjust at the organisational level. Evaluation findings of a project supporting a regional network that MDI WB coordinates helped them to adjust leadership style and cooperation with partners in the network.

STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT & OVERSIGHT

MDI WB follows a strategic planning process with internal and external consultations. The Executive Director participates in strategic planning meetings involving multiple MDI branches, and external experts, resulting in a coherent mission-driven approach for all sister organisations. From there, the MDI WB develops its own strategic document. The draft plan is consulted with the employees and the Assembly members as well. After revisions, the strategic plan is adopted by the Assembly.

The organisation's performance is primarily assessed through project reporting rather than dedicated evaluations. MDI WB team recognises the relevance of having a monitoring and evaluation mechanisms at the organisational level are of upmost importance of the organisation. A lack of core grant and human resources has been cited as the sole reason why MDI WB does not have a monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) framework.

Only recently, with MDI WB receiving support for larger-scale projects did the organisation got the chance to build more developed MEL systems and activities.. In these cases, an external MEL expert support was hired to facilitate and run the process. Drawing on this experience, MDI WB started working on an internal MEAL practices with particular enthusiasm and move forward with preparing a MEL policy.

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT & OVERSIGHT

Financial governance is overseen by the Assembly, with the Executive Director being responsible for financial management. The organisation has a draft, but not yet formalised internal financial procedures. Regular reporting and adherence to donors' financial guidelines and national authorities' requirements compensate for the lack of such an internal policy.

A challenge pointed out by one interviewee was the difficulty of recruiting and retaining a qualified financial manager.

The (informal) structure of MDI globally, having sister organisations, has been instrumental for ensuring the financial sustainability of MDI WB. These close ties help in identifying funding opportunities as well as enabling applications in consortium with other Europe-based branches as a requirement for EU funding. Moreover, the UK branch has been supportive when MDI WB faced financial hardship in the past.

GENDER & DIVERSITY IN GOVERNANCE

The Assembly is gender-diverse, and the organisation actively integrates diversity principles into governance decisions, programme activities and hiring practices. MDI WB puts a strong emphasis on diversity; essentially, it is part of the organisation. The strategic plan embeds these principles in the organisation's governance. While gender and diversity, more broadly, are evident at the leadership level, the organisation has no formal policies.

The MDI UK, due to programme and project activities, needed to develop a sexual harassment policy. To conduct this, they went to pro bono lawyers to help them draft the document, and were available for a back-and-forth exchange to finalise the document. For specific activities such as training that engage and target young people, MDI was more important to develop Child protection policy.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY IN GOVERNANCE

Environmental matters are not a formal governance priority of MDI WB, but the organisation has adopted sustainability-conscious practices. Sustainability considerations are integrated informally and for specific projects. For instance, the team insists on limiting the use of printed materials and is recycling within the office, and are involved with activists on this matter.

A notable example of incorporating environmental matters into organisational operations is initiatives such as committing to travel-related CO_2 emissions limits and tracking the CO_2 emissions of projects that involve budget lines for CO_2 offsetting measures (which are more expensive than regular ones).

LESSONS LEARNED

The case of MDI Western Balkans highlights a case of a mission-driven organisation operating in a complex media and civic space. The organisation's unique example of governance – though independent, it is anchored in the small Assembly and reinforced through (in)formal coordination with its sister organisations—offers insights into the benefits and risks of such governance structure.

The organisation's commitment to diversity and environmental practices, even informal, implementation of inclusivity and sustainability principles can be embedded into governance culture without formal codification. Being at the same time aware of the need and constrained to only project-based evaluations and donor-driven MEL, the case study highlights a broader sectoral issue: the challenge of sustaining long-term learning and oversight mechanisms in the absence of core support.

Governance structure and coordination.

Weekly interactions between Assembly members and staff and a shared leadership history facilitate informal but efficient strategic and operational decisions.

Strategic use of international networks.

MDI WB's collaboration with MDI UK and other sister organisations boosts strategic thinking, resource mobilisation, and knowledge exchange, reinforcing its governance capacity despite limited internal structures.

Embedded diversity principles.

Gender balance in leadership and inclusion-oriented project practices reflect the organisation's values, which are organically embedded into its operations and governance.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Limited assembly size and formal oversight.

The three-member Assembly allows efficiency but restricts diversity of views and risks centralization in decision making. Beyond the oversight coming from MDI UK, expanding membership or establishing a formal advisory or oversight body could enhance legitimacy and expertise.

Adoption of internal procedures.

Key policies, especially financial and governance-related procedures, remain in draft stage or are implemented as informal rules. Their finalisation could increase accountability, as well as operational consistency.

Informal monitoring and evaluation.

The lack of structured MEL mechanisms limits the organisation's ability to track long-term progress and reflect on governance outcomes beyond donor-required reporting.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- MDI WB operates with a governance structure centred around a three-member Assembly. What are the benefits and limitations of such a lean structure in terms of accountability, expertise, and diversity of viewpoints? What mechanisms can such organisations introduce to mitigate potential risks associated with limited membership?

- The Assembly has discussed creating an Advisory Body to strengthen strategic oversight. What are the key considerations when setting up such a body in terms of its mandate, composition, and relationship to existing governance structures?

- The MDI has a unique way of interaction with its MDI sister organisations, particularly the UK branch that plays a significant role in MDI WB's governance. How can CSOs balance external partnership and internal autonomy i.e. balance between strategic alignment without undermining local ownership?

- MDI WB is keen on having an internal MEL expert, but have to rely on external experts and implement these processes only when funding allows. Does your organisation face similar challenges? How do you monitor and evaluate the work and impact of your organisation?