

# LEARNING BRIEF

Experiences  
from Strategic  
Mentoring  
Programme

January, 2023

## INTRODUCTION

This learning brief is based on the outcomes of a learning workshop organised by the EU TACSO 3 project in October 2022.

EU TACSO 3 Strategic Mentoring is a programme of pragmatic and in-depth mentoring support from experts (mentors) to civil society organisations (CSOs) in the Western Balkans and Türkiye (WBT) region. The programme provided targeted hands-on capacity development support to 21 CSOs tailored to each organisation. Mentoring sessions are designed as a combination of facilitation of workshops, training, individual team members' coaching, online consulting sessions and training events, provision of feedback, practical work on documents, etc. Strategic mentoring is distinct from other forms of mentoring in that the mentor works at the level of the whole organisation rather than at the level of the individual.

Twenty-one people participated in the 2-day workshop: 13 from CSOs and CSO networks who had participated in the EU TACSO 3 support, two mentors from other programmes not directly involved in the TACSO programme, and 4 members of the EU TACSO 3 team.

The workshop aimed to consolidate learning from the EU TACSO 3 experience of this capacity development process so far and to provide practical guidance for future similar activities.

This learning brief offers a set of recommendations for future capacity-building support to CSOs in the form of strategic mentoring.

## STRATEGIC MENTORING PROGRAMME

The EU TACSO 3 conception of strategic mentoring aimed to strengthen CSO capacities in the following areas of organisational development:

- ❖ Monitoring of target groups
- ❖ Fundraising strategies
- ❖ Communication strategies
- ❖ Strategic planning
- ❖ Human resources management
- ❖ Grant management
- ❖ Online tools for community engagement
- ❖ Project proposal development
- ❖ Designing and implementing advocacy actions

To date, within the support provided to 21 CSOs, in total, 268 individuals, CSO staff, members, volunteers and governing board members were involved in activities 93 consultative meetings held and 36 training and workshop activities organised.

## KEY FINDINGS

The Strategic Mentoring programme supported a variety of CSOs, including regional and national networks and a few smaller organisations working at the national level. The **majority of supported organisations were struggling with certain aspects of their organisational development** at the time when the mentoring process started.

Some of the examples of the **main challenges** organisations were facing **prior to the implementation of the mentoring process** included: lack and/or **unclear strategic directions**; absence of strategic and action plans; **poor visibility** of the organisation and its actions; **unclear communication strategies** and lack of good quality communication with the key constituencies; **lack of funds** and increasing rate of unsuccessful competition for grants.

Although organisations applied for Strategic Mentoring support and presented areas of organisational development on which they want to work, the **EU TACSO 3 experts conducted a prior assessment of the needs in cooperation with each CSO selected** to define the type of support to be provided and identify a matching mentor to facilitate the process.

The mentoring process included meetings, debriefing sessions, workshops, work on document development and organisation of events at which the final results were presented to network members.

As a result of the mentoring process, the **following positive changes were observed** to date by CSOs involved in this process:

- Mentoring helped structure the internal communication process and reflect on the mission, scope, and strategic goals.
- The **CSO governance has improved** by clarifying the roles of the governing boards in the organisational development process. Also, the process contributed to the revision or development of organisational policies and internal procedures.
- **Communication with stakeholders and counterparts has improved** as a result of defining new communication strategies and messages. Also, the revision of the strategic vision and mission of organisations has contributed strongly to this process.
- **Working approaches within organisations were unified.** For example, in cases where the advocacy approach was aligned by the staff of the organisation, this resulted in an increased impact on decision-makers.
- **Effectiveness in performing and implementing tasks and activities has improved.** This especially relates to areas targeted by the mentoring process like fundraising, visibility representation, communication with stakeholders and counterparts etc. More clear division of the roles, tasks and procedures that were defined during the process of strategic and action planning has contributed to this organisational change.

However, the **strategic mentoring process was also challenging in many aspects** since it required time, resources, dedication, and serious work to implement the organisational changes.

The following **key challenges of the mentoring process** were reported:

- The mentoring process was mainly implemented in a **short period of time** (3 months), which was sometimes challenging for the CSO staff and members concerning availability and capacities to implement all tasks and participate actively in the implementation of the mentoring plan activities.
- **Diverse capacities of the members of CSO networks** to participate in mentoring process activities, which were often successfully overcome by organising preparatory meetings and workshops to introduce participants to the process of, i.e., strategic plan development.
- **Involvement of the governing board members** was reported often as a great challenge during the process. However, in the cases where board members were actively involved or even led the process, the success in the timely finalisation of the process and documents was reported.
- **Funds for the immediate implementation** of the new organisational strategies are not always available, and additional time is needed to raise funds and implement actions.

By observing the organisational process implemented, the following aspects of the mentoring process were assessed as important factors for its success:

- The **external view** (from the position of the mentor) was a valuable learning experience. The CSOs are mainly focused on their work and often missing to reflect on how certain aspects of their work influence their organisational development.
- Mentors turned into **advocates** of the CSOs they worked with and the issues that CSOs is dealing with, as they come from outside the niche.
- Mentoring process was very **participatory** and **inclusive**, and this was very important for networks as it contributes to the ownership among members and better implementation effects.
- **Reality check** for the organisation to recognise the weaknesses, choosing adequate donors (i.e., avoid writing proposals for donors that are not applicable to them), and new ideas for collecting funds (i.e., crowdfunding, collecting donations).
- It helped CSO to **think** about what they want to achieve; it included the reflection on what are CSO's achievements and what is the CSO's identity. It helped organisations to find focus and not jump from one project to another.

The majority of organisations involved in the learning workshop reported as positive **availability of mentors after the completion of the mentoring process**.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This learning event provided valuable feedback to the EU TACSO 3 team on the view of the strategic mentoring process from the perspective of the beneficiary side. The group of participants was actively involved in the whole process and provided their feedback and recommendations based on their experiences and capacities as individuals and representatives of particular CSOs.

The event also had a strong influence on creating new synergies and networking opportunities for representatives of CSOs from different countries and types, and sizes of CSOs. As noted also by participants, they were not expecting they discover what they have in common with CSO from another region or sector.

The term “**collateral benefit**” has ended as the catchphrase of the event; participants benefited in many unexpected areas, like learning from others about the importance of i.e. strategic planning process and its elements, the importance of developing communication strategies, and how the lack of strategic direction can influence on the failures in the grant application process.

Considering the number of inputs provided during this event, the following can be summarised and concluded:

- ❖ Strategic mentoring as a capacity development intervention is recognised as an **effective approach** with expected long-term impacts on the key beneficiary of the process (CSO in the role of mentee).
- ❖ In order to be successful, the strategic mentoring process **requires the dedication** of the CSO or CSO network, its governing and executive bodies and its membership base.
- ❖ A strategic mentoring process also **requires certain knowledge, capacities, and experience** of the mentee (CSO or CSO network) to be capable of actively participating in the process and conducting required tasks and actions.
- ❖ According to the feedback provided by the participants of the workshop, the mentoring process would **fit the best mid-size organisations**.
- ❖ Further **promotion of the mentoring process**, its importance and the structure of the operation are important among the CSO community.
- ❖ Also, the process is recommended **to last around 6 months** allowing more time for the organisation to work on its development. The follow-up after the completion of the process is also recommended.
- ❖ **Financial support for the implementation of the tasks and follow-up actions** of mentoring support is recommended as a key factor for the success of the process.
- ❖ **Monitoring of the mentoring process at all levels** (CSO, TACSO etc.) is emphasised as an important area to be strengthened in future programme implementation.