

2021 CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

CROATIA
OCTOBER 2022



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For Croatia
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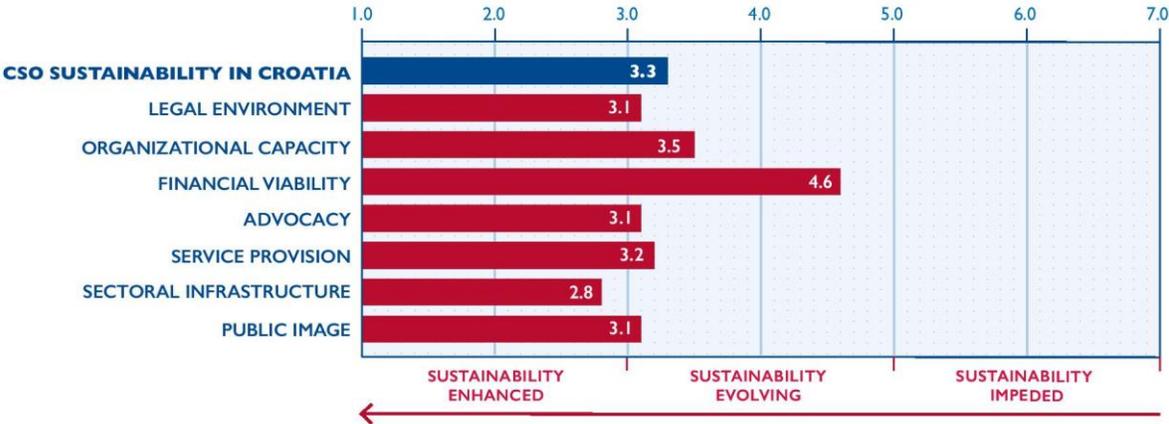
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CROATIA

Capital: Zagreb
Population: 4,188,853
GDP per capita (PPP): \$26,500
Human Development Index: Very High (0.858)
Freedom in the World: Free (85/100)

OVERALL CSO SUSTAINABILITY: 3.3



The COVID-19 pandemic continued to affect all aspects of life in the Republic of Croatia during 2021. The government put various restrictions in place during the year to control the spread of the virus. As infection rates rose at the end of the year, employees in certain sectors were required to have COVID certificates, which could be obtained either by being vaccinated or testing negative. In addition, restrictions on the size of indoor gatherings were reimposed. By the end of the year, less than 60 percent of the population had been fully vaccinated.

The ongoing pandemic also had a significant impact on the economy, particularly as tourism, an important segment of the Croatian economy, was stifled for the first half of the year. Inflation increased significantly at the end of the year.

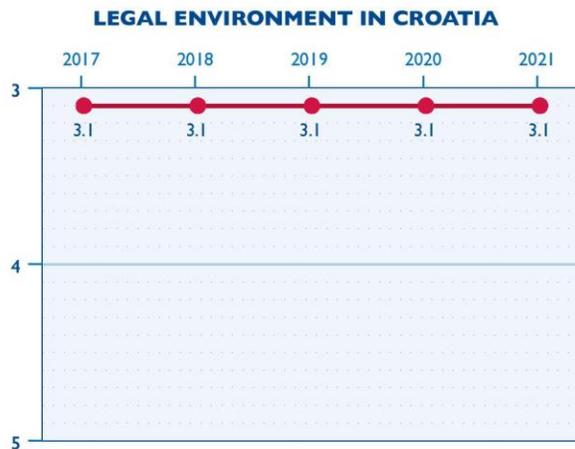
Local elections were held in Croatia in May 2021, resulting in the four largest cities—Zagreb, Rijeka, Split, and Osijek—getting new leaders. We Can! (Možemo!), a relatively new left-wing green party, received the most votes in the elections in Zagreb, but fell slightly short of a majority and therefore had to form a coalition with the Social Democratic Party to secure a majority in the city council. In the second round of voting, Tomislav Tomašević from We Can! was elected mayor of Zagreb with the highest number of votes ever (199,630 votes or 62.25 percent). Tomašević has a background as a civil society activist.

The country dealt with the aftermath of a deadly 6.4-magnitude earthquake that struck the area near Petrinja on December 28, 2020. Much of Petrinja, Glina, and Sisak was left in rubble, and other nearby places suffered extensive damage. People across Croatia united to send assistance to the earthquake-affected areas.

Despite this difficult context, CSO sustainability improved slightly in 2021, driven by a slight improvement in the infrastructure supporting the sector.

According to the Register of Associations, towards the end of 2021, there were 50,627 active registered associations, 314 more than in 2020. During 2021, 1,802 associations were in the process of terminating their operations, while 13,625 were removed from the Register because they ceased to exist. CSOs have to register with the Register of Non-profit Organizations at the Ministry of Finance in order to receive state funds on the national or local level. On December 31, 2021, there were 39,888 organizations registered with the Ministry of Finance, an increase of 866 over the past year. A total of 28,103 organizations submitted financial reports to the Ministry of Finance during the year, which might offer a more accurate estimate of the number of active CSOs in the country.

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT: 3.1



The legal environment governing the CSO sector did not change significantly in 2021.

CSOs in Croatia are primarily governed by the Law on Associations and the Law on Foundations. The legal framework clearly defines the rules for internal management, the scope of allowed activities, financial reporting requirements, and the procedures for terminating organizations. The law is enforced in accordance with its stipulations.

Associations can independently determine their scope of activity, aims and activities, and internal organization, and perform any activities that are not contrary to the Constitution and the law. Associations freely participate in the development, monitoring, implementation, and evaluation of public policies, as well as the formation of

public opinions, and are free to express their views and opinions and to take initiatives related to issues of their interest.

The CSO sector is supported by three government institutions: the Office for Cooperation with NGOs, the Council for Civil Society Development, and the National Foundation for Civil Society Development. The National Strategy for Creating an Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development 2017-2021, which should have been adopted by 2017, was still not adopted in 2021. However, during its session on February 4, 2021, the Government of the Republic of Croatia adopted a decision to launch the preparation of such a strategy for the period 2021-2027. The working group tasked with preparing the plan, which included CSO representatives, was created in June 2021.

CSOs are still faced with administrative harassment in the form of administrative burdens and the inefficiency of the public administration, as well as the inefficient system of European Union (EU) funds management. Due to inadequate training, the tax administration and state and local public administration employees often interpret rules and laws differently. In addition, CSOs that criticize local or national policies are sometimes subject to sudden inspections of their finances or other matters. On the local level, CSOs often refrain from criticizing local governments because they are dependent on funding from local budgets.

CSOs are able to generate revenue through the provision of services and enter into contracts with government bodies. They can also organize fundraising campaigns, although the legislative framework in this area is still not clearly regulated. CSOs can receive donations from foreign donors without legal restrictions.

All CSO income, including income from economic activity, is exempt from taxation. Humanitarian organizations are also exempt from paying value-added tax (VAT) on purchases made for humanitarian purposes, and all CSOs—regardless of their area of activity—are exempt from VAT while using income from EU sources. Individual and corporate taxpayers have the right to income tax deductions up to 2 percent for charitable donations to CSOs.

CSOs continued to have limited access to legal advice in 2021. Most lawyers still do not show an interest in the legal regulations governing CSOs. Quality legal advice is almost exclusively available through other CSOs that employ legal professionals or through acquaintances. Most CSOs that give legal advice are based in larger towns, while CSOs in rural areas frequently have no one to turn to for legal information and advice. The Law Clinic of the Faculty of Law in Zagreb provides legal advice to CSOs, among other activities.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY: 3.5¹

Organizational capacity in the CSO sector remained largely unchanged in 2021.

CSOs continue to struggle to build constituencies and obtain public support for their work due to insufficient staffing and increasing administrative demands. In spite of these problems, there were some successful initiatives in 2021. For example, a sudden increase in the number of work-based sexual harassment cases was recorded due to the activism of the civil initiative #nizamtražila (#I didn't ask for it), which enabled victims to report their traumatic experiences.

Dependence on project-based funding continued to jeopardize CSOs' ability to adhere to their missions in 2021, driving them to focus on the programmatic areas in which funding is available. Also, some CSOs closed their doors because of a lack of funds to pay staff salaries and continue their operations.

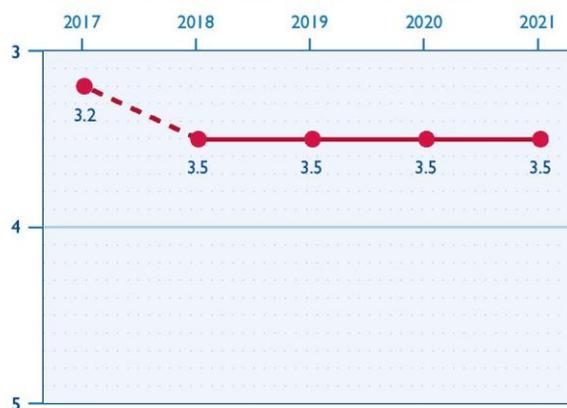
All CSOs, regardless of their size and level of professionalism, are legally obligated to adopt strategic plans. CSOs increasingly note the development of strategic plans when applying to tenders. The Active Citizens Fund, a program of the European Economic Area (EEA) and Norwegian Financial Mechanism, issued a significant call for proposals in 2021 focused on strengthening active citizenship. Given the lack of other funding opportunities, many CSOs prepared strategic plans that diverged from their primary purposes in order to take advantage of this funding opportunity. Tools and capacities for measuring the impact of CSO work are still underdeveloped.

CSOs' internal management structures did not change in 2021. CSOs with greater human and financial resources have structured internal management systems that generally include an assembly, board of directors, and supervisory and advisory boards. In such organizations, there tends to be a clear delegation of responsibilities between various bodies and the management board actively participates in CSO management. Larger CSOs also inform the wider public about their expenditures and agendas on an annual basis, and they use professional services in their work.

The share of CSOs with stable staffing is still relatively low. Limited human resources are an obstacle to developing stronger, more professional, and more sustainable CSOs. Employment of new staff is most frequently done on a project basis, without any elaborated system or strategy. Poor financial viability within the sector generally impedes the employment and retention of professionals and educated young persons. Smaller CSOs experience a greater fluctuation of employees, as they lose human capital that they had invested in over time.

According to the latest Report on Performed Services or Activities of Volunteer Work Organizers by the Ministry of Demographics, Family, Youth and Social Policy, 5 percent more reports on organized volunteer work were submitted in 2020, the most recent year for which data is available, than in 2019. However, the number of registered volunteers indicated in these reports decreased by 25 percent and the number of volunteer hours decreased by 7 percent compared to 2019. Overall, 48,386 volunteers worked for approximately 3 million volunteer hours, providing services valued at roughly HRK 11.3 million (approximately \$1.6 million). Individuals still recognize the need to help those in need, and therefore increasingly volunteer in organizations and initiatives that protect vulnerable groups. For example, after the devastating earthquake that hit Petrinja, Sisak, and the surrounding areas in the last days of 2020, an initiative called Chefs Cook at Home sprang into action, preparing hot meals for the victims for two weeks.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY IN CROATIA



¹ The Organizational Capacity score was recalibrated in 2018 to better reflect the situation in the country and to better align it with other scores in the region. The score does not reflect a deterioration in Organizational Capacity, which remained largely the same in 2018 as in 2017.

CSOs invested a great deal of effort in developing their technical capacities in 2021, as an increasing number of organizations switched to hybrid modes of working. However, some local CSOs still lack basic office and technological equipment. Few CSOs use adequate cybersecurity measures.

FINANCIAL VIABILITY: 4.6



Financial viability remained largely unchanged in 2021.

CSOs continue to be largely reliant on project-based funding, which limits their scope of activity and makes it difficult for them to mount an efficient response to crises and other urgent needs in their communities or advocacy work unrelated to the priority areas of announced tenders. Many CSOs adjust their missions to respond to available funding opportunities.

Most CSOs have diverse sources of funding, including the state budget, the National Foundation for Civil Society Development, and various EU funds. Funds from local authorities are also important. During 2021, the City of Zagreb reduced funding for CSOs for the second year in a row.

During 2021, several tenders were issued on the national level. For example, the Ministry of Labor, Pension System, Family and Social Policy announced two calls for funding: HRK 3 million (approximately USD 465,000) was made available for CSO projects focused on women and children who are victims of domestic and sexual violence and alleviating and promoting social inclusion and integration of socially vulnerable groups, and HRK 71 million (approximately USD 11 million) was budgeted for CSO projects that provide services to assist disabled persons. The central state office for demographics and youth announced two calls for projects focused on young persons (with a budget of HRK 10 million, approximately USD 1.55 million) and support to parenthood (with a budget of HRK 8.6 million, approximately USD 1.33 million). This was an improvement in comparison to 2020, when none of these usual annual tenders were issued.

Although national tenders are one of the most significant sources of funding, the relationship between CSOs and the government institutions that award this funding continues to be marked by mistrust. In addition, CSOs continued to report problems related to the duration of tenders, and the excessive administration related to reporting.

In 2021, Croatian CSOs were able to apply for funding from the EU program Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV), which supports CSOs in EU member states that are active on the local, regional, and/or national level. The programmatic focus of CERV includes the protection and promotion of EU values; non-discrimination and gender equality; citizens' engagement and participation; and countering violence, including gender-based violence. The first call was issued at the end of November 2021. CSOs could not apply for any EU funds on the national level in 2021. Many organizations continue to note the excessive administrative demands related to implementation and reporting for EU-funded projects. Additionally, there continues to be a problem of awarding funds according to the "fastest finger" principle in which funding is allocated based on the order in which applications are received.

Towards the end of 2021, the Office for Cooperation with NGOs announced that it was conducting an evaluation to identify CSOs' priorities for funding within the four main program areas of the EU Operational Program Efficient Human Potential 2021-2027 (labor market, education and lifelong learning, social inclusion, and health care) and to determine the capacities of CSOs to implement projects funded by the EU.

According to the report *Giving Croatia 2020*, which was published by Catalyst Balkans in 2021, the corporate sector donated almost EUR 20 million during the year. Most of these donations came from large companies and focused on alleviating the consequences of the earthquake. Associations, such as Rotary Clubs, also became donors. The Foundation for the Promotion of Partnership and Development of Civil Society, in cooperation with the University of Juraj Dobrila and FET "Dr. Mijo Mirkovic," conducted research on corporate philanthropy in

Istria in March 2021. The survey showed that the most common form of donation is financial (40.5 percent), followed by goods and volunteering (24.3 percent each), while 5.4 percent donate in other forms. On the other hand, 5.4 percent of respondents reported that they did not donate at all.

Through its 5.5 Fund, the SOLIDARNA Foundation for Human Rights and Solidarity raised HRK 17.3 million (approximately USD 2.7 million) from individuals and companies to support the sustainable reconstruction and recovery of Sisak-Moslavina County. SOLIDARNA issued a tender valued at HRK 1 million (approximately USD 155,000), with financial support per project of up to HRK 200,000 (approximately USD 30,000). Ten local initiatives ultimately received support.

The use of crowdfunding continues to grow. A notable crowdfunding example focused on raising funds for the areas devastated by the earthquake in late 2020. The Association for Promotion of IT, Culture and Coexistence (IKS) Petrinja and Local Democracy Agency Sisak launched the campaign “Community in the center- if I had somewhere to...live” in 2021; the initiative raised EUR 6,665 to establish and equip two cultural community centers.

The Croatian Community of Counties (HZŽ) in cooperation with Mladenka Majerić and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, launched the project Yellow Spot in 2021, with the support of the Office for Cooperation of NGOs and the Association of Croatian Cities. One of the project’s activities is to train associations on fundraising to increase their financial viability. Training participants will be selected through a tender process that began during 2021.

In December 2021, the National Foundation for Civil Society Development published the results of its tender for institutional support. Financial support was allocated to CSOs focused on democratization and social development, as well as associations that had not previously received institutional support from the national foundation, associations of disabled persons, and associations for consumer protection. The foundations Kultura nova and Croatia for Children also announced competitions for funding in 2021.

CSOs continue to receive funds from foreign institutions, embassies, and other international organizations. In October 2021, the Active Citizens Fund Croatia announced its fourth tender for projects that contribute to the Fund’s goals: increased watchdog function of civil society; increased support for human rights, rule of law, and good governance; and strengthened democratic culture, civil awareness, and civic engagement. A total of EUR 2,625,000 was made available through the tender. The Embassy of the Republic of France also announced a new funding competition for CSOs in 2021 with three priority areas: gender equality and the fight against gender discrimination, reconciliation and promotion of tolerance, and environmental protection and the fight against climate change. The estimated budget for 2021 was EUR 15,000, with a maximum of EUR 3,000 available for individual projects.

CSOs do not generate significant revenue through the sale of their products and services, in part because many community members still expect CSO services to be free. Social entrepreneurship is still underdeveloped, although there are some positive examples. For example, Zadruga Ruke employs women who are victims of domestic violence to grow seasonal vegetables in greenhouses in Bilje, thereby increasing their economic independence.

CSOs submit financial statements that are made public through the Register of Associations maintained by the Ministry of Finance. Audits are generally only conducted at the request of donors.

ADVOCACY: 3.1

CSO advocacy remained unchanged in 2021.

An e-Consultation system has been operational in Croatia for six years, enabling all interested parties, including CSOs, to participate in public consultations. However, CSOs note that government representatives are not obliged to accept their comments, and practice in this area seems to indicate that CSOs are only being involved in the consultation process as a formality. For example, all comments submitted by environmental organizations during the consultations for the fifth report on the implementation of the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making, and Access to Justice in Environmental Issues were either duly noted (which does not indicate any concrete follow-up) or rejected. A 2021 report by the Information Commissioner

finds that government bodies have reduced the time periods during which consultations take place. In addition, some bodies fail to publish reports about conducted consultations.

An e-consultation focused on a new Social Welfare Act was announced in 2021, in which more than 1,800 comments were submitted. Employees of the social welfare system and many representatives of the academic community, professional chambers, and CSOs opposed the reform as it centralized the system; however, this opposition had no impact and very few of the comments were considered or accepted. In addition, Prime Minister Plenković refused to meet with representatives of professional chambers and other experts connected to the social welfare system.

Ultimately, the law was adopted without taking the profession’s opinion into consideration, demonstrating the lack of cooperation between the government and experts, including CSOs.

CSOs are frequently members of various government working groups. However, CSOs that engage in advocacy on behalf of vulnerable groups are sometimes excluded from working groups or the development of relevant strategies. For example, a working group was formed in the middle of 2021 to prepare the National Youth Program for 2022-2024. The working group brought together representatives of state administration bodies, public institutions, the academic community, and youth organizations. However, no representatives of the Youth Network Croatia, which has more than seventy member organizations, was included. In addition, information about the members of working groups charged with the development of certain policies, as well as the criteria according to which they were selected, is frequently unavailable.

The Council for Civil Society Development is an advisory body to the government that promotes cooperation between the government and CSOs and the implementation of acts creating an enabling environment for civil society development, the development of philanthropy, social capital, partnership relations, and cross-sector cooperation. The Council for Civil Society Development has been recognized on the EU level as an example of good practice of including CSOs into the work of public administration. In February 2021, the government issued a decision re-establishing the Council for Civil Society Development for the period 2020-2023.

CSO cooperation with local authorities remains relatively modest, with government representatives often remaining aloof. CSOs’ dependence on funds from local budgets limits their criticism of these same local authorities. While some CSOs criticize and advocate for changes despite their financial dependence, most organizations do not speak out publicly.

The new authorities in Zagreb announced the termination of the “parent-educator” measure, which provides financial compensation to unemployed parents raising three or more children, if at least one of these children is of preschool age. The measure benefited 3,800 parents with 20,000 children. During 2021, parent-educators organized several protests against this decision. The decision was under litigation at the end of the year, with the involvement of several CSOs.

During 2021, strict COVID-19 measures, including a ban on public gatherings, were in place. These reduced opportunities to advocate by limiting the ability of CSOs to organize protests or demonstrations.

In 2021, the initiative Right of Every Child to a School Meal continued to push for school meals for all children in order to alleviate child poverty. Through its research, this initiative found that a significant number of children do not eat at school because their parents cannot afford to pay for their meals. Based on this finding, it is raising attention to the inadequacy of co-financing of school meals for poor children. As a result of these efforts, the Ombudsperson for Children, the President of Croatia, and a number of political parties and coalitions expressed their support for this initiative.

In 2021, the National Foundation for Civil Society Development began to implement the European Social Fund (ESF) Program “Thematic Network for socio-economic development and promotion of social dialogue in the context of improving working conditions.” The program emphasizes the development of dialogue and cooperation

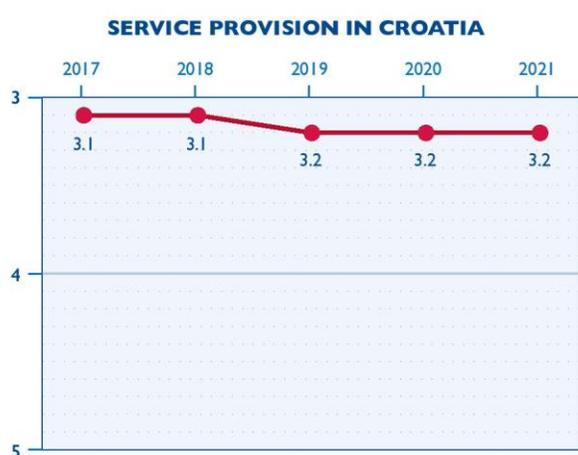


between CSOs, local and regional self-government units, social partners, and higher education institutions. Efforts supported so far indicate great potential for various lobbying initiatives.

CSOs advocated to ensure adequate and affordable social housing units to satisfy the housing needs of those who cannot afford housing at market prices. The aim of the campaign is the adoption of an appropriate legal framework for social housing, including the Law on Social Housing and the Strategy of Housing Policy until 2030. For the fourth year in a row, the Croatian Federation of Disabled Workers' Associations organized the national campaign "A week with disabled workers" to educate the public about the problems faced by disabled workers and disabled persons and to discuss proposals for their solutions. The campaign also aimed to establish cooperation with state authorities in charge of the implementation of public policies pertaining disabled workers.

CSOs did not engage in any notable advocacy to improve the enabling environment for the sector in 2021.

SERVICE PROVISION: 3.2



CSO service provision did not change notably in 2021. CSOs continue to play a significant role as service providers and provide a wide range of social services. CSOs reacted quickly to the extraordinary situations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the earthquakes and adapted to new circumstances by modifying their services and actively developing services in communication with their beneficiaries. For example, CSOs provided homeless individuals with sanitizer, masks, and other means of protection. In response to the earthquake, CSOs collected clothes, hygiene items, and food. The Psychological Help Platform made a list of toll-free telephone numbers that provide help and support available on its website. The Zagreb Psychological Society made a video about trauma, while the Game Association provided individual and group psychosocial services. In

addition, many CSOs worked together to address the growing problem with stray animals after the earthquake and to spay and neuter dogs and cats to prevent future problems.

In the area of climate, the Association for Nature and Environment Protection Green Osijek is implementing a climate change mitigation program to raise awareness about the preservation and restoration of wetland and flood ecosystems and biodiversity, including protected species.

CSOs regularly communicate with local stakeholders and beneficiaries, giving them insight into the needs of local communities. Many CSOs also use already existing research and data sources to identify needs. However, CSOs rarely undertake systematic assessments of community needs and priorities or directly collect data, generally because they lack the needed capacities. This is particularly a problem in smaller CSOs with fewer staff. CSOs do not openly or visibly discriminate against anyone in the provision of their services.

Pandemic-related restrictions hampered the provision of services in 2021. On December 16, 2021, the Civil Protection Headquarters issued a decision introducing a special security measure in the social welfare sector (Official Gazette No. 138/21). This decision mandated COVID-19 testing for all employees engaged in social welfare, including those in social welfare institutions, associations, religious communities, other legal entities, and craftspeople and natural persons who perform social care as a professional activity and work at least twice a week. Testing was not required for employees who were vaccinated or recovered from COVID-19, unless they had signs of respiratory infection or other symptoms of COVID-19. This decision had a significant impact on CSOs engaged in social welfare as it required additional resources to cover the testing costs. At the same time, individual users, who were subject to the same requirements, struggled to pay for testing, limiting their access to certain services.

Some organizations closed their doors in 2021 due to their inability to cope with the effects of the pandemic and the lack of financial support, so their services ceased being available. Other organizations, such as Home of Hope, which operates a homeless shelter, were threatened with closure. The Croatian Homeless Network was faced

with the same problem but was able to continue providing social services thanks to support from individuals and volunteers.

A new Social Welfare Act was adopted in 2021. CSOs criticized the new law, claiming that it centralized the social welfare system and would not improve access to services or reduce the risk of poverty and social exclusion.

There continued to be a lack of support from the state and local authorities to continue or further develop social services. Key strategic documents that should have been adopted in 2021, such as the Strategy of Poverty and Social Exclusion and the Strategy of Social Entrepreneurship, were not adopted. The lack of interest in adopting these strategies demonstrates the attitude of the authorities towards CSOs.

The system of contracting social services is problematic. There is a lack of continuity in contracting, which threatens the sustainability of social services that are funded in this manner. In 2021, there was some contracting in areas such as domestic violence.

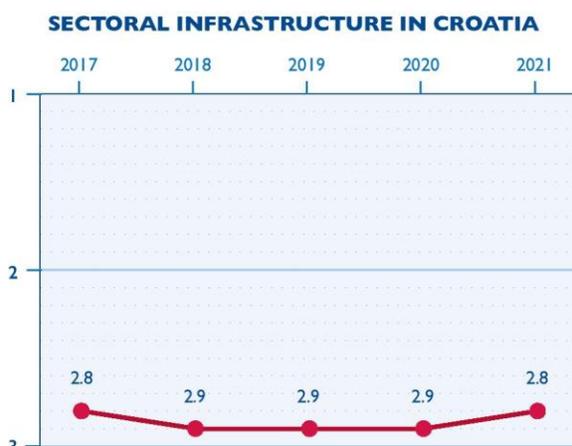
Service provision largely depends on available tenders and the capacities of CSOs to apply and receive funds. Most CSOs lack knowledge about market processes, but a growing number of CSOs provides services, such as workshops and training programs, at market prices. From December 2021 until April 2022, the first cycle of the program Center of Social Innovations, implemented by the ACT Group, supported innovative work to improve services or products that benefit numerous vulnerable groups. Through this program, the Association of the Blind from Međimurje County created plans to form a social enterprise that would offer medical massage services by trained blind persons with highly developed tactile abilities.

SECTORAL INFRASTRUCTURE: 2.8

Although it continues to be centralized, the infrastructure that supports civil society improved slightly in 2021, driven by increasing cooperation within the sector.

For several years, the National Foundation for Civil Society Development has operated regional branch offices in Split, Rijeka, and Osijek. These offices provide support to beneficiaries of the European Social Fund in order to increase the impact of financed projects. Information about the work and achievements of these branch offices was not publicly available in 2021. The Office for Cooperation with NGOs provides support to NGOs, including information about competitions and legal obligations. Some local action groups (LAGs), which bring together representatives of local self-governments, CSOs, and businesses to develop, implement, and monitor local development strategies, provide support to CSOs, which is particularly important for CSOs in rural areas.

A number of local entities provide grants to local CSOs to address locally identified needs and projects. The Active Citizens Fund is managed by Community Foundation Slagalica from Osijek in consortium with the SOLIDARNA Foundation from Zagreb, Association for Civil Society Development SMART from Rijeka, and the Center for Information Service, Cooperation and Development of NGOs (CNVOS) from Ljubljana. It supports projects that focus on democracy, active citizenship, good governance and transparency; human rights and equal treatment through the prevention of discrimination; social justice and social inclusion of vulnerable groups; gender equality and prevention of gender-based violence; and environment and climate change. Several other local organizations also allocate small grants to CSOs. In addition to supporting earthquake recovery efforts in 2021, the SOLIDARNA Foundation awarded funds to support the education of poor children; to provide support to victims of domestic violence; and for cultural programs The Slagalica Foundation, Zamah Foundation, Istra Foundation, and Kajo Dadić Foundation also awarded small grants to CSOs, with funds they raised from local sources, including local self-governments.

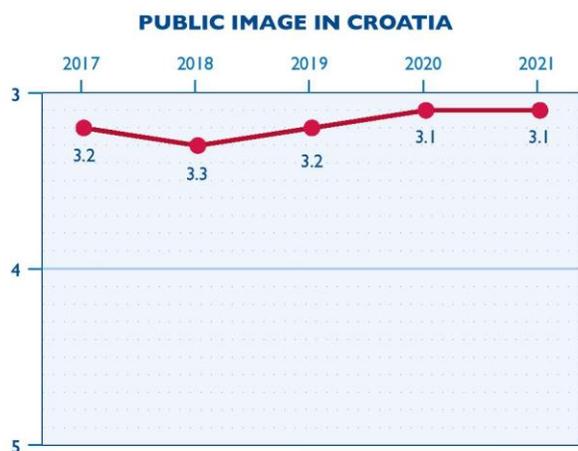


CSOs increasingly exchange information, promote their interests, and advocate for changes in society through different networks, platforms, initiatives, and associations. In 2021, some projects promoted CSO networking. For example, the ESF-funded initiative “Thematic Network for socio-economic development and promotion of social dialogue in the context of improving working conditions” announced a call for projects in 2021. An example of cooperation supported through this call is the Croatian Homeless Network, whose members work together to improve care of the homeless. The Network for Local Sustainable Development was established in 2021 within the project SUSTINEO – Through Collaboration, Participation, Research and Education to Sustainability, which is implemented by ODRAZ - Sustainable Community Development in cooperation with ten partners. Cooperation of CSOs through such activities has the potential to have a long-term effect on information exchange, association, and advocacy for common causes and interests.

CSOs have access to training on CSO management, but these opportunities are not equally accessible throughout the country in terms of physical and digital availability. Training materials are mainly available in the Croatian language. For the fourth year in a row, ACT Group from Čakovec organized the Academy of Business Skills, which addresses strategic management, social enterprise, accounting, and other topics relevant for CSOs. Some LAGs also provide training for CSOs.

There are numerous examples of intersectoral partnerships for the realization of common goals, most of which are project-based. Within the project Work Action: STEM, the Foundation for Civil Society Development Istra works with CSOs, representatives of the academic community, local authorities, schools, and cultural associations to raise public awareness of the importance of education in the STEM field and to increase scientific literacy among children and youth.

PUBLIC IMAGE: 3.1



The public image of CSOs did not change notably in 2021. CSOs are presented in a polarized manner that reflects society’s general attitude towards them. While CSOs active in the area of human rights or LGBTI rights are labeled negatively, those that advocate for and work with vulnerable social groups (e.g., children, the ill, or areas affected by the earthquake) are presented positively. A broader public understanding of the importance of CSOs in the context of democratic political culture continues to be lacking.

Some media outlets, especially newspapers, criticize particular organizations and civil initiatives, which impacts the image of the sector as a whole and contributes to public distrust in civil society. In 2021, harsh criticism was directed at the Spasime initiative, which opposes

domestic violence. An article in *Slobodna Dalmacija* claimed that “Many [CSOs] are financed from abroad and have a certain political agenda of ideological colonization, and under the disguise of the fight for equality they are working on destruction of society from within. They are an extended arm of certain politics (generally left-wing ones), so they have a para-spy character.”

During the election campaign for the mayor of Zagreb, the previous work experience of Tomašević with CSOs and civil initiatives such as Green Action, Youth Network Croatia, and the Right to the City was criticized as being inadequate. Despite this, he was elected as mayor of the capital city.

The business sector’s perception of CSOs was unchanged during 2021. Businesses continue to recognize CSOs as active members of local communities, as well as frequent organizers of tourist events and proponents of innovative local solutions like social entrepreneurship. As indicated by the process of adopting the new Law on Social Welfare, in which the comments and proposals of CSOs were not taken into consideration, government authorities frequently view CSOs as irrelevant stakeholders in the creation of social or public policy.

CSOs mainly publish information about their activities on social networks and web sites. CSOs' relationships with journalists are underdeveloped and CSOs not do adequately recognize the role of the media or use free or paid advertisements in the media to improve their visibility. CSOs primarily develop contacts with the media to fulfill obligations related to promotion and visibility under funded projects. While CSOs are able to more easily make contacts with the media and work on their image at the local level, it remains extremely difficult for them to gain national recognition. CSOs have limited capacities to respond to negative media content.

An increasing number of civic initiatives were visible in the media in 2021, most of which formed in response to social problems such as the termination of a former right or the eruption of a scandal related to politics. For example, the Croatian Association of Parent-Educators, which played a prominent role in protesting the decision to terminate the parent-educator measure in Zagreb, received a lot of media space in 2021 because of great public interest in the issue.

CSOs strive to be transparent in their work by preparing and publishing annual reports, reports on current activities and fund management, and calls to individuals to get involved in their work. Most CSOs still do not have formally adopted codes of ethics, although they adhere to principles of ethical conduct in their work. In addition, some leading CSOs include such principles in their strategic documents.

Disclaimer: *The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or FHI 360.*

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