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*Evolution of the Civil Society Sector in Serbia*

**1) What results of USAID's CSAI program do you consider as the most important achievements in 2010?**

There are many positive changes and results that have been achieved by the civil society organizations that we supported over the past five years. We are proud of the fact that these organizations have been equally active and engaged in pushing for critical legislative reforms, creating pressure on decision-making processes at the local, regional and national-level, influencing environmental protection measures, providing help to persons with disabilities, as well as supporting youth, at-risk children and elderly citizens.

Simply put, public advocacy is a means for citizens to influence relevant authorities, particularly decision makers that have the final word. It is a kind of "public discipline" or "check and balances system" used by citizens and organizations to articulate their interests to state bodies and society as a whole. The adoption of several laws over the past year, and changes to key aspects of legislation regulating the rights and opportunities of citizens in a democratic system have definitely achieved great results in 2010.

For example, the adoption of the Law on Associations is a turning point for civil society organizations in Serbia. Going forward, we will know exactly how many CSOs exist, who runs them, what they do, how they are financed. Furthermore, these organizations will be more accessible to citizens, and it will be easier for citizens to understand them and to decide which to turn to resolve the issues they consider most important. We are proud of the support we provided to the civil sector and to the Government of Serbia in establishing the Office for Cooperation with the Civil sector, which now has its own budget and mission statement.

Numerous public campaigns have been launched in order to raise awareness and mobilize citizens to change their habits, behaviors and attitudes. We supported the "A Penny is not Petty" Campaign to promote the concept of individual gift-giving to charitable organizations in Serbia. We supported the establishment of the VIRTUS Corporate Philanthropy Awards which recognize companies and enterprises for supporting public or non-profit actions and organizations.

Finally, we strongly supported the activities of CSO Mother Courage to, in cooperation with the Ministry of Health, improve the conditions inside maternity wards and hospitals. We leave 2010 with a long and broad list of achievements, which, overall, we consider to be a very successful and productive year.

**2) Advocacy, networking and consensus building seem to be core issues in all ISC supported projects. To what extent would you say these techniques and concepts have found a place among civil society activists and among general citizens?**

Five years ago, when USAID's Civil Society Advocacy Initiative was launched, only a few people genuinely understood what public advocacy is, and even fewer people ever heard about successful examples of this technique employed in other parts of the world to achieve widespread societal impact. During our provision of technical and financial assistance to civil society organizations in Serbia, many citizens learned how to use this tool to build a more democratic system in this country. So far, ISC, in an effort to influence municipal authorities, government officials, institutions, citizen groups and interests, conducted over 100 multi-day trainings, where over a thousand activists and experts from more than 180 organizations acquire the knowledge, skills and techniques needed to successfully conduct public advocacy initiatives.

Over the course of the last five year, ISC has awarded 275 individual grants to CSOs that have significantly contributed towards pushing the boundaries of civic activism, advancing the interests of underserved and vulnerable populations, and improving the living standards for all citizens.

Today we witness the large numbers of organizations to which we provided tailored technical assistance playing an important role in influencing decision making processes at the local level. As a result, citizens are influencing where public finances are being allocated, and now avenues exist for citizens to access information of public importance. Today these organizations are contributing towards creating transparent processes at all levels – and this is a significant step forward, and what makes our work very rewarding. Of course, significant work still remains ahead, but we are on the right track – many changes are taking place and society is reacting well to these changes.

**3) Given ISC's key programmatic areas: Governance accountability and Transparency, Legislative Reform, Socio economic Rights and Environmental Protection – where do you see that ISC supported projects have made the biggest impact and where do you believe more work is warranted?**

Without question the most visible progress has been achieved in the environmental sector. This issue, partly imposed by the European integration process and partly due to the overall modernization of society, has proved to be one of the most interesting topics for citizens, and, incidentally, where citizens happen to be the most proactive. For citizens it is simply very important to know the quality of the air they breath, the purity

of the water they drink, whether the vegetables they consume are contaminated, how to protect themselves from environmental pollution, and how to move away from simply collecting secondary raw materials to selecting and processing this waste in order to better preserve the environment.

At the local level, this is best exemplified through the “Oplaneti se!” Campaign which mobilized citizens from 20 municipalities to clean illegal land dumps and to place pressure on municipal authorities to adopt environmentally-friendly local actions plans in an effort to solve the long-term struggle with this problem. The pressure created by these organizations on municipal authorities led to important changes in local waste management policies. This is what we mean when we say public advocacy – when citizens through solidarity, networking and personal activism manage to create meaningful impact.

We can measure this success through the many projects that have directly led to job creation for persons with disabilities, women and redundant workers. For example, in the Municipality of Zajecar, due to the successful advocacy initiative of an organization we supported, municipal officials adopted a decision to abolish local taxes for start-up businesses during their first two years of operations and to create better financing opportunities for out of work individuals and redundant workers.

For the last several years, we’ve strived to support organizations whose projects are designed to jointly collaborate with relevant authorities (both at the local and national level) to influence the efficiency and effectiveness of social spending. In pursuit of better solutions to existing problems, these projects now offer solutions that create more ‘bang for the buck.’

**4) Most citizen polls indicate that Serbian citizens perceive poverty, unemployment, corruption and violence as core societal problems. To what extent do you think that the CSAI project has helped Serbian society address these challenges?**

Serbia is still a young democracy. This means that the issues we encounter are the common sets of problems typically seen in transitional countries, where the decades-long neglect and irresponsible conduct towards human rights cannot be rapidly transformed and incorporated into a just and fair system. Civil society organizations in this sense play a critical role – they are close to citizens, they represent their interests and they are flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstances.

To date, ISC’s work has sought to support and strengthen key projects that address relevant societal issues. Unfortunately, we are not in a position to create new jobs, but we do work hard to create opportunities for vulnerable groups (including youth, persons with individuals, women, Roma, etc.) in order to create sustainable solutions that can help these individuals.

Some of the projects that we've supported through USAID's Civil Society Advocacy Initiative have contributed in the fight against corruption – a key problem cited by citizens. Civil society organizations work to identify problems, find appropriate solutions and change the prevailing attitudes that foster corruption at all levels. The hard work of these organizations has led to the adoption of local anti-corruption action plans in the municipalities of Pozega and Zrenjanin, and similar initiatives are expected to be adopted in the City of Nis in the near future. Five years ago such examples were nowhere to be found. This speaks volumes about the positive changes taking place in society and about the advocacy initiatives being employed to fight corruption in an appropriate manner.

**5) How would you contrast the Serbian NGO sector today compared to ten years ago, within the context of ISC's mission statement that says: "...work with civil society organizations to help them better to represent the needs of ordinary citizens?"**

So far a lot has been accomplished - I would even venture to say that an evolution has taken place in civil society. Ten years ago, for example, civil society organizations were perceived to be "some sort of nebulous organizations" to which most people never recognized a natural partner and ally in helping them advance their interests and solve their problems. To a large extent, the poor image surrounding CSOs at the time, could be primarily attributed to the public authorities in power and to the prevailing public sentiment held towards the work of CSOs, which were primarily engaged in addressing immediate humanitarian concerns and promoting human rights. In short, a mutual dialogue between CSOs and citizens was never properly established.

Today, the situation looks very different. First, there are greater numbers of CSOs, they are larger in scope, they have established closer ties with citizens and they are more concrete and direct in their actions. And secondly, inside the majority of organizations today, citizens can recognize people similar to themselves, people with whom they share common values and with whom they can discuss common problems, such as the alleviation of poverty and unemployment, concern about the environment, etc.

It is important that the authorities in power today are far more sensitized and open to the work of civil society organizations. Public support, or the lack of it, now directly implies public condemnation or support of organizations engaged to protect the environment, support parental associations, help people with disabilities, assist youth associations, as well as support reforms in other key areas. This is proof of the advancement of the sector and the progress of Serbian society.

ISC can join other international organizations that have succeeded in Serbia to strengthen and encourage solidarity, empower civic activism, embrace social responsibility and raise public awareness about social problems. This undoubtedly contributes to a more

stable democracy and this is why we all must be thankful to these citizens, to the organizations that represent them and to active community networks.

**6) What will be focus of the ISC activities in 2011?**

We will continue to provide financial and technical support to civil society organizations in order to contribute towards solving key societal issues in Serbia. USAID strongly supports the transformation of Serbia into a modern and democratic state in which civil society plays a positive and constructive role - and ISC's mission is oriented around these goals.

We intend to delve deeper into the field of environmental protection and to more vigorously support projects focused on raising environmental awareness and reforming legislation regulating this area, particularly legislation related to waste management policies where an opportunity exists for job creation. Support will be given to projects in the field of socio-economic rights (for example, employment of women, persons with disabilities, redundant workers and vulnerable populations), and we will continue the important practice of awarding grants to smaller organizations, based in underserved municipalities where civic activism has less of a foothold, with sound project ideas with the ability to improve conditions at the local level.

In the coming period our aim will be to help civil society and the efforts of the state to solve the complex process of social change and to create visible and tangible social progress through the projects we support. This long-term process is complex and demanding, but we are determined to persevere.