

CONCEPT NOTE FORMAT

The Concept Note must answer 4 sections in a maximum of 4 pages (each section must be answered on maximum 1 page - the font size **cannot** be smaller than Arial 10). Any Concept Note not meeting those basic requirements will be rejected without appraisal.

1. Summary of the action

1.1 Brief description of the proposed action.

The proposed project aims at **developing a National NGO Network for Civic Court Watch** comprising of 25 non-governmental organizations. The Network as well as the project activities will cover three planning regions of Bulgaria: **North-Eastern, South-Central and North-Central**. The project will be managed by NGO Centre - Razgrad, as a **leading organization**, in partnership with another NGO Open Door Centre Pleven. The NGO Centre Razgrad will manage the project activities in Northeastern region and South-Central and will be responsible for the overall grant management. Open Door Centre Pleven will operate on the territory of North-Central planning region with partial outreach to North-West planning region. The project activities will cover approximately ½ of the whole territory of Bulgaria. About 25 of NGOs, relatively evenly dispersed across the above-listed planning regions will be trained to apply civic court watch techniques.

The project duration is **14 months** and will be accomplished in **4 stages**:

- **Stage one: Promotion of the project goals and methodology and identification of 25 NGOs for the interactive trainings (1-3month)**

The information campaign will aim at national coverage, focused on the three planning regions of Bulgaria: Northwest, North-Central and South-Central. The campaign will cover also the other three planning regions but only via one information meeting per region and on-going dissemination of materials highlighting the project results.

The campaign includes a total of **6 information days and 10 press conferences**. It will be organized by NGO Centre Razgrad and its partner *Open Door Centre, Pleven*. The events will take place in the bigger towns of *North-Central region*: Pleven, Ruse, Veliko Tarnovo, Gabrovo, Lovech; *South-Central region*: Kardzhali, Haskovo, Pazardzhik, Plovdiv, Smolian and Stara Zagora and for *North-East region* in Varna, Tarogvishte, Shumen, Silistra, Razgrad and Dobrich. During the information days the competition and the selection criteria for participation in the training will be announced.

During the third month of the project 25 NGOs from the three targeted planning regions will be selected through a transparent public procedure. Their teams will be **trained in the basics of civic court watch methodology**.

The local NGOs, whose teams have been selected for the training, will be invited as founding members of a **National NGO Network for Civic Court-watch in Bulgaria**.

The **press conferences** will be organized in the biggest urban centers of the three regions: Pleven, Veliko Tarnovo, Ruse, Shumen, Varna, Plovdiv, Pazardzhik and Haskovo. The candidates for participation in the national NGO network will be presented to the broad public and the project launch will be announced to the media.

- **Stage two: Establishment of a National NGO Network for Civic Court Watch in Bulgaria (3-14 month).**

A) **Trainings for the selected 25 NGOs** – developing capacity for conducting civic monitoring of case hearings and compiling the necessary reports. The trainings are scheduled for the second, the third and the forth month of the project.

The first two-day training will be introductory, providing information about the specific project activities and expected results as well as interactive training on the basic principles of the civic court watch model and the methodology of the civic monitoring of court hearings.

Challenges in the collaboration with the local courts, the attitude of the judiciary towards the civic monitoring will be discussed. The training will highlight the necessary steps for establishment of effective partnership with the local courts, the different approaches for access to court records. The experience of NGO Centre Razgrad in the area of civic court watch will be shared and the lessons learned will be used as case-studies.

Between the first and the second training the organizations will have to accomplish a task - to draft a model system for civic court watch, developed according to the specifics of

their local courts. The provided template would support the drafting of realistic region-specific civic court watch models.

The second two-day training will focus on the practical execution of the civic monitoring, the specific roles and responsibilities within the local teams, the formats for data collection and its processing. The participants in this module will be acquainted with the full cycle of the civic court watch – its logistics and professional aspects. On the basis of the gained theoretical knowledge the participant will again be assigned practical tasks, related to real civic court watch cases.

The third training includes the final and most important steps of the civic court watch cycle – processing and analysis of the information, drafting conclusions and recommendations, feedback mechanisms and public launching. The participants will be acquainted with some complimentary tools for assessment of the public perception of the performance of the courts – phone inquiries, questionnaires, media monitoring, Internet forums and etc. The structure and the content of the Monthly (raw data) reports and the Quarterly Analytical Reports will be the major focus of the third training. Practical steps related to the public presentation of the reports and the preliminary briefings with the monitored courts will also be addressed. Special Certificates for Watch Dog Organizations will be awarded to the NGOs, whose teams have successfully accomplished the trainings.

B) The national NGO network for civic court watch will be established within the 7th month, immediately after the end of the 3 training module. The purpose of the network is to unite NGOs and informal civic groups actively involved in supporting the judicial reform on local level. The Network will provide a structured information exchange and will stimulate innovative approaches for civic court watch and for pro-active collaboration with the local courts. The network will provide favorable environment for capacity building and informal “trouble shooting”.

C) Two regional teams will coordinate the network activities within the three target regions: Open Door Centre, Pleven will be a coordination body for North-Central target region; NGOs Center Razgrad will coordinate of the activities in South-Central and Northeast regions. Special communication system in the national NGO network will be developed in a highly participatory manner.

- **Stage three: Assessment of the public image of the court system**

The project team will organize a national survey for the assessment of the public image of the court system in Bulgaria. It will be carried out with the methodological support of a sociological agency. The opinion of 1500 citizens selected on a random basis will be inquired. The goals of the Assessment will be to measure the current level of the public credibility of the court system (base-line data) and also identify the trends to be further explored.

- **Stage four: Public campaign for popularization of the project goals and results**

Sufficient and timely information would be provided to the broad public, related to the project goals, major activities and with a special focus of the project results. All interested institutions, counterparts and other stakeholders and the media will be regularly updated on the current development of the project activities, the concrete achievements and the full texts of the Quarterly Analytical Reports. This is a part of our positive impact via wide public outreach approach.

2. Relevance:

2.1 How relevant is your proposal to the needs and constraints of the target country (ies) or region?

The International Community is unanimous that the judicial system in Bulgaria is not effective despite the designed programs and strategies. The newly drafted legislation is harmonized with the good EU examples, but its implementation is still far beyond the desired standards. This miss-match between the regulations and their implementation as well as the alarmingly high number of corruption cases among the judiciary does not provide for equal protection of the rights and interests of the citizens from the various strata of society. The key participants in the court hearings at Regional and District Courts demonstrate low level of sensitivity towards the public opinion about their

performance and independence. The quarterly opinion polls, organized in different parts the three targeted planning regions show low level of public credibility of the local courts and unsatisfactory level of awareness about the possibilities for civic involvement in the on-going judicial reform.

The proposed project offers to multiply the successful court watch model, piloted in Razgrad region. The model had a measurably positive impact over the transparency and quality of performance of the monitored courts. More than four years the NGO Centre Razgrad develops capacity for successful implementation of the civic court watch model at local and regional levels. Taylor-made versions of the civic monitoring methodologies were applied in 16 Regional and District courts throughout the North-East planning region. The project results as well as the conclusions of the reports on the status of the Judicial Reform in the country clearly justify the need for enlargement of the coverage of the civic court watch and for development of the capacity of a network of socially engaged NGOs to apply the model nation-wide.

2.2 What are the problems to be resolved and the needs to be met?

During the last three years of application of the civic court watch model in 6 cities in NE planning region, the lead partner to the current proposal identified the following major problems:

- Occasional negligence of the basic principle of Rule of Law;
- Slow and non-efficient jurisdiction;
- Lack of transparency about the overall procedures regulating the court hearings;
- Certain miss-match between the legislation and its application;
- Considerable decrease in the public credibility of the judiciary due to justified suspicion about their dependence on political pressure and corruption;
- Non-compliance with the conflict of interest regulations;
- Disrespect for the prescribed 3 month term for the court decisions;
- Considerable problems with the access to court records;

All these findings are in contradiction with the strategic directions of the on-going reform in the Judiciary are: transparency, accountability, proper law enforcement, quick and effective justice, high public credibility. As a result of the active cooperation between the media and the non-governmental organizations and under the pressure of the EU, the citizens anticipate fast and measurable changes in the overall performance of a judicial system that would deserve higher public trust.

The analysis of the media coverage of court-related topics shows prevailing number of “sensational head-line news”, rather than informative materials. Cases of corruption, conflict of interests, biased or politically/ corruption influenced court decisions comprise over 90% of the court-related media coverage. All this shapes negative public opinion, nurtures suspicion and contributes to the hostile and demoralizing environment for the functioning of the judicial system and discourages civic participation in the overall democratization process.

The **civic monitoring** of court hearings i.e. the presence of well-trained and respected civic monitors in the court room will contribute to the strict compliance of the performance of judges and prosecutors with all procedural regulations preventing conflict of interests, corruption practices, biased decisions and attempts to jeopardize the independence of the judiciary

That is why we consider the already established good working relations with the local courts and the Regional prosecutor's office in Razgrad as a serious break-through and we would like to use the momentum and **expand the impact of our efforts at a national level.**

The teams of both partner organizations strongly believe that the proposed establishment of on-going, independent civic monitoring of the courts and the prosecutors will **foster the overall reform in the judiciary and will favorably impact the public credibility of these key institutions of our young democracy.**

2.3 Who are the actors involved (final beneficiaries, target groups)?

The target-group of the civic monitoring as well as the briefings and the public forums will be the members of the Judiciary hearing cases of considerable public interest, the Chair persons of the Regional and the District Courts, the Regional

prosecutors from 25 locations in the three targeted planning regions, the local media and socially engaged NGOs and informal civic groups.

The target group of the trainings will be the teams of the 25 selected NGOs.

2.4 What are the objectives and expected results?

Objective1: A successful model for public-private partnership between the judiciary and civil society is multiplied in the three target Planning regions: North-Central, North-Eastern and South-Central.

Objective2: A functioning National NGO Network for Civic Court Watch is established;

Expected results:

- The Court Watch Model is multiplied in 25 locations throughout the three targeted planning regions;
- The teams of 25 NGOs have the capacity to apply the model with minimum need for technical assistance from the lead partner;
- The respect of the judges and the prosecutors to the civic presence in the court rooms is increased;
- The transparency and good will of the court system and the prosecutors to consider the critical feed-back of the local civil society is increased;

2.5 What is the added value of the action (what adds the action by reference to (central or local) government action and actions implemented by non state actors)?

The project will disseminate a successful model that was piloted by the lead partner in 3 planning regions. The methodology is developed by the NGO centre, following the best EU examples. Developing a new form of a public-private partnership between the court and the civil society, based on mutual trust and respect, while preserving the element of critical assessment and provision of constructive fed-back is the value-added that this project will contribute both to the reform in the Judiciary and to the development of the capacity of the civil society.

3. Methodology and Sustainability:

3.1 What are the main project activities?

Activity 1: 6 information days (1-3 month)

Activity 2: 10 press conferences (1-3 month)

Activity 3: 6 briefings (1-3 month)

Activity 4: Three 2-day training seminars for civic court watch of 25 NGOs from the three planning regions (3-6 month).

Activity 5: National survey of the public image of the judiciary (5-7 month)

Activity 6: Establishment of two regional teams for project coordination (1 month)

Activity 7: Technical assistance and methodological support to the local teams (1-14 month)

Activity 8: Information bulletin with best civic court watch practices 10 000 issues (12-14 month)

Activity 9: Establishment of National NGO Network for Civic Court Watch (7-14 month)

Activity 10: Public Forum (13-14 month)

Activity 11: Development and run of a web-site (1-14 month)

3.2 Who will be your main implementing partners, what is the length of your relationship with them and how will they be involved in the project?

Main partner: Open Door Centre Pleven, partners since 2000;

Associated partners: District and Regional Courts and the District Prosecutors' office in Pleven; – Pazardzhik, and Razgrad. We cooperate with the listed institutions since 2003.

3.3 How will the project achieve sustainability?

The established National NGO network of 25 trained NGOs from all over the country will secure the institutional aspect of the sustainability of the project results. The developed local capacity, which will be further utilized with minimum need for further funding will contribute to the financial sustainability. The existence of the free database, accessible

for all potential users of civic court watch practices will also add to it. The establishment of the civil monitoring and the public discussions between the civil society and the Judiciary as a good practice will contribute to the policy aspect of the sustainability of the impact of the results of the current proposal.

3.4 Will it have multiplier effects?

The gained best practices for civic court watch will be applied (and multiplied in that way) at national level in more than 25 district and regional courts throughout the country. The current experience of NGO Centre Razgrad, the collected database of information will be applied in practice in 3 planning regions.

4. Expertise and operational capacity:

4.1 What is the experience of your organisation in project management?

Association "NGO Centre Razgrad" is established in 1997 and up to date has successfully implemented more than 30 projects. The average amounts managed by the NGO Centre is more than 40 000 Euro per year (mainly through solicited/ competitive grants). The average number of projects managed by its team is 4-5 projects per year. The NGO is member of: Bulgarian Network for Social Services, Regional network "Police Close to the Minorities", National network "Police close to the Society". In the summer of 2006 the organization becomes a member of Civic Coalition for Sustainable Use of the EU Funds in Bulgaria. Since 2005 NGO Centre Razgrad is a member of the Bulgarian Association of Social Enterprises.

Since 2000, Open Door Centre Association, Pleven has implemented over 30 projects. In the last two years the organization manages between 5 and 7 projects per year. The organization is one of the few in the country to have a long-term program for self-financing through its own Social Enterprise. The annual turnover of Open Door Centre is about € 40 000.

4.2. What is the experience of your organisation and your partner(s) of the issues to be addressed?

NGO Centre Razgrad is the only organization in NE region implementing civic court watch. Up to date the organization has successfully managed and implemented 4 projects with local and regional impact for civic court watch: <http://court.ngo-rz.org>. The NGO has a unique six-year experience for work with the local police. In the period 1999 – 2005 the organization has implemented five projects for building capacity of the local police structures: <http://polce.ngo-rz.org>.

The two partner organizations have experience in different areas that would successfully complement each other. Their potential interaction will significantly contribute to the launch of a successful public-private partnership between the judiciary and civil society in the three strategic target regions: North-Central, North-Eastern and South-Central.