

Dear representatives of the social economy and civil society organizations in the Balkans,

We would like to thank you for your participation in today's Thematic Workshop on Promoting Co-operation and Networking between Social Economy and Civil Society Organizations in the Balkans.

As we already discussed during the Forum's sessions, the services of the Ministry for Macedonia-Thrace have set up a Master Plan for the period 2019-2025. Its main objectives are to strengthen transnational co-operation for sustainable co-development in the Balkans, to exploit our regions' and countries' comparative advantages and to transform them into competitive advantages, aiming at a Europe and a world of fair, democratic and equitable cooperation through:

- 1) The annual organization of the Balkan Programming Forum in Thessaloniki. This year's successful event proves that it is a necessity for the development of a substantial public, programmatic and interdisciplinary dialogue on the conditions for co-development of the wider Balkan region and South East Europe;
- 2) The creation and activation of a European Groupings for Territorial Cooperation in which collective organizations from the entrepreneurial and innovation sectors in the Balkans will participate.

The promotion of all the necessary actions for the modernization and further development of business, transport, industrial, technological and energy infrastructures and networks is a prerequisite both for the economic convergence of the regions and countries of the Balkans and for the promotion of transnational cooperation on entrepreneurship and innovation.

- 3) The creation of a Forum -a network of social economy actors and civil society organizations- that will help to make the case of inter-Balkan cooperation. To that end the strong will of social, self-governmental and public institutions is needed in order to establish the right terms for cooperative actions among all institutions on local, regional, national and cross-Balkan organizations.

The fields for developing collaborative actions in the sector of the social economy and civil society are many:

We are inter-connected by the rich environmental biodiversity of the mountains, plains, lakes, rivers and seas of the Balkans, a large part of which is protected either by the European institutional framework of the Natura 2000 and by Directive 60/2000 on water management for the countries that are members of the EU, the Ramsar international treaty for all Balkan countries, or the Paris International Convention for the Prevention of Climate Change of 2015.

We are inter-connected by the long-standing historical tradition of the Balkan countries in the production and trading of PDO/ PGI/ PGI quality products and foods that have as their basis the rich biodiversity and their traditional way of production. These products, either consumed by the local population and tourists or exported through international trade, are not just commodities. They transfer the biodiversity, local customs, history, culture and the way of production and consumption of their local societies, and should therefore be protected as public goods.

We are inter-connected by the rich architectural and cultural heritage of the hundreds of traditional and historical settlements and the thousands of traditional buildings of the historical centers of the Balkan cities, which are protected by international treaties (1972 Paris Convention, Amsterdam Declaration 1975, Granada Convention 1985 and UNESCO texts).

We are inter-connected by the common need for a peaceful and creative co-existence of our peoples to address the challenges of social exclusion of the unemployed, of people with disabilities, migrants and refugees.

We can promote policies and sustainable development programmes in the Balkans, as long as we create the necessary "social capital of trust" of the people and institutions through equal and mutually beneficial partnerships.

We are working to take advantage as partners of:

- The European Structural Funds programmes of the current and new (2021-2027) programming periods (Regional Development Fund, Agricultural Fund, Social Fund, Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance for candidate countries);
- The transnational (BalkanMed, Adriatic, MED ENI, Black Sea) and cross-border Interreg Programmes among the 12 Balkan countries;
(Especially the BalkanMed Programme, which was established through a bottom-up approach, has sought to identify potential functional areas for regional cooperation and act as a substantial “convening power” to bring together the relevant actors to develop and begin implementation of a coherent strategy in the Balkan peninsula. It is of great importance for all regions and countries in the wider area to continue its efforts. The BalkanMed area has a joint historical past that spans through centuries. It is a unified and functional geographical area with uninterrupted, dense and two-way flows of people, goods and services in the fields of economy, tourism and culture. The common geography of the countries in the region leaves no room for anything but a multifaceted strategic cooperation to address environmental and developmental challenges and risks).
- The National and regional Programmes of the Balkan countries.
The Hellenic Ministry of Interior (Sector of Macedonia & Thrace) has been developing programs with open public invitations and objective criteria for selecting funding actions such as juvenile actions, actions for people with disabilities and sensitive social groups. At the same time it is planning to activate in the immediate future programmes for collective promotion of traditional PDOs / PGI products and a specific Balkan Networking Programme for local products’, environmental, cultural and social solidarity organizations.

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