STRONGER ROOTS

CSO Networks Engaging Divergent Stakeholders and Interconnecting Fragmented Societies

The Concept and Impact of Network Transversal Collaboration

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Executive Summary

Bridging gaps between various interests, approaches and views in society is a challenge as acute as ever. It is even more urgent in countries of Central and Eastern Europe that have wrestled with the polarizing effects of the rising far right, authoritarianism and populism[1]. These political streams feed on and further aggravate societal fragmentation, which tends to undermine not just civic space, but also human rights, other foundational values and the democratic framework of European civilization itself.

To strengthen the roots and ties of civil society in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, Open Society Fund Prague, Glopolis, Open Society Foundation Bratislava and NIOK Foundation piloted the Stronger Roots Program in 2019-2022. The program has two pillars: social base building for civil society organizations (CSOs) and transversal collaboration for CSO networks. Social base building helps CSOs expand communities of donors and supporters, volunteers and partners. Network transversal collaboration helps CSO networks engage divergent stakeholder groups.[2]

This publication outlines the network transversal collaboration concept, methodology and impacts observed in the pilot program. It is intended for a wider audience of leaders, strategists, communication officers and donors interested in practical ways that CSOs can build bridges for more inclusive, open and collaborative societies.

The network transversal collaboration concept has already proven useful to the CSO networks from Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic who participated in the 2019–2022 pilot program. It has guided them in exploring connections with potential new members inside their networks and/or partners outside their networks stemming from their stakeholders with divergent perspectives. Some were able to involve members from groups they had previously not worked with (e.g. an environmental network invited youth and religious groups to join, a democracy protection network reached out to conservative groups). Others forged partnerships with key institutions in their environment despite stark differences in worldviews and working styles (e.g. a network aiming to improve prison conditions worked with the governmental prison service to create online communication options for prisoners).

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1   More-Hollerweger, Eva – Bogorin, Flavia-Elvira – Litofcenko, Julia – Meyer, Michael Civil (eds., 2019):
     Society in Central and Eastern Europe: Monitoring 2019, ERSTE Stiftung.
     https://philea.issuelab.org/resources/35585/35585.pdf ;

     Hummel, S., Pfirter, L., Roth, J., & Strachwitz, R. G. (2020). Understanding Civil Society in Europe:
     A Foundation for International Cooperation. IFA: Stuttgart, pp. 71–78.
     https://doi.org/10.17901/AKBP1.12.2020 ;

     Sikk, Allan (2022): Regional Report East-Central and Southeast Europe Stuck in Reverse. Bertelsmann
     Shifting.
     https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/global/BTI_2022_Regional_Report_
     ECSE.pdf;

     Przybylski, Wojciech – Jarończyk, Kamil (2021): Towards 3SI Civil Society Forum. Visegrad Insight, pp. 14
     https://visegradinsight.eu/app/uploads/2021/07/Visegrad-Insight_18_2021-3SI-2025.pdf

2   Stakeholders include both potential/new members of the network (internal stakeholders) and partners
     to the network (external stakeholders). When speaking of both internal and external stakeholders, we use the
     term stakeholder groups. Otherwise we specify either a new member or partner.

These inclusive and collaborative approaches challenged networks to take on new ways of working that make it possible to engage with people and organizations which have very different experiences, opinions or modes of operation. The networks modified their organizational processes (e.g. needs assessment, communication and even decision making), developed new skills (such as deeper listening and facilitation) and adopted new attitudes (such as increased empathy, appreciation or self-reflection). The program evaluation indicates that this type of internal transformation makes a network more effective and resilient.

Greater resilience is evident in the acquisition of new allies and other resources, in greater recognition by other actors and an increased capability to adapt to others and/or the broader context. Greater efficacy is seen in the achievement of strategic objectives, especially those that can only be achieved with others. This increased resilience and efficacy resulted in more energy and a stronger commitment to deepen transversal collaboration. We believe the program also contributes to reducing fragmentation in society, although this aspect is hard to measure and only relevant over a longer period of time if the program is massively scaled up.

 The hardest but perhaps most exciting aspect of impact measurement is the quality of transformative change. In the 2019–2022 pilot program, we found that shifts of mindset, mirrored by the language that is used, deserve heightened attention. We saw a broadening of values, perspective and attitudes in individual as well as institutional minds. This type of shift, in our view, holds the key to addressing the cultural wars we have been witnessing in the past decade all over the West. We believe that a collaborative attitude, when adopted by other networks, the bulk of the civil society sector and many stakeholders, can be a key element in finding solutions to challenges or tensions in a society on a larger scale and over the longer term. The transversal collaboration methodology may shed light on a concrete path for networks as well as other entities in this tricky but meaningful arena.

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1/ Introduction

This publication introduces network transversal collaboration, defined as strategic engagement of divergent stakeholders to further public interest goals. It is intended for leaders, strategists, communication officers and donors interested in practical ways that CSOs and their networks can respond, gradually and systemically, to the **challenges of cultural change** or cultural conflicts in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and beyond. It is complemented by a [guide](#) that provides an overview of best practices and recommendations related to network transversal collaboration.

This publication grew out of the Stronger Roots Program, which is operated by Open Society Fund Prague, Glopolis, Open Society Foundation Bratislava and NIOK Foundation. The program was piloted in 2019–2022 in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, and seeks to **strengthen the roots and ties of civil society**. The aim is to support more resilient – i.e. more stable, legitimate and proficient – civil society organizations and networks that are effective in addressing a range of societal challenges. Stronger CSOs are instrumental to achieving public interest goals, as well as essential for democracy at large.

The program strengthens civil sector resilience and efficacy through two pillars. This publication focuses on the pillar of building the membership and partnerships of CSO networks – a key, but somewhat overlooked component of CSO work – through **network transversal collaboration**, a concept developed by Glopolis as part of the Stronger Roots pilot program. The other pillar of the program focuses on [social base (constituency) building](#) for CSOs.

During the 2019–2022 pilot program, Glopolis aided 9 CSO networks in their efforts to engage divergent stakeholders. After these three years of research, development, guidance and deeper reflection, we – as members of the Glopolis team – are able to offer a more evidenced description of why society needs a more collaborative approach, how we have blazed the trail with CSO networks and the **results** of the program's financial, expert and peer support **in 9 different thematic, professional or political contexts**.

While far from claiming a resounding impact of this **first, experimental phase** of a new program, this publication elaborates on three main avenues of results observed so far. In conjunction with the other members of the Stronger Roots consortium, as we enter the program's second phase we would like to take this publication as an opportunity to share learning so far and invite other CSOs, their networks, partners and experts to work together on collaborative methodologies and their practical implementation.

We believe that increased collaboration with diverse, and especially divergent, stakeholders inside and outside CSO networks has the potential to not only **transform** many civil society actors towards greater efficacy and resilience, but also contribute to reversing the trend of fragmented and polarized societies.

1.1 The Context: Fragmentation Shrinks Civic Space

The Stronger Roots program was developed in the fall of 2018 in the wake of attacks on civil society in the whole CEE. These attacks strongly correlated with the waves of migration into Europe in 2015–2016 and were more politicized in the CEE than in the EU–15 countries[3]. Advocacy CSOs, human rights and environmental activists and democracy and government watchdogs met with media and political backlash and efforts to **undermine their legitimacy**[4]. These attacks then spread more broadly to the civil society sector, often taking on a personal or criminal dimension. They resulted in restrictions on CSO participation in public decision making, hostile regulation of CSO operations and more dramatic cuts in CSO public funding[5], especially for certain groups of "political" CSO.

What began as a political tool of populist, ultra-conservative governments and extremist political parties gradually affected **broader media and public perceptions** of the civic sector. A veil of suspicion was cast over civil society which made it difficult for publicly active CSOs to (re)gain respect and trust and support for their advocacy objectives. This was layered upon **earlier deeper criticism of CSOs** that emphasized their insufficient and incomprehensible communication with their constituencies, dependence on government or EU funding and perceived detachment from the lived experience of some segments of the population.

Alongside this **perceived elitism of CSOs,** recent studies point out that a large minority or even the majority of the population in some CEE countries **distrust CSOs promoting more substantial changes to cultural norms** or habits[6]. Some politicians are quick to fuel this distrust by harnessing emotions and discomfort that some citizens experience around cultural change. Parallel to this cultural challenge, many citizens feel their sense of security unraveling in the face of rapid technological and economic changes and the sheer diversity and complexity of life in the 21st century. This complex context exposes deeper uncertainties, anxieties and **identity crises**.[7]

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3   More-Hollerweger, Eva – Bogorin, Flavia-Elvira – Litofcenko, Julia – Meyer, Michael Civil (eds., 2019): Society in Central and Eastern Europe: Monitoring 2019, ERSTE Stiftung, pp. 7. https://philea.issuelab.org/resources/35585/35585.pdf

4   Novakova, Nataliya (2020): Civil Society in Central Europe: Threats and Ways Forward. German Marshal Fund, pp. 4. https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/Novakova%2520-%2520Civil%2520Society%2520Central%2520Europe%2520-%252012%2520October_Final.pdf

5   Hummel, S., Pfirter, L., Roth, J., & Strachwitz, R. G. (2020). Understanding Civil Society in Europe: A Foundation for International Cooperation. IFA: Stuttgart, pp. 75–77. https://doi.org/10.17901/AKBP1.12.2020

Meyer, M. – Moder, C. – Neumayr, M. et al. (2020) Civil Society and Its Institutional Context in CEE. Voluntas 31, 811–827. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-019-00106-7

6   Glopolis, *Most NGOs in the Czech Republic have more support than they seem to have.* https://www.glopolis.org/site/assets/files/1287/english_version_of_summary_of_neon_research-1.pdf

7   Fukuyama, Francis (2018): *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. New York

Intensifying cultural conflicts have eroded understanding, respect and trust between and among opposing segments of society as well as society's ability as a whole to sustain common ground and take collective action in disputed areas. Societies are **polarized** about hyped topics of public debate such as migration, pandemics, Green Deal or the war in Ukraine. They are also **fragmented** along a range of other fault lines – urban-rural, generational or sectoral – which, though less hyped or ideological[8], can be divisive nonetheless. The **deliberate efforts** of various forces inside and outside the West to take advantage of cultural rifts to further destabilize or even manipulate significant segments of our societies make the situation even more fragile. The "anxious middle" can be swayed in either direction in the next election or issue: closer to mutual respect, solidarity and collaboration or closer to fear, isolation and hatred (or outright violence) in yet more and more societal "bubbles"[9].

Yet many recent and practical examples from different countries (such as the transition from apartheid or communist regimes to democracy) document that more **open and participative approaches to complex challenges** are the way – and maybe the only way – forward that allows **bridging of deep gaps and creation of sustainable new realities**.[10]

For CSOs, this means being more strongly **rooted in society**, reaching out to existing audiences and new diverse stakeholders, building networks and increasing the number of actors involved in addressing societal challenges. This often requires a change in CSO organizational culture and mindset, i.e. **internal (and indeed inner) changes** that include adapting organizational processes and skills as well as shifting perspectives and values.

One of the most notable challenges in increasing the resilience of civil society – and one where CSOs can have an impact in any political, professional, geographical or thematic setting – is related to **personal mindsets and capabilities to shift them**: to what extent are representatives of the CSO sector willing to, and capable of, increasing the understanding and even the acceptance of different and in particular diverging views, approaches or interests around pertinent issues? And can they actually incorporate these differences more organically into **how they operate**: how they set objectives, design the process of change they want to see, communicate topics and assess and learn from the outcomes?

1.2   The Program: Stronger Roots, Stronger Ties for Civil Society

With this in mind, Open Society Fund Prague, Glopolis, Open Society Foundation Bratislava and NIOK Foundation created a consortium and piloted the Stronger Roots Program

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8   Buchtík, Martin et al. (2021): Jedna společnost: různé světy *("One Society. Different Worlds")*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

9   Cloet, Q. (2020): Civil society Futures in Central Europe. Visegrad Insight. https://visegradinsight.eu/app/uploads/2020/06/Civil-Society-Futures-in-Central-Europe-DemocraCE-European-Futures-Report-III.pdf

10   Kahane, Adam (2004): *Solving Tough Problems - An Open Way of Talking, Listening and Creating New Realities*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., San Francisco

in 2019–2022 to strengthen the roots and ties of civil society in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. The program aims to increase the **efficacy and resilience** of CSOs and their networks, including smaller and more remote CSOs, and embed them in the communities and societies in which they operate.

The program intensively empowers and builds the capacities of both individual CSOs and CSO networks through a combination of **financial, expert and peer support**. There are two pillars: social base (constituency) building, which helps CSOs create stronger communities and networks of supporters, donors, volunteers and partners, and network transversal collaboration, which helps CSO networks reach out to new or more rather divergent stakeholder groups or engage them more deeply.

The program presents a long-term investment in stronger, more resilient:

- **CSOs** (by making grantees more accountable, sustainable and impactful),

- **civil society** (by increasing participation in public affairs and creating a more supportive environment for civil society), and

- **society as a whole** (becoming more open, inter-connected and collaborative by building bridges between divergent views and groups).

The Stronger Roots Program is unusual in the CEE due to its focus on:

- **deeper transformation** of organizational processes and mindsets to consciously tackle societal fragmentation and polarization

- **long-term capacity development** through a combination of funding, expert training and consultations, peer support and experience sharing

- a flexible **tailor-made and partner-like** approach to grantees

- universal **applicability** of the concept to CSOs or networks, local to national, across various topics and types of CSO missions

- universal **applicability** in **different** political, cultural, geographical or professional **settings**

- **low administrative workload** for grantees

To our knowledge, strengthening the roots of organizations and networks has been a rather **rare strategy among grant makers** in the CEE region. EU and other programmes usually support advocacy, watchdog, service provision, etc. and/or specific themes, but not the internal development of the organizations or networks as such. Focusing on long-term organizational development, effective outreach and inner change, the Stronger Roots Program innovatively complements thematic funding strategies and can also multiply their impact.

Finally, the Stronger Roots Program enhances experience sharing and networking not only among organizations and networks in a single country, but also **across borders**, fostering understanding, solidarity and effective cross-fertilization and enabling the development of more universal methodologies.

2/ The Concept: Network Transversal Collaboration

2.1 Defining CSO Networks and Their Challenges in the CEE

Networks in civil society act as a **natural bridge** between individual and collective action efforts, on a local, regional, national, EU or even global level. Networks provide shared space for access to information, mutual support and more effective responses to joint challenges in given areas that particularly benefit more fragile or marginalized CSOs such as small, remote or rural CSOs. For the purposes of the Stronger Roots program, we have defined CSO networks as civil society structures that **aggregate the common interests** of multiple organizations, which:

- have **various types of shared goals** and/or functions (advocacy, professional development, capacity building, etc.)

- have either a **formal** legal status **or** convene as an **informal** grouping, professional or spontaneous initiatives

- use **various terms to describe themselves** (such as platforms, umbrellas, coalitions, initiatives, federations, working groups and other network-like organizations)

- work at local, regional and/or national level

While each network faces a different political, socio-economic, cultural or professional context and different mixtures of interests or approaches among its members and/or stakeholders, they all face similar challenges internally as well as in external outreach.

During the program's initial phase we conducted **mapping** studies and interviews among CSO networks in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia to gather baseline data. We learned that these CEE CSO networks often lack the capacity to **enhance strategic processes** such as problem analysis, planning, coordination and learning based on evaluation and experience. Unacknowledged by the outside world, they often fall short of reaching their potential or fail to acquire new members, partners or donors. Even networks which do have processes and a clear strategy in place often **lack the ambition,** capacities or skills to effectively engage with other (or more) relevant stakeholders in exchange of information, basic coordination, let alone

longer-term complex collaborative processes needed to effectively and sustainably tackle societal challenges. According to focus groups, interviews and evaluation reports from two dozen CSO networks, the extent and quality of relationships with public officials, politicians, businesses or other civil society groups is insufficient. Network leaders told us that they lack the **capacities and skills** to communicate about common issues, analyze and respond to stakeholders' needs as well as facilitate sustained dialogue and coordinated, collaborative action.

Based on this research, we developed a concept of transversal collaboration, outlined a theory of change with evaluation framework and designed a specific program to support such a collaborative action among CEE CSO networks.

2.2 How the Program Works in a Nutshell

Network transversal collaboration means CSO networks strategically engaging with stakeholder groups of diverging approaches, interests and/or worldviews.

In practice, the program supports CSO networks to:

- first clarify goals for external engagement among members

- listen to stakeholders and analyze their views, needs and lived experiences

- approach new different members and begin to involve them (more) in network activities, processes and/or governance and/or further relationships with divergent external stakeholders (e.g. government agencies, companies, municipalities, church organizations, ethnic minorities)

- expand their own understanding and capacity to work with divergent views, approaches or interests (throughout the process)

As a result, CSO networks:

- understand the environment and potential new members', partners' or other stakeholders' foundations, needs and limitations, and begin to address them more systematically

- build/improve relationships with new potential new members, partners or other stakeholders and reflect on their own foundations, needs and limitations

- identify and develop new skills (e.g. considerate communication, deep listening and facilitation)

- consolidate internal strategies and design more inclusive processes (analysis, planning, evaluation learning, etc.)

- perceive and begin to adopt collaborative attitudes (such as increased empathy, appreciation or self-reflection)

This is **transformative work that increases networks' efficacy and resilience**. Engaging constructively with stakeholders around a topic that the CSO network focuses on increases the chance of finding a more complex and lasting – i.e., effective and sustainable – solution. The new resources (e.g. new members and/or partnerships with divergent stakeholders), skills, attitudes, as well as a more nuanced understanding of the environment that develop along the way make a network more capable of dealing and adapting to challenges – i.e. more resilient.

Looking a bit deeper, however, at the inner impact of transversal collaboration (we also call it the "inpact"[11]), we perceive a **shift in mindset: in perspectives, attitudes and values**: from a closed, past or inward-looking to a more open, future- and outward looking worldview by both CSO networks as well as the various constituencies and stakeholders the CSOs need to work with.

2.3   Theory of Inner and Outer Change

The theory of change of the program is that by practicing transversal collaboration the CSO networks undergo inner and outer changes that increase their efficacy and resilience. The **inner changes** involve a shift in their organizational practices, skills and attitudes, while the outer changes relate to a more effective response to the societal challenges the CSO networks focus on.

Society changes as a result of the combined strategic changes achieved by various dialogue, advocacy, negotiation and other efforts, many of them including or even led by CSOs. More systemic or durable impacts (such as collective impact)[12], however, usually happen as a result of collaborative efforts of **a more diverse set of actors**. The capability of CSO networks, organizations and individuals to understand the nature of any given societal challenge, find a common denominator with key (diverse) stakeholders about ways of tackling the challenge and adapt their actions enable them to effectively play their part in a multistakeholder process leading to an improvement.

We believe that both the CSO network's inner and outer changes are important on this path and that they are interlinked. The efficacy of a network's capability to collaborate is demonstrated through concrete results in a particular context (such as changed legislation, implemented proposals, joint sectoral strategies, etc.). If these outer changes are to be sustainable and replicable, then the inner **capability to collaborate** needs to be systematically strengthened.

The **combined** longer-term impact of the transversal collaboration pillar in the Stronger Roots Program is a matter of the program's **duration, outreach and scale**. The more various CSO networks (their boards, member organizations, allies and constituencies both on individual and institutional levels) undergo similar changes in their mindsets across various CSO themes and can reproduce positive outer changes in the given environment over time, the more impact the program can have on the **CSO sector**. The more their behavior and effects of collaboration are convincing and inspire such inner changes in diverse stakeholders groups (business, government,

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11   An idea first crafted and discussed at a Porticus seminar for its grantees in Vienna in February 2019.

12   see for instance at: https://collectiveimpactforum.org/

etc.) they interact with, the more mindsets can shift towards a collaborative approach for the critical mass of the **society's leadership**. Finally, the more countries are involved in such collaborative efforts, the more we can tame the negative effects of societal fragmentation and polarization in the Visegrad and CEE **region** (or beyond).

Figure 1: Theory of Change - Overview

INPUTS Program Level	OUTPUTS Networks Leadership Level	OUTCOMES Entire Networks & Stakeholders Level	LONG TERM IMPACT Society Level
• Operational and Capacity Building Funding • Transversal Collaboration Concept, Training & Consultations • Peer Exchange & Self-Reflection	• Inclusive Organizational Practices • Engagement & Relationships (with Stakeholders) • Collaborative Skills • Context Understanding • Engagement & Relationship	• Collaborative Attitudes & Processes • Integrated, Multi Stakeholder Strategies • Open, Collaborative Mindsets	• More Effective Response to Societal Challenges • Stronger, More Resilient Civil Society • More (Inter) Connected, Collaborative Society

Steps of Transversal Collaboration

Transversal collaboration – i.e. the process by which a CSO network reaches out to and engages diverse (or outright divergent) stakeholder groups to achieve its strategic goals within broader societal challenges – consists of **several activities**. They may take place one after another or happen simultaneously – in smaller or larger feedback loops of learning and action (see also Figure 8)

First, the network usually needs to review its strategy and internal processes and make sure it has **clear goals and consensus** among current membership about which stakeholder or potential member groups are to be approached. For example, some members may view particular stakeholder groups as too divergent to approach if the gap between values, approaches or interests is extremely wide.

Once consensus has been reached on goals and stakeholder groups, network representatives approach potential new members or partners from among the key stakeholders in an effort to find out more about their positions and thinking, needs, interests and limitations. This is about **listening** – through interviews, surveys, focus groups or a combination of activities. What they learn shapes the approach they take to the stakeholder group. For example, if a network learns

that a stakeholder has a long and highly stratified institutional decision-making process, it will create an engagement approach that allows enough time for approval by the relevant executives.

Next, the network invites the given potential stakeholders to take part in its activities in some way. This is about opening the space in and around the network to new members or partners, and building new, longer-term relationships with stakeholder groups such as government administration, local authorities, business associations or other civil society groups (e.g. church groups). These groups can either become new members of the network or partners in collective (impact) efforts. This is the actual **outreach**. All of these steps along with experiences and recommendations from the networks involved in the program, including tips for effective meeting and what to do if you run into hiccups, are summarized in our other publication [How to Engage with Divergent Stakeholders: Experiences and Recommendations for CSO Networks](#).

The outreach, in turn, typically leads the network to adjust or expand its activities, practices or even processes and strategies, and as such can be quite **a transformative process.** It often requires and/or results in a new approach to identifying and implementing the CSO network's collective goals and/or a new perception of its role or identity. Some networks may, for instance, redefine strategic goals, involve stakeholders much more closely in decision-making or move from narrow advocacy towards facilitation of differing views.

The process as a whole may be described as a gradual opening up to positions, views, and/or experiences outside of the existing network membership. A network transversal collaboration project is designed to **initiate and/or support** such transformation alongside the support for the network's strategic goals.

2.5   Program Support

The Stronger Roots program provides the necessary **space and time** for the network team, secretariat and/or the member CSOs to undergo this transformation through a combination of funding, peer exchange and reflection, training and ongoing dialogue with the network project managers.

2.5.1 Funding

CSO networks are provided with a **grant** ranging from € 10,000 – 30,000 to support their transversal collaboration efforts for up to 18 months. The grant provides the network with a basic financial cushion for these processes, which require extra time and energy. Apart from operational funding the grantees also receive a specific amount of money for capacity building.

2.5.2 Specific and tailor-made trainings

Since networks face both shared and specific needs, they can select a joint **training course** or an **expert consultation**, training or other capacity building activity tailor-made to their particular needs. The knowledge and skills typically needed for network collaboration include effective

external communication, meeting and network organization, deep listening and facilitation, personal relationship building, organizational collaboration and learning, and collective impact.

2.5.3 Peer exchange and reflection

Network project leaders meet regularly in national and regional groupings, either all together or in thematic groups (e.g. advocacy vs. public dialogue networks, etc.). In peer **exchange sessions** they share their knowledge and experience, reflect and learn from one another as well as receive feedback, inspiration or other types of peer support. **Monitoring reports** and regular **update calls** with the program managers provide additional opportunities for networks to reflect on the internal and external impacts of their transversal collaboration efforts and make changes accordingly.

2.6 Evaluation Framework: Perspectives, Indicators and Trajectories

2.6.1 Network's and Program's Perspectives, Standard and Adaptive Evaluation

There are **2 main perspectives** that can be used to evaluate the effectiveness and impacts of such a complex, multi level and multi actor program. Rather than distinct alternatives, however, both of these perspectives are important and **complementary**.

From the **networks' perspective,** the programme evaluation assesses to what extent the grant contributed to advancing their long-term causes in a specific (political, cultural, geographic) context, such as reaching a common understanding or agreement on a policy issue. Yet, to achieve this, a number of interim inner and outer changes are needed.

Therefore, the evaluation maps the main short-term, expected and unexpected **changes the grant contributed to**, their interlinkages and also the ways in which the program contributed to each change**.** The changes usually include both external outreach and some sort of internal transformation. They occur in a dynamic flow where feedback from outreach translates into internal adjustments, which then lead to changes in the quantity or quality of engagement with external stakeholders (see also Figure 8).

In the short term, networks can move forward with some activities and acquire certain knowledge and skills. Yet their effect on both collaboration with stakeholders and internal development is only visible over a period of years rather than months. Strategic changes in related long-term causes occur as a result of more coordination and joint activities with more stakeholders. Our experience confirms that as a **collaborative approach** bears fruit, the mindset and culture of a network and its members also shift.

From the **program's – or grantmaker's – perspective**, the evaluation looks at changes at the level of **the whole cohort of grantee networks**. The majority of the **collaborative practices,**

skills and attitudes acquired through the projects which are necessary for effective collaboration with divergent stakeholders are not specific to a given theme or context. They can be used time and again for different strategic goals, in different contexts.

Capturing all these various elements of change for impact assessment and learning requires a flexible approach, working on an on-going basis with existing data and oriented towards action. On top of the standard evaluation approach with a set of indicators the program, but especially the monitoring and evaluation of grantee projects, also uses an **adaptive (development) evaluation.** This more dynamic approach explores processes and relationships (including power) as much as outputs and outcomes. It supports curiosity rather than judgment (just about successes or failures), turns conflict into shared exploration, defensiveness into self-reflection and assumptions into questions. Whenever data is collected, it is analyzed and key actions taken immediately. Final findings were synthetized, shared across the programme stakeholders and reported as lessons learnt.

2.6.2 Evaluation Areas, Questions and Indicators

Our **evaluation framework** for the network transversal collaboration program, therefore, focuses on shorter-term effects, both internal and external, corresponding to the two perspectives (networks' and program's perspective) described above. While the theory of change is structured by the outreach levels (from outputs to outcomes to impact from networks'leaders to whole networks and stakeholders to civil society at large) and mixes inner and outer change, the evaluation framework attempts to distill results inside and outside the networks establishing their scale and extent, plus specific contributions of the program and other influencing factors.

Thus we assess to what extent the program contributed to:

1. networks' progress towards achieving their **strategic goals** (outer change)

2. networks' progress towards **actual collaboration** with divergent stakeholders (outer change)

3. networks developing **collaborative culture and mindset** (inner change)

Evaluation Area	Indicators
1. **network progresses towards its strategic (grant project) goals**	• changes along the paths towards networks' **strategic goals** (as per indicators selected for their supported project) • **specific contributions** of the grant and other influencing factors
2. **network progress towards (closer) collaboration with selected potential new members or partners**	• changes in quantity and quality of new or current **stakeholders approached** (new members or partners acquired) • changes in quantity and quality of **relationships** with stakeholder/s • changes in quantity and quality of **joint activities** with stakeholder/s • **other related changes** • **specific contributions** of the program to the changes above and other influencing factors
3. **network develops their collaborative practices, skills and attitudes**	• changes in the networks' **understanding, perception and reflection** of the topic, relevant context and stakeholders, incl the extent to which networks assess and address the needs of their stakeholder/s • changes in networks' **skills** needed for collaboration with stakeholders • changes in networks' collaborative **practices,** organizational **processes** and overall **strategy** • changes in networks' collaborative **attitudes and values** • **other related changes** • **specific contributions** of the program to the changes above and other influencing factors

2.6.3 Tracking Progress: Engagement and Development Trajectories

We are particularly interested in areas 2) and 3) above: what (outer) progress each network makes in collaborating with stakeholders, and what (inner) changes occur within the network (adjusted processes, new skills, shifts in attitudes). To illustrate these changes we developed **three trajectories**, each looking at a different facet of transversal collaboration:

- Engagement with diverse members inside the network

- Engagement with diverse stakeholders outside the network

- Internal development of the network's culture and mindset

Each of the engagement trajectories progresses towards **more complex inclusion and collaboration**, while the (internal) development trajectory progresses towards **deeper inner change**.

A network needs to be considered on all three trajectories simultaneously or, if the network focuses only on extending membership or only on establishing collaboration with external stakeholders, then on the relevant engagement trajectory and the internal development trajectory. The key point is to determine to what extent higher levels of an **engagement** trajectory correspond to higher levels of a **transformation**, i.e. internal development trajectory, as any shifts in mindset and culture should be reflected in collaborative actions inside and/or outside the network.

It is important to note that each network has a different **starting point** and **aspiration.** For instance, some have not had any prior communication with desired new members or partners and seek dialogue, while others may have already had dialogue and seek partnership. There may be a partnership on a minor issue with a few representatives of the stakeholder group, but still unsatisfactory dialogue with its leadership. Some may want to proceed to higher levels of collaboration with a given stakeholder group while others may prefer to go deeper on the current level.

Each of the three trajectories is rather an index **composite of particular aspects**. For instance, overall collaboration with diverse members inside the network depends on the depth of diverse members' engagement, quantity and quality of outreach to new members and other factors (see end page note 10, 11 and 12 for each trajectory). More importantly, collaboration with one stakeholder group may display characteristics of two or more levels. For a more precise and nuanced assessment, each should be captured on a separate sub trajectory (possibly in a future iteration of the program).

Therefore, the trajectories should not be taken as the ultimate framework for scoring or ranking of networks. In line with the adaptive evaluation approach, these are indicative representations of **potential paths** networks may want to pursue, open to shared exploration and reflection. Each network's starting point, mission and ambition need to be taken into consideration. It makes sense to use relative rather than absolute measures to mark the changes the program brings about, where the program is used to move a network further on the relevant trajectories. Where this is not the case, the trajectories offer simple, proxy tools for deeper reflection and exploration of further development and collaboration possibilities.

Development of Collaboration Inside the Network: Levels of Engagement with Diverse Members[13]

- **Level 1** – **No Real Diversity of Membership** – closed club of like-minded CSOs, not reaching out to more diverse interests, approaches and views to be included among members

- **Level 2** – **Limited Diversity with Passive Membership** – a few diverse members present, but only passively receiving information, fulfilling statutory obligations, but not involved in activities, limited or formal further outreach

- **Level 3** – **Some Diversity, Partially Active** – members which are diverse from more than one aspect (e.g. different size, geographical location, sector or viewpoint) are included in working/coordination bodies, some courting of other members

- **Level 4** – **Divergent Membership, Fully-Engaged** – Diverse members leading workflows and/or other structures, are part of decision-making processes, programmatic outreach

Figure 2: Internal Transversal Collaboration Trajectory

No diversity of membership → Limited Diversity with Passive Membership → Some Diversity with Partially Active Membership → Divergent Membership with Fully-engaged Members

Development of Collaboration Outside the Network: Levels of Engagement with Diverse External Stakeholders[14]

- **Level 1 –** Network does not attempt **any direct interaction** with external stakeholders.

- **Level 2** – Network makes **contact** with the stakeholder, provides information or advocates for a cause and tries to find out more about the stakeholder's interests and needs.

- **Level 3** – Communication moves from one-way information sharing to a **dialogue** with the stakeholder. More frequent, intentional communication often leads to some consensus, even if only around some issues.

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13   Engagement and diversity are the two main axes here, which can be disjunctive. In fact, the more diverse membership the harder it may be for a network to keep all of its members active and engaged to a similar degree. Engagement has both a quantitative aspect (how many members engaged) and a qualitative aspect (how deeply they collaborate).

14   This trajectory also combines a number of axes. It regards how mutual, frequent, continuous (regular/repeated) and encompassing the interaction is and how many and how divergent stakeholders are involved (transversality) on how big an issue (ambition). It is again an ideal typology with the ultimate aspiration nearing the collective impact approach.

- **Level 4** – Network builds on agreement on some of the issues, identifies common denominators and coordinates initial **joint activities** with the stakeholder.

- **Level 5** – Collaboration develops into a **partnership** – multi year collaboration around several streams. Both the network and the stakeholder plan, contribute and evaluate repeatedly or continuously in order to advance their shared interests.

- **Level 6** – Initiated and/or facilitated by the network, multiple, diverse parties agree on a **joint vision and/or long-term strategy** on how to approach a complex problem collectively (possibly joint metrics and/or mechanisms). Their (collective impact) collaboration involves not only joint planning, regular communication and coordination, evaluation but also deeper reflection and joint community building.

Figure 3: External Transversal Collaboration Trajectory

Development of Network's Collaborative Culture and Mindset: Levels of Internal Transformation (individuals, organizations', networks' leadership)[15]

- **Level 1** – **Inside Bubble**: Little effort to step outside the enclosed bubble, deepen understanding of the external environment, key stakeholders and their needs, hesitant to enter into new relationships with others and adjust internal processes, learn new skills and evolve one's own perception and thinking as result of the evolving world around.

- **Level 2** – **Cautious Exploring:** Exploring diverse others, willingness to adjust own analysis of external context, but mostly pragmatic interest in key stakeholders' positions and weaknesses, not their needs, strengthening relations with potential allies, tactical improving of processes and skills, prevailing confrontational perception and thinking.

- **Level 3** – **Occasional Bridging:** Deeper understanding of the legitimate grounds of most stakeholders, changing perception of and attentiveness to their situation and needs, willingness to negotiate and make concessions, to adjust several networks'

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15   Mindset development is clearly the most complex process, hard to depict convincingly and describe universally. Our ideal trajectory touches on a number of factors such as: openness to change and willingness/capacity to learn, depth of insight about and prevailing perception of the world/others, role of ego/own identity vs. the whole in driving motivation. They are both different qualities (which can in fact have different use/value in different contexts) and stages of development/evolution, which, however, is hardly as simple, linear and consistent. The trajectory is inspired by Spiral Dynamics. Of course, these are also more personal rather than institutional qualities that can differ widely from person to person in a network. Thus, it is important what subgroup (secretariat, board, leading vs. regular members, etc.) we are considering.

decision making processes and strategies, build new relationships, learn new skills and adopt collaborative attitudes.

- **Level 4** – **Systematic Integration:** Profound reflection of changing broad context and own role, ongoing adaptation of internal processes, skills and even mission as needed by external environment evolution, systematically connecting all stakeholders' primarily seen as human beings, their needs, values and plans are integral parts of the network's analysis and actions, strategy primarily based on supporting or driving big-picture collective efforts.

Figure 4: Transformation of Network's Culture and Mindset

3/ Indications of Impact from Program Piloting

In this chapter, we provide reflections on the initial results and outcomes of the program's first phase and a probe of what the impacts of this work can be over time.

The main **purpose** of the **evaluation** in the first phase was to adjust the program along the way to increase its effectiveness and impacts. The consortium also wanted to learn how to further develop the methodology of transversal collaboration, more effectively multiply and possibly scale-up the program (into other countries).

As expected, both grantee projects outputs and outcomes as well as overall program's expected results, proposed indicators and monitoring and evaluation processes were **adapted on the way** according to the complex, evolving contexts: the adaptive (developmental) evaluation (see chapter 2.5.1) complemented the standard evaluation tools.

Given that this publication was written in April–June 2022, we focus on **shorter-term effects** and **anticipated longer-term impacts**. In line with the evaluation framework outlined in the previous chapter, we look at the pilot program's impact in three areas, namely to what extent:

1. networks achieved their project goals (chapter 3.2)

2. networks progressed towards collaboration with selected divergent stakeholders (chapter 3.3)

3. networks enhanced cognition, practices and skills related to transversal collaboration (chapter 3.4)

3.1 Networks in the Pilot Program

In the pilot program, we had networks that vary in size from a dozen to several dozen members. Their members include individuals, organizations and even networks. Some focused on advocacy or multi-stakeholder negotiations around a policy topic such as climate protection, hate crime prevention or remuneration in the audiovisual industry. Governments or municipalities were key stakeholders of these **advocacy networks**.

Other networks aimed to **instigate dialogue** with or between groups in society, i.e. between liberal and conservative groups, urban and rural organizations or younger and older people.

Some of the networks aspired to **facilitate collaboration** between CSOs and business. Quite a number of the networks also combined outreach to two or more of these groups as well as capacity development of their members.

All the networks we worked with in the Stronger Roots program adhered to **democratic principles** and were also encouraged to include small, grassroot and remote members, especially from under-served regions.

3.2 Strategic Results of Networks' Projects

The goals of network projects implemented within the pilot program ranged from broadening and diversifying networks; fostering dialogue, shared goal-setting and collaboration among partners; to taking joint steps in the grantee network's interest area (e.g. policy advocacy, improving the environment or services for particular target groups). All of the networks met their **project goals** fully or partially. There was a higher level of fulfillment of goals that centered around a very concrete common task, such as influencing policy, legislation or creating a specific tool such as a handbook; aimed to build cooperation or trust at an unspecified level; or sought to develop a strategy for collaboration. Goals that require more intensive collaboration, such as developing a joint vision or creating a network including external partners, were met partially. In some cases, the network project goal was only partially achieved due to obstacles that arose unexpectedly (e.g. attempts at dialogue among network members uncovered deep-seated differences of opinion).

3.3 Progress Towards Collaboration with Stakeholder Groups

Each network in the pilot program experienced changes in its **engagement with divergent stakeholders inside and/or outside** the network. Five networks reached a fairly advanced level of stakeholder engagement, and three networks welcomed more members with divergent views.

All nine networks reported that steps taken towards collaboration helped them fulfill their **strategic goals.** Some saw that broadening and/or diversifying their networks increased the potential to achieve network goals. Some created space for dialogue among stakeholders, which they consider the basis for developing suitable solutions. One noted that collaboration and communication improved between networks, thus enabling more effective advocacy, and another reported that the project contributed to the strategic goal of increasing transparency and building trust between actors.

3.3.1 Inside the Networks: Strengthening Memberships

Networks focusing on collaboration inside (i.e. strengthened membership) saw either new members joining the network or existing members becoming more engaged in network

activities. In some cases both occurred. In fact, most networks (no matter whether focusing on internal or external collaboration) had been facing a gap between a core group of active members and the more passive rest or another external group active in their field.

Therefore, the objective was often to first **include** the more distant (i.e. smaller, rural or remote) organizations, regardless of whether they are formal existing or potential new members, and then **engage** them in the network's activities. Some networks also modified their strategies to approach partners and acquire new members by e.g.:

- switching from a purely tailored membership approach to a stratified approach.

- shifting from persuading potential members to offering involvement – in line with a new emphasis on humility in growing the network.

The Stronger Roots projects helped the networks increase their visibility and create new energy to engage members in their causes. Closer collaboration introduced during the project (often hand in hand with increased transparency) enhanced trust, **respect** among networks' members and their representatives (secretariats), including those with different views, as well as the **motivation** to work together on the network's strategic objectives.

Members with diverse views became involved by e.g.:

- joining new working groups

- starting to collaborate with other members

- being added to coordination or decision-making bodies

- becoming directly involved in strategic debates or key decisions that matter to all

- being invited to co-organize the network`s events

Figure 5 - Progress in Engagement with Diverse Members

CSO NETWORKS ENGAGING DIVERGENT STAKEHOLDERS AND INTERCONNECTING FRAGMENTED SOCIETIES
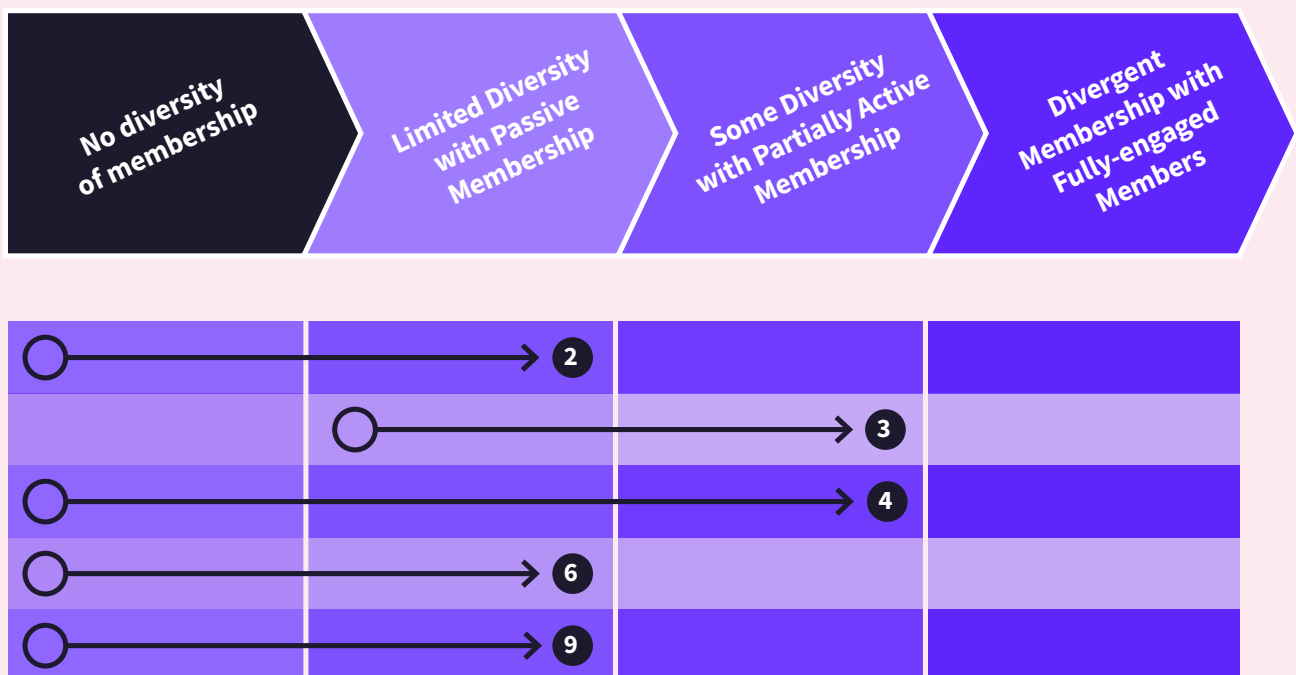
Figure 5 shows the extent to which the networks were able to engage with new or passive members. Each numbered dot refers to one project and shows the degree of engagement/collaboration achieved.

3.3.2 Outside the Networks: Strengthening Partnerships

Before the Stronger Roots program, the vast majority of networks that focused on collaboration with **external stakeholders** had been engaged in just one-way communication with the selected stakeholders. Only one network reported that it had already been engaged in dialogue. Over the 16 months, all of these networks strengthened their engagement with external stakeholders. Moving 1 step from left to right on the trajectory below[16] networks **started a dialogue, coordination or collaboration on joint projects** with their partners. Two networks aspire to create a joint strategy or vision with the stakeholders in the future, while others aim at coordination, joint activities or partnership.

Figure 6 - Progress in Engagement with External Stakeholders
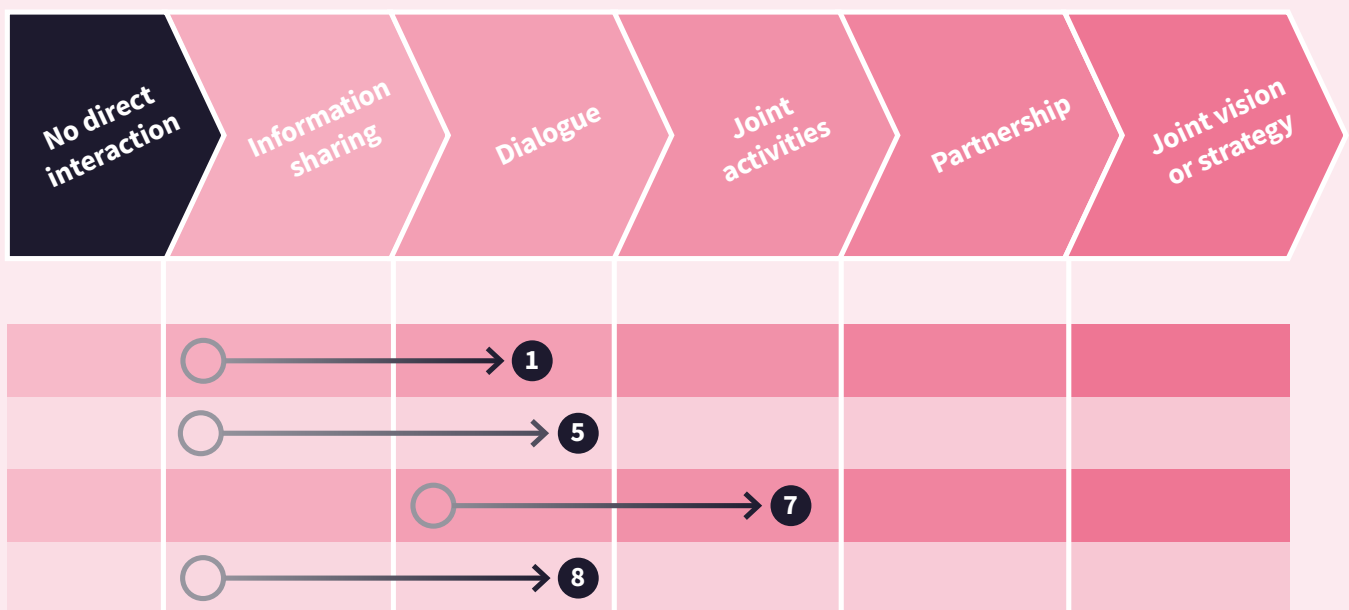
Figure 6 shows the extent to which the networks were able to engage with divergent stakeholders. Each numbered dot refers to one project and shows the degree of engagement/collaboration achieved.

Nevertheless, **the degree of transversality, mutuality or continuity** of the engagement achieved varied. For example, in some cases, joint projects were launched with some new groups outside the network, but not with those with divergent views. In another case, a network found the new partnership unequal and willingness to cooperate limited to the areas of interest of the partner. Yet another network experienced a shift from ad hoc to continuous collaboration. Three networks realized midway that their goals for outside collaboration were **too ambitious** and scaled down the goal.

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16   The scale was developed by the authors of this report per narrative reports and focus groups. The first 3–4 steps may be considered as pre-collaboration. Changes are complex and uneven in transversal collaboration. In the pilot program they differed by actor and even among representatives of each actor; thus the scale should be used with caution (to facilitate reflection and planning, not to "measure" success).

3.4 Internal Development: Enhancing Cognition, Practices and Skills

Progress in engaging new members or external stakeholders was closely linked to internal network changes. As networks gradually learned more about their potential members or external stakeholders, they adjusted their activities, strategies and/or decision-making bodies to reflect what they had learned. It was an iterative process, in which engagement actions led to internal network adjustments, which then influenced further engagement actions. This process is schematically depicted below as an Internal Development Trajectory in Figure 8.

Figure 7 - Progress in Changing Cognition, Practices and Skills

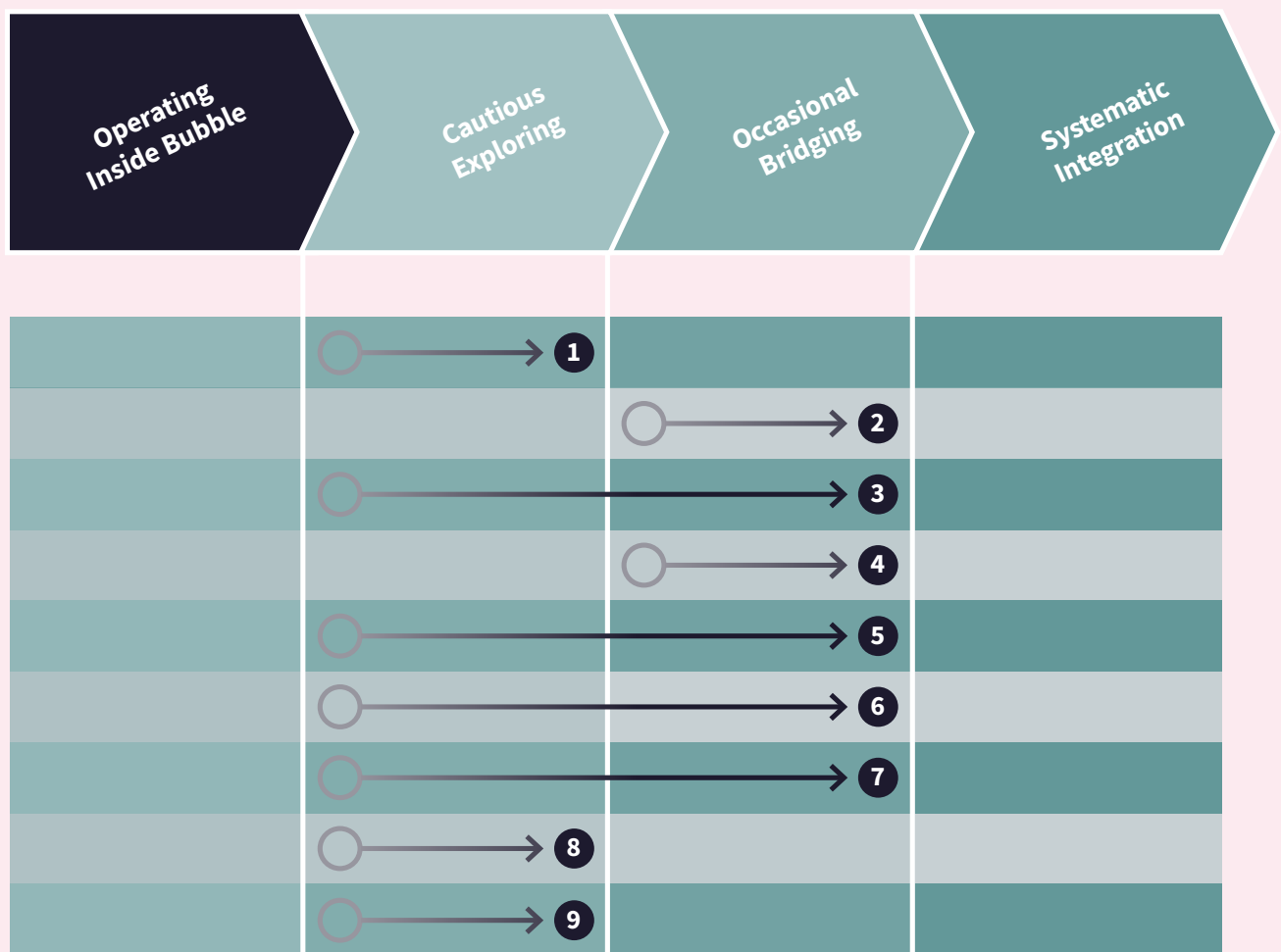*Figure 7 shows the extent to which the networks developed internally in terms of cognition, practices or skills. Each numbered dot refers to one project and shows the progress achieved.*

3.4.1 Understanding Stakeholders

All of the networks carried out **a needs assessment** among external stakeholders or potential members as the first step towards collaboration – something most of them had not ever done

before. All of the networks reported deeper **understanding and reflection of the needs** of members or external groups.

Two-thirds gained **new insights** about the stakeholder groups' issues, positions, but also challenges and/or perceptions. Several said they now **think more deeply** about the respective groups: accepting them more, being more sensitive to their issues, thinking critically about how the network labeled a particular group. Several others discovered that whom they often called target groups were willing or even eager to engage and share their experience.

The networks have also all **reflected** their stakeholder groups' **needs in their work** or plan to do so in the near future for instance by:

- providing requested information to them or more transparency overall

- being ready to respond to their concerns

- aiming at non-confrontational approach, more careful language and framing or focusing on shared values

- reflecting or anticipating their specific needs in communication, policy proposals or advocacy strategy

- organizing more in-person meetings, including them in planning and other activities

- offering new, more flexible forms of membership or partnership

- redesigning existing or introducing new services

While not all of the networks have reflected all needs of all their stakeholders, as a principle, all supported networks are committed now to reflecting the stakeholder needs in their work in the future.

3.4.2 Organizational Practices

Network **organizational practices** include both institutional **structures** such as boards, executive bodies, working groups etc. as well as **processes.** These include needs analysis, planning, monitoring, evaluation, learning as well as internal communication, member support and development, fundraising, rule-setting and strategic and operational decision making.

The networks in the pilot program expanded their understanding of their stakeholder groups and the broader operating environments, and as a result they introduced or planned the following **key changes** to their internal structures and processes:

- formalizing governance structure (e.g. differentiating regular members, voting members, board and coordinator)

- streamlining workflows and data collection

- integrating reflection and planning

- extending coordination, consultation or decision-making bodies to incorporate stakeholder groups more directly in key processes such as strategy development

- introducing new communication strategy or guidelines

- engaging an external facilitator or mediator in an effort to ease tensions

- establishing a paid coordinator for a similar workload / future project.

3.4.3 Collaborative Skills

These adjustments to internal processes usually called for acquiring or refining corresponding skill sets. Alongside assessment and analysis of stakeholder needs, the following skills proved particularly important:

- careful listening and ongoing **reflection** of their perspectives

- identifying and weighing **ways to respond** to stakeholders' needs and perspectives

- **communication** with very different people, both about what we have in common as well as about what divides us, including avoiding jargon or loaded expressions

- **constructive facilitation** of the strategic dialogue and coordinated action, some-times even **mediation** in case of deep disagreements or tensions

- **product/service development** – for the CSOs to be able to offer something useful and meaningful to the partners

- and practical skills such as effective **meeting and network organization**

Networks supported in the pilot program noted new skill development both in the core project teams as well as among representatives of member organizations. These included deep listening and facilitation, personal relationship building and organizational collaboration, i.e. skills covered by training workshops. The most frequently mentioned skill and also most appreciated workshop was **communication**, both internally (communicating with members, facilitating network discussions and mentoring) and externally (negotiating with partners, incorporating the needs of an external stakeholder into communication).

3.5 Deeper Results: Transforming Relationships and Attitudes

The pilot program evaluation was very intense: initial questionnaires, mid-term and final reports and meetings with network leaders, focus groups and selected triangulation were all processed by internal as well as external evaluators. However, a year and a half of interactions with representatives of nine networks can only provide **a glimpse into the potential** a long-term, scaled-up program could have.

Networks' projects combined with expert support, peer sharing, evaluation and reflection hold a promise of a deeper impact, in that most of them seem to have also advanced their capability to effectively **engage with any stakeholder/s on any issue** that might arise.

This **capability** involves more than improved internal processes and structures, refined or newly acquired engagement skills. Or more precisely, the scale, depth, and quality of these internal changes seems to depend on how far perception and thinking evolved in a given network.

 All of the networks changed to some degree. Some changes were more of a **technical** nature (internal changes): streamlining of processes, creation of new working methods, expanding the network's approach from mediation to facilitation or formalizing its structure.

Other networks brought about more **profound** (inner) changes to their strategies, decision-making processes or values. In some cases, representatives of the stakeholder group were engaged in decision-making, strategies were adapted to address stakeholder group issues, and the network incorporated the values of the stakeholder group or confirmed its own.

Two specific categories we show as examples of deeper inner change (Inpact) from the pilot program center around how the CSO networks' **relationship to and with** the stakeholders changed and how their **collaborative attitudes** changed.

3.5.1 Trust and Legitimacy Through Cultivating Relationships

Regular exchange and intense communication with stakeholders brought greater **understanding, legitimacy and trust**, interest, depth and continuity in cooperation or collaboration with key partners. In several projects, relationships among members or partners developed in unanticipated ways. In two projects, efforts to forge partnerships opened up **unexpected potential for collaboration** with specific stakeholder groups (Roma youth groups and people with lived experience from prison) that networks plan on cultivating further. One network was invited to join a new government working group due to the project. Another network became seen as an expert entity and was asked to comment on a new initiative.

In another case, the project unexpectedly strengthened relationships **among the core network members**. In contrast, in another project that had envisioned network members working closely together, the degree of divergence among members turned out to be greater than expected, which formed a formidable barrier to collaboration.

3.5.2 Engagement Attitudes Evolve in Loops

A number of pilot program grantees described how their **thinking on collaboration evolved**. In one project, there was a shift from ad hoc to continuous collaboration – both between the two core networks, and with the business sector and political actors. Better understanding of the stakeholder groups' needs and perspectives helped some network leaders see their issues from a different angle. Even in a case where dispute over strategy led four members to leave the network, long term collaboration and a non-confrontational approach were underscored as key values.

Ultimately, we learned that transversal collaboration (on a network, but also organizational or individual level) brings about some degree of **transformation**. Depending on their ultimate ambition and readiness the process moves people and their structures from enclosed bubbles and basic awareness of others to greater understanding, reflection of, and integration with, the world around them. Each experience of interaction with divergent views triggers reflection, thus altering plans and resulting in a different quantity and/or quality of action.

This **increasing openness** is not necessarily a straightforward or linear process. It can progress in such stages, but also in **multiple loops** whereby moving a step forward to a more complex relationship with external stakeholder/s can lead to pausing, reflecting internally or even stepping back again before next action. The infographics (Figure 8) below attempts to grasp the evolution of both how increasing openness manifests externally and what changes it brings in the mindset.

What is particularly promising vis a vis longer-term societal impact are the shifts in what we call **engagement attitudes**. Representatives of the grantee networks observed them as helpful in moving on towards more complex collaboration. In many cases, their previous approach to partners differed and had to be **consciously developed** in the course of the project. The main engagement attitudes are listed in the bottom right of the Figure 8 and described in more detail in the guide How to Engage with Divergent Stakeholders.

3.6 Impact Over Time: Opening Up For More Connected, Collaborative Societies In The Region?
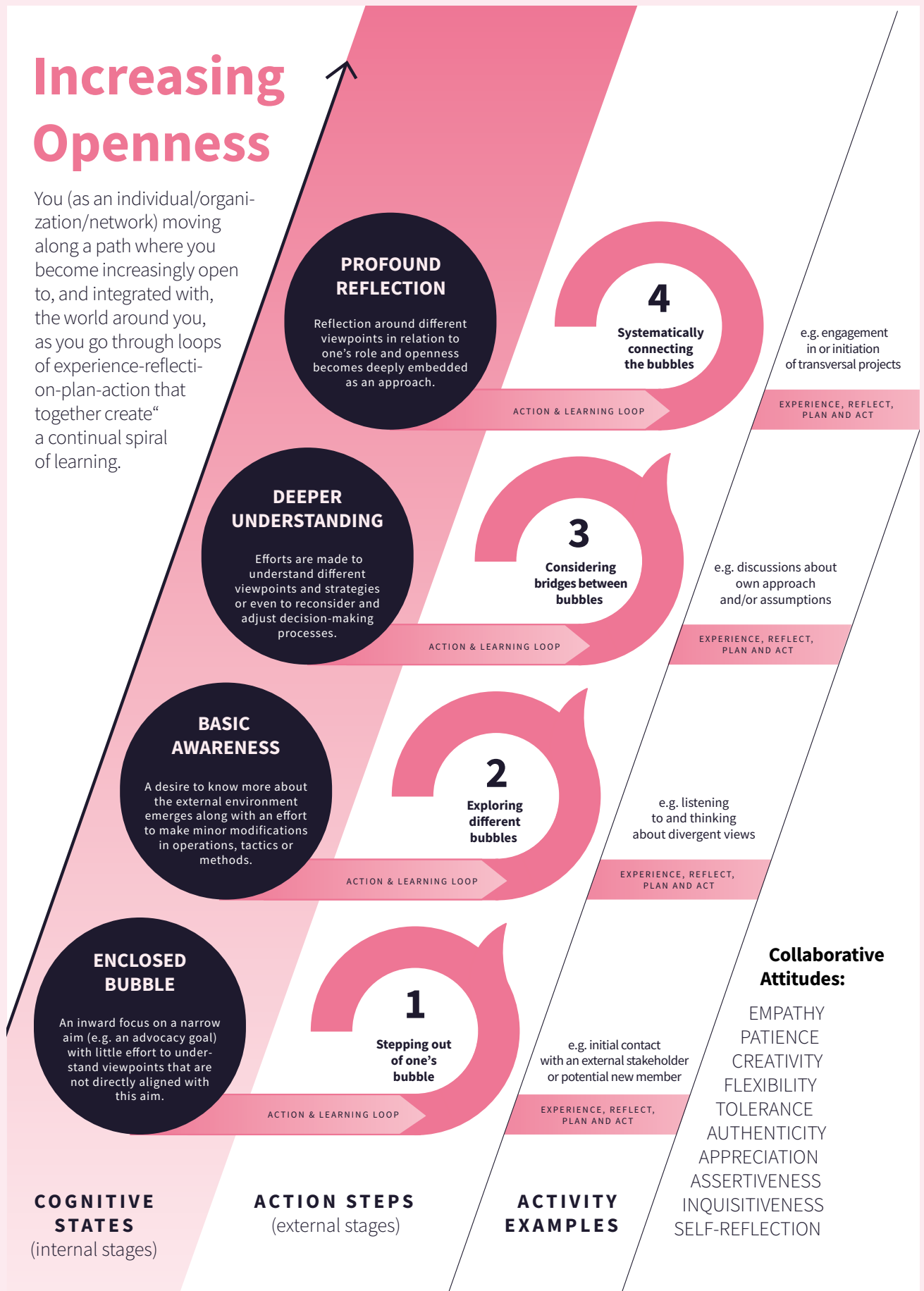
So what could be the impact trajectory of a replicated and scaled up program over time? Based on the adapted concept and results of the testing phase, we believe a broader impact could proceed from network leaderships to entire networks, stakeholder groups to civil societies, from selected countries to regional impact in following, summarized stages:

In the short-term, we have seen that supported networks (better) develop relationships with, and understand the needs of, their (existing and/or potential) members and partners among key stakeholders, and begin to address these needs more systematically. The networks identify and build some of the skills (communication, meeting organization, deep listening or facilitation) as well as consolidate internal processes (analysis, planning, evaluation learning, etc.) needed for more effective internal and external collaboration.

In the medium term, we can already see a trend of joint activities organized by the networks that engage (new) members and/or (new) partners among stakeholders in addressing common challenges. This begins to slowly alter networks' understanding of the broader context, possibly even perception of their own role, leading to adjustment in strategies, positions, and/or formats of activities. There are light traces of this also triggering changes on the part of the stakeholders, over time being more ready and able to contribute to collective efforts.

Finally, **in the long-term**, we have little evidence so far, but we believe transformed organizations and evolved mindsets will allow more effective solutions to more complex problems in the three countries. The collective efforts will bring more sustainable and democratic solutions to challenges of these and other societies if the program is replicated. The more inclusive, relevant and accountable civil society (sub)sectors become acknowledged as relevant partners by the larger societies, and the stronger public support, the more effective voice in decision making and more stable resources – the **stronger roots** – they will have. This will increase public participation in civic activities and strengthen civil society and democratic values in the CEE region and Europe reducing their fragmentation and polarization.

Figure 8: Internal Development Trajectory

Increasing Openness

You (as an individual/organization/network) moving along a path where you become increasingly open to, and integrated with, the world around you, as you go through loops of experience-reflection-plan-action that together create "a continual spiral of learning.

PROFOUND REFLECTION

Reflection around different viewpoints in relation to one's role and openness becomes deeply embedded as an approach.

4
Systematically connecting the bubbles

e.g. engagement in or initiation of transversal projects

ACTION & LEARNING LOOP

EXPERIENCE, REFLECT, PLAN AND ACT

DEEPER UNDERSTANDING

Efforts are made to understand different viewpoints and strategies or even to reconsider and adjust decision-making processes.

3
Considering bridges between bubbles

e.g. discussions about own approach and/or assumptions

ACTION & LEARNING LOOP

EXPERIENCE, REFLECT, PLAN AND ACT

BASIC AWARENESS

A desire to know more about the external environment emerges along with an effort to make minor modifications in operations, tactics or methods.

2
Exploring different bubbles

e.g. listening to and thinking about divergent views

ACTION & LEARNING LOOP

EXPERIENCE, REFLECT, PLAN AND ACT

ENCLOSED BUBBLE

An inward focus on a narrow aim (e.g. an advocacy goal) with little effort to under-stand viewpoints that are not directly aligned with this aim.

1
Stepping out of one's bubble

e.g. initial contact with an external stakeholder or potential new member

ACTION & LEARNING LOOP

EXPERIENCE, REFLECT, PLAN AND ACT

Collaborative Attitudes:

EMPATHY
PATIENCE
CREATIVITY
FLEXIBILITY
TOLERANCE
AUTHENTICITY
APPRECIATION
ASSERTIVENESS
INQUISITIVENESS
SELF-REFLECTION

COGNITIVE STATES
(internal stages)

ACTION STEPS
(external stages)

ACTIVITY EXAMPLES

4/ Some Challenges, Plans and Observations in Conclusion

The concept of transversal collaboration based on Glopolis' long-standing experience of working with networks was in the making for several years before the Stronger Roots program began. Having gone through the **full cycle** of designing, implementation and evaluation of this rather innovative program, we are glad that most of the assumptions from 2018 hold.

There is a lot of learning to be reflected and acted upon in the next phase of both specific program and general methodology development.

It is important to note that **advanced collaboration levels** have been paired with attention paid to both stakeholder groups' needs and more profound changes in the processes and attitudes of the networks, but also with the degree to which the strategic goals – and willingness to cooperate – were shared between the core of the network and selected stakeholders.

In fact, we had to adjust our assumptions about when a network is ready for transversal collaboration. We assumed that for those who aim at complex, longer-term collaboration outside the network, contact and dialogue (levels 2–3 of the trajectory in Figure 2) are in fact about laying the groundwork for collaboration whereas only levels 4–6 (from joint activities to partnership to collective impact) are the real thing and represent a rollout of actual collaboration. We tended to think of levels 2–3 as "pre-collaboration", but all supported networks spent some (and many of them most of the) time on these activities during the grant period. This shows that even with the right intentions many of the networks may not be ready for transversal collaboration and we should focus much more attention on **network consolidation** in the next phase of the program.

This points to the need to elaborate on the **limits of the concept**. It is clear that transversal collaboration (or collective impact) are not methodologies universally applicable to any situation. As we are painfully reminded by the aggression against freedom and territorial integrity of Ukraine, the very term "collaboration not only has an ugly connotation in war or dictatorship or autocracy contexts (traitorous cooperation with enemy), but certain types of conflicts especially with stakeholder groups abusing power in general do not have solutions in more understanding, building relationships or organizing joint activities. At least not in the short term, not until a shift of mindset occurs on the side of their leadership.

Another important observation relates to the rather arbitrary border between potential new members or new partners. What might be called an **internal vs. external stakeholders**' dilemma is rather a scale of divergence in the reality of transversal collaboration. Whether collaboration takes place hinges more on the above mentioned factors than on whether the stakeholders are involved with the network formally or informally.

Clearly, assessment of **deeper impact** requires more in-depth examination of the projects and more time to see how they actually develop further. The impact on **CEE societies** then depends on the number of countries served, number of networks receiving grants, degree of systemic ambition of the grant projects and the scale and divergence of stakeholders addressed by the CSO networks.

We plan to stay in touch with the nine grantees from the first phase and support at least a joint reflection of how the networks' collaborative culture and mindset further developed. Looking ahead, we are going to increase the quantity and quality of impact by focusing on **capacity building of networks which are not supported directly**. Networks who are not ready yet for, or do not need, a full-fledged program support.. These could begin to adopt more collaborative practices and attitudes to their work as a result of the program's communication, educational or awareness-raising activities such as a series of workshops, webinars and experience sharing sessions.

The three years pointed out the pitfalls of **evaluation**. While we came a long way in giving the concept a concrete and fitting (standard as well as adaptive) evaluation framework, we feel there is still quite a lot to do in terms of refining the trajectories, weight and interactions of different factors and making sure the framework captures key developments in various particular contexts and types of networks. As the final infographics (Figure 8) hints, it may be more fitting to replace the trajectory as the main measurement device with **a spiral** or system of double or triple loops.

The hardest but very exciting part of impact measurement is by all means the quality of inner **transformative change**. We need to pay more attention especially to the shifts of mindset. We believe the broadening of perspectives, attitudes and indeed values (although we have kept coming back to debates over the distinctions between them) in individual as well as institutional minds holds the key to cultural wars we have been witnessing in the past decade all over the West.

A very important, but tricky factor to watch is the **language** we use to talk about us and the others. It is not just WE and THEM versus US TOGETHER. We could see the slight shifts in vocabulary during the entire pilot program on a number of more subtle fronts. Let us give three examples to demonstrate the mindset shift is really happening: a changing perception of stakeholders more as potential partners (two-way interaction) rather than a sheer target group (one-way interaction); change becoming more of an evolution (process) rather than abrupt new quality (state); and advocacy (convincing) turning into negotiation and facilitation of a joint process (invitation or offer).

The most intriguing manifestation of mindset change, however, is probably the reflection of shifts in attitudes. These inner changes are rather soft, intimate and vulnerable, as opposed to more pragmatic and technical shifts in processes and skills (we therefore call internal, rather than inner). Words such as patience, curiosity, authenticity or hopefulness are not very common vocabulary and bring a **deeper, personal thread** to CSOs' routine operation.

We trust that, like us, you find transversal collaboration an exciting journey, relevant well beyond increasing the efficacy and resilience of CSO networks, and will join us in further collaboration on advancing collaboration.

STRONGER ROOTS

The Stronger Roots Program is jointly implemented by a consortium created by Open Society Fund Prague (CZ), Open Society Foundation Bratislava (SK), Glopolis (CZ) and the NIOK Foundation (HU). The Program aims to increase the resilience of civil society organizations and their networks in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, strengthen their social capital and embed them in the communities and societies in which they operate. Within the Program, the concept of transversal collaboration was developed and tested on 9 networks of civil society organizations.

)(glopolis

Glopolis is an analytical and networking center with an 18-years long outstanding think-tank experience in research, policy monitoring, advocacy and campaigning, relationship development, resource mobilization and facilitating collaboration at the Czech, CEE and EU-wide levels. Glopolis mission is to support transversal collaboration beyond the non-profit sector towards resilient civil society and sustainable democracy. Therefore, it seeks out and expands the field of shared aspirations of the CSOs, governmental and business representatives and engages them in solving common, societal challenges

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