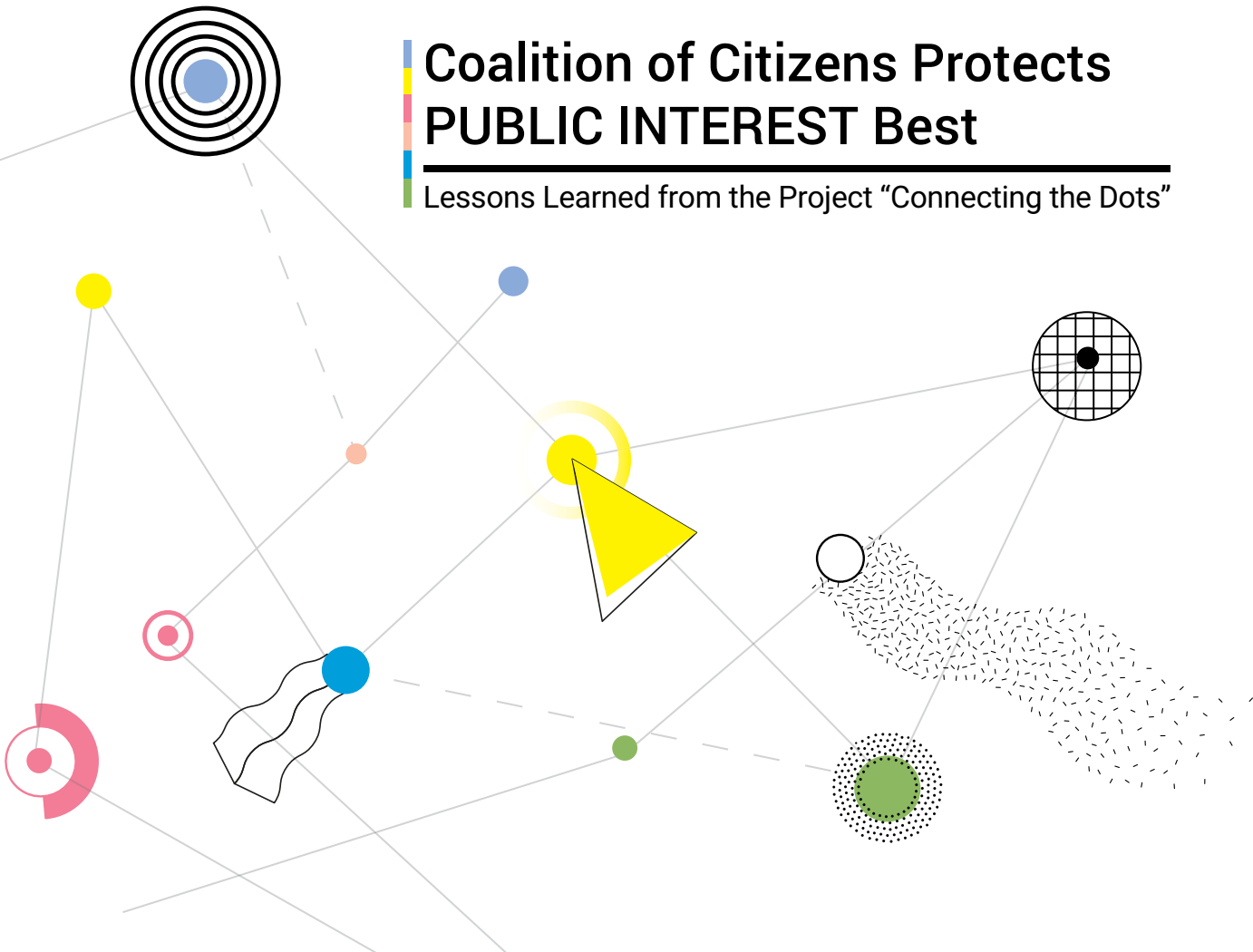


Coalition of Citizens Protects PUBLIC INTEREST Best

Lessons Learned from the Project "Connecting the Dots"





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1 INTRODUCTION

Connecting the Dots is a project run by the Institute of Communications Studies (ICS), through which we have built a civic coalition enabling civil society, academia, media and public institutions to co-operate for improved governance.

Within the project we focused on protecting the public interest and strengthening public interest journalism. Providing space for diverse views, we opened themes that had been side-lined in mainstream media and helped in making them key headlines in media reporting.

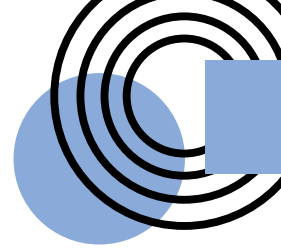
The central strategy we used in Connecting the Dots project was co-operation among diverse stakeholders on many levels, by using several tools which brought good results:

- Connecting civil society, academia, media and public institutions to co-operate for improved governance and citizen engagement in society
- Refocus in media on public interest journalism

Dialogue, networking and co-operation were the main mechanisms of our work in the project. Key deliveries of the project have shown that public pressure can lead to improved performance from institutions. Citizens can take actions for public interest issues when they are offered evidence and information on efficiency of institutions. Certainly, they should have a platform which informs and educates them how the institutional decisions and policy making affects the quality of life of citizens. The project has demonstrated that joint actions which are product of coalition-building can lead to raising public awareness about key policies and decisions made by institutions.

2

CIVIC COALITION FOR IMPROVED GOVERNANCE AND CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN SOCIETY



Transparency and good governance of public institutions often pose a challenge in young or fragile democracies, such as North Macedonia, where the national debate for years has focused on democratisation, rule of law, social cohesion and quality of life.

Climate change, care for the environment and biodiversity, use and managing natural resources have been marginalised themes. The lack of public debate and pressure for transparency on use of resources in the area of environment, have been the bases for launching a process in which civil society would request and start a dialogue with public institutions on central and local level, for broader consultation process in decision-making and designing policies.

Our experience in the Institute for Communication Studies (ICS) has shown that when civil society unites for a public interest issue through a transparent process and informs the public regularly, results can be achieved.



The “Clear It Up!” Alliance



We established the “Clear It Up!” Alliance for lobbying and advocacy with the purpose to promote and advocate for sustainable use and protection of water resources and effective supervision of the excessive use of natural resources. Starting with 21 civil society organisations and two civic initiatives, the Alliance later has grown into a network of 84 partners, including 41 from civil society, 36 media, 4 faculties and 3 public institutions. Organisations within the Alliance are experienced in working on diverse themes such as environment, youth, gender issues, rule of law, economy and European policies.

We identified sustainable use and protection of natural resources as public interest issues for the “Clear It Up!” campaign, on the basis that:

- The two themes have been determined as public interest in national policies and legislation (the Environment Protection Law, the Water Law).
- In addition to having an effect on the environment, they also affect the public health which is another theme of public interest on national level.
- “Sustainable use and protection of natural resources” are part of the ‘common good’, the general welfare and the security and well-being of everyone in the community we serve’ - definition of the Ethical Journalism Network, UK, which was used by the project Connecting the Dots.

The experience of the Alliance demonstrated that when civil society organisations and media join efforts to work together on an issue, the results have greater impact. This method of work within the project has become a practice not just for issues within the campaign. Moreover, the civil society organisations sought and received support from each other beyond the scope of issues of the campaign, which shows that trust has been built, that the Alliance has earned integrity.

The advocacy and lobbying campaign “Clear It Up!” was launched in December 2020. Once we completed the trainings on advocacy and lobbying, we established the Alliance and identified the key themes. Immediately after the launch, more than 60 people, representatives of state institutions, media, academia and civil society organisations joined the campaign. The president of the country, Environment and Physical Planning minister and his deputy, directors of the State Audit Office and State Inspectorate for Forestry and Water Management supported the campaign, whereas the National Hydrometeorological Service, PE Water and Sewage Management and the State Inspectorate for Environment joined the campaign. The mutual support enabled direct communication with the Alliance and understanding on how to move forward in improving resource management by the public institutions.

The Alliance connected the dots on several levels by involving institutions from central and local government, civil society, researchers, journalists. In order to strengthen the dialogue with institutions and influence institutional processes of decision and policy making, we included environmental organisations that had the expertise in environment, law, economy. In order to gain wider influence in raising public awareness, organisations that work in other areas such as youth, gender equality, European affairs, human rights, were also involved.



Liljana Popovska,

Zelen Institut: The valuable network of several organisations led to good results

This co-operation increased the trust among civil society, we know each other better now. It blended the actions of organisations and people that work on certain issues with dedication, there were established expert groups that could work in future as well. These networks should be sustainable because they are multi-layered and multi-sectoral, including higher education institutions, scientific, state and local institutions, numerous journalists were mobilised. Together with the civil society this is a valuable asset in the battle for better environment, which requires serious commitment.

Testimonials from partners in the Alliance

Martin Pushevski,

MRT: The network is well placed, it should continue

The Alliance is a step forward towards cleaner environment. It enabled good media promotion and the co-operation with the ICS was excellent. I consider that the Alliance should continue so that there would be pressure for more quality policies and solutions, and the network is well placed.

Clear it up!

We succeeded in engaging in a dialogue with institutions

The communication within the Alliance members and the informal horizontal setting proved to be effective mechanisms for influencing policies.

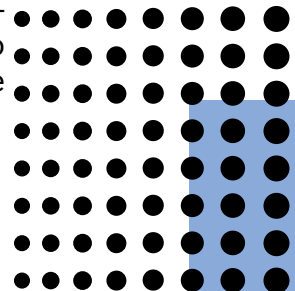
The “Clear It Up!” Alliance succeeded in engaging in a dialogue with the institutions on drafting legislation and policies creation such as the cases with the Water Law and the Law on Mineral Resources. In the process of adopting the Water Law, civil society organisations were involved at the beginning of the consultation process with the competent institutions and after accepting the proposals for amendments, the draft-law was published on ENER, followed by a public debate. When the dialogue was launched, the channel of communication with the policy makers allowed academia, experts and civil society to be involved in drafting legislation.

The organised and joint approach of diverse teams of civil society organisations for a common theme such as environment, led to deepened cooperation among the organisations on central and local level and profiling some organisations with the various expertise they had. This has been particularly beneficial for smaller organisations, or for those that operate on local level.

Besides the partnerships with academia and civil society, media were partners within the Alliance. Media worked closely with the other partners in the Alliance in researching and reporting on the issues that the Alliance worked on, being actors in protecting the public interest, building trust with the audience.

The “Clear It Up!” Alliance worked as an informal network and we at the ICS were responsible for planning, administering and supervising the campaign. The activities of the partners ranged from supporting a civic initiative, to taking a lead on a specific component within the campaign.

We conducted thorough research of the themes of the project, in co-operation with several experts. The project has allowed us to see the practical benefits from science and demonstrated that academia can be part of policy creation. University professors and researchers have provided input, assisted in conducting measurements and assessments, based their activities on science and facts, presented analyses and offered solutions. To illustrate with an example, the measurements of water quality of the waters of Dojran, Berovo and Tikvesh lake were conducted by the University of Goce Delchev - Shtip, by providing directions and recommendations. Experts have also provided input on how the area of natural resource management can be regulated.



Testimonials from partners in the Alliance

Stefan Ristovski,

European Policy Institute (EPI):

Networking with other organisations is of exceptional value

We would highlight the swift mobilisation of civil society and individuals for joint reactions to government policies and institutional decision-making. The themes that the “Clear It Up!” Alliance is working on are of exceptional value and this platform has shown that it has the capacity to work on these issues.

Mimoza Mustafai,

Press Online: The campaign led to changing the environmental awareness

The campaign led to changes in the environmental awareness of citizens and local government would more seriously put an effort in protecting the environmental and public goods. There will be improved protection of water sources and there will be investments in secondary and tertiary water networks. The rivers will also be priority for the local government and there will be more parks and green spaces.



We forced the government to withdraw a law

The informal approach of the Alliance proved to be quite beneficial. There was significant cooperation and flexibility within the Alliance when partners needed to react fast to external developments. For example, at the very beginning of the campaign, the Alliance found out that potentially a harmful draft of the Law on Changes and Amendments to the Law on Mineral Resources was submitted to Parliament. The Alliance was able to organise itself quickly, to demand actions by MPs, political parties and the Government to withdraw the draft law. The Alliance publicly elaborated the weaknesses of the draft law, making its position and requests clear to everyone. The Ministry of Economy withdrew the draft law for further revision and invited the Alliance to participate in the process, accepting several of its comments and suggestions.

Flexibility of arrangements and the enabling cooperative environment in which the partners worked, helped to raise issues within the Alliance beyond the campaign themes. Some of the examples include activities for protection of the natural treasure Vodno, or the status of the Ohrid region as UNESCO Natural and Cultural World Heritage. Partners engaged in discussions regarding what would be the best strategies for these issues, or gave support to eco activists. The debates of organisations that work in same thematic areas could be successful when there are fairly relaxed conditions for discussion. In such an ambient, representatives from organisations informally share information, provide mutual support and reach solutions for common problems. This approach could also be beneficial for representatives from different sectors to gain diverse perspective on the issues, but also to develop trust with each other.

Testimonials from partners in the Alliance

Bojan Trpevski,

Macedonian Young Lawyers

Association: The Alliance led to
improvements in legislation

With the activities on advocacy through media and civil society, inclusion in the amendments to legislation (Law on Waters, Law on Mineral Resources, Law on Environmental Inspection) and support of the institutions regarding transparency and effective work, the campaign positively affected situation in society. At the same time, the established co-operation and communication among the civil society led to establishing the Civic Inspection Council, as a new form of organised approach and work of civil society organisations in the area of environment. The method of communication and the team work established within the campaign is good basis for further positive influence on policies.



Разбистри се!
Онлајн ресурси

**We prepared online resources for
advocacy and lobbying for civil society
organisations**

In the ICS we worked with civil society organisations and media on capacity building by providing training on advocacy and lobbying. We provided resources and support to the partners, as well as tools that they would need to work on safeguarding the public interest and scrutinizing the work of institutions.

To ensure the scrutiny by the civil society continues after the project ends, we developed and published online resources for advocacy and lobbying for civil society organisations. These resources can be used by civil society organisations and other stakeholders that work on similar projects or conduct similar actions. The resources can be also helpful for creating new coalitions that would benefit from this project.

Portion of the members in the Alliance are small organisations and the partnership within the Alliance was beneficial for them for transferring experience, guiding them through the process and providing them support with promotional materials, as well as media relations. Each partner in the Alliance was equal, both large and small organisations had their voice heard. Everyone was equally involved in consultation processes on legislation, promotion, campaigning in media, advocacy and lobbying. The support was customized for each organisation to their needs, ranging from media relations to event management support, as well as developing key messages and general guidance on public relations.

The Alliance with its work brought significant changes in the society. It has demonstrated that coalition of civil society, academia, media can be functional and effective in launching a dialogue with the public institutions for safeguarding the public interest. The Alliance proved that it was important for the civil society to be engaged and demand responses from government institutions, to influence the institutional culture, in order to achieve better transparency and accountability.



Testimonials from partners in the Alliance

Stefani Spirovska,

Youth Education Forum (YEF):

The Alliance should definitely continue,
problems in environment are still current

There were several issues opened in the public which have not been raised until then. The added value from the campaign is that it involved many young people in creating content, which could lead to their active engagement on the issue in the future. The Alliance should definitely continue. The campaign themes are not with a deadline that expires, the problems that the campaign addresses remain, only perhaps changing the form and intensity.

Government response to the campaign actions

- In partnership with the State Environmental Inspectorate (SEI) we produced a tool that enables citizens to use the Inspectorate's social media, website or email to report pollution. This helps to improve the reporting process, as well as reactions from inspectors, since this tool allows them to receive all reports in one spot and helps them to more effectively plan inspection oversight.
- In co-operation with the State Environmental Inspectorate (SEI) we established the Civil Inspection Council (CIC) which unites about thirty civil society organisations and higher education institutions advocating for environmental protection. The Council provides more efficient cooperation of the Inspectorate with the civil society and citizens, as a central institution for oversight and sanctioning for pollution and damage to the environment.



- The CIC and the “Clear It Up!” Alliance proposed amendments for the draft of the Law on Environment Inspection which is in parliamentary procedure. The amendments refer to consistent solutions for co-ordinating the national and local inspectors, functional oversight by the State Environmental Inspectorate (SEI) on local inspectors, improved process of planning inspection oversight, availability of inspectors after office hours and during weekends, equipping inspectors and strengthening transparency. Previously, the Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning (MOEPP) accepted some of the comments by the CIC in the draft of the Law on Environment Inspection that refer to transparency and accountability of the SEI, such as from example, provisions for the SEI to manage a database for the inspections and registry of entities for inspection oversight.
- SEI developed a digital platform for electronic registry of inspection oversight entities on national and local level, as well as database and generating reports from inspections, which would be available to the public on the Inspectorate’s website.
- The “Clear It Up!” Alliance established co-operation with the Ministry of Economy on the Law on Mineral Resources which for the first time had wider consultation with civil society, the mining industry and MPs. The draft of the Law on Mineral Resources was submitted to Parliament again after it was withdrawn and revised, following the public pressure by the “Clear It Up!” Alliance. The analysis of the new draft revealed that the text was improved significantly, and most of the Alliance comments were accepted. The Alliance was invited to few consultation meetings by the Ministry of Economy during the drafting of the law.

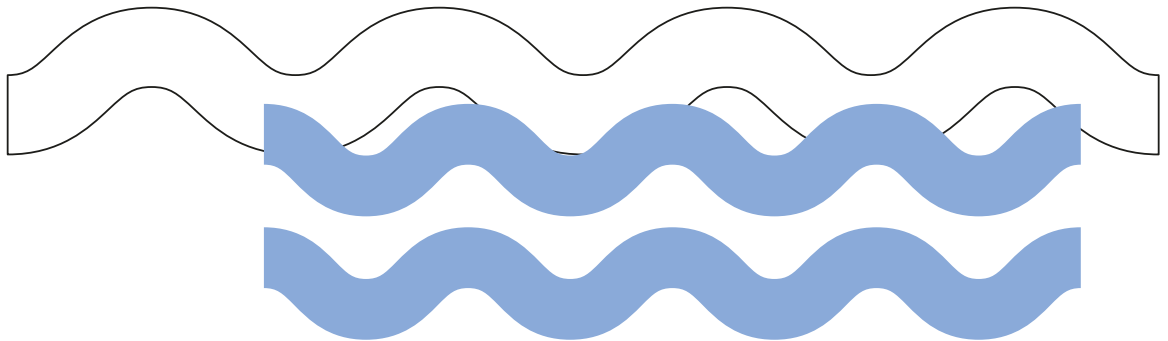
The new draft is precise regarding procedures for approval and termination of concessions, and expands the list of obligations of the concessioners towards the state. However, some of the requests by the Alliance are still missing, regarding improving the transparency towards the local population in issuing concessions, greater observation of the ecological parameters in exploiting sand and gravels from rivers and lakes and improved regulation of tailing ponds as the potentially most harmful spots in mining compounds. Therefore, the Alliance proposed amendments and submitted them to Parliament and the MPs.

○ Changes in the Law of Water provide greater opportunities for the protection of water resources after the MoEPP involved CSOs and experts from the “Clear it Up” Alliance in the earliest stage of drafting the law. It is extremely important that the public is involved in granting concessions for water use, the construction and operation of small hydropower plants is more precisely regulated, and the preparation and regulation of riverbeds and lake coastal lines will have priority over the extraction and sale of sand and gravel. Also, the conditions for issuing permits for water use have been made more stringent, the control over the discharge of wastewater is strengthened, especially in groundwater, and the inspection is strengthened.

○ Digital monitoring platform of the National Hydrometeorological Service (NHS) for the quality of surface waters was developed. The digital monitoring platform improved the system for gathering data, allowing for public availability of the assessments and access of the public and the inspection services to the monitoring. This allows to create integrated and comprehensive outline of data gathered by measurements of waters and design effective monitoring programmes.



MOEPP prepared digital platform for a Water Book which would be publicly available. The Water Book contains database to keep and maintain data necessary for effective water management in the country, as well as data on natural persons and legal entities, domestic and foreign entities that have been granted licenses or concessions for water use and water resources.



Testimonials from partners in the Alliance

Katerina Veljanovska-Mihailov,
Water and Sewage Management Public
Enterprise – Skopje: The campaign offered
solutions for
the real problems

The conducted campaign “Clear It Up!” was a success, having in mind the themes and the problems that were publicly outlined and during the work on them, solutions were offered, regarding the reasons for the problems, particularly regarding legal changes. Expected changes as a result of the campaign are taking steps and plausible measures for cooperation of the competent institutions for solving the problems and the issues which had been outlined in the campaign, and raising the public awareness.



3

REFOCUS IN MEDIA ON PUBLIC INTEREST JOURNALISM

Media reporting in North Macedonia mostly focuses on current affairs with rare examples of investigative journalism and public interest stories. In difference, media content produced through the Connecting the Dots project led to shift towards public interest journalism, improved quality of media reporting with editorial approach which gave more space to public interest issues in journalistic stories.

Media were treated as partners within the Connecting the Dots project and were given the opportunity to support the processes from the inside. Media products focused on specific themes, presenting new issues, new people and content. Journalists were given full support when working on media stories. They could use different resources and tools, educational and specialist content, were given access to scientists, experts, different databases, and what is most important is that they were given creative freedom to tailor the products without political or business influence, only driven by the public interest.

The project identified public interest areas that were not, or were sporadically present in media reporting, such as water resources management, inspection oversight of overuse of natural resources - mineral resources, forestry, land and water.



Media products within the project focused on finding the solutions, in addition to presenting problems and challenges. They were in line with the goals of the campaign to raise public awareness on environment, increased influence in designing new or altering the existing public policies, as well as enabling better dialogue with the public institutions in policy design and decision-making processes.

Young people were given adequate space in media products, primarily the young researchers, eco activists, eco ambassadors, experts, people who presented potential solutions, credible data and argumentation. The ambitious advocacy coalition, succeed to make the themes such as environment, management of natural resources and urban planning to be treated as issues of public interest by the majority of media in the country.

Testimonials from partners in the Alliance

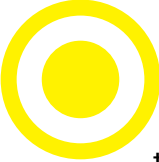
Katerina Topalova,

**MRT: The Public
Broadcaster has a duty
to address the
difficult issues**

Addressing the difficult issues in media, related to our rivers is a success because it leads to education, raising awareness and pressure on institutions. The campaign led to increased exposure of similar problems in media. The Public Broadcaster has a duty to address the difficult issues.



Digital Media Platforms of the Institute for Communication Studies within the Connecting the Dots Project

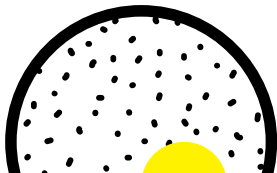


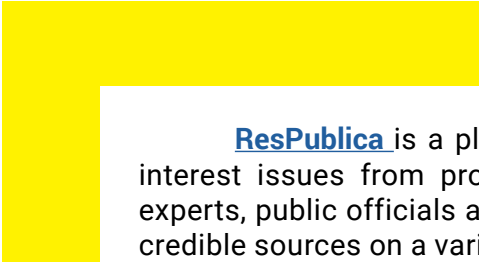
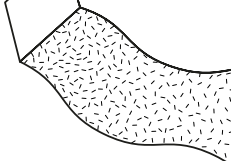
DOMA (HOME) is a digital platform focusing on biodiversity, environmental hazards, sustainability of ecosystems, sustainable development as well as investment in the environment. DOMA works with a network of scientists, academia, media and institutions to produce media content supported with relevant data.

DOMA connects the dots between the scientific view, the institutional responsibility and safeguarding the public interest. DOMA seeks answers from institutions, at the same time giving them a platform for their views. Thus, DOMA contributes to citizens being more informed and engage further for protection of the environment.

Young researchers of natural sciences are frequently part of DOMA, which motivates them to work on new research projects. DOMA gives voice to eco ambassadors on national and regional level who have found solutions that are important for protecting the environment.

In addition to working on national level, DOMA has worked with partners from the region, investigating natural resources, hazards and threats on environment on regional level.



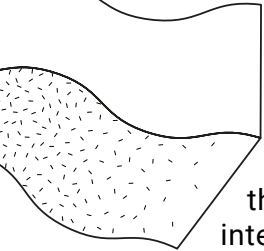


ResPublica is a platform that offers plurality of independent views on public interest issues from professors, analysts, researchers, journalists, civic activists, experts, public officials and students. ResPublica enables citizens to be informed by credible sources on a variety of important themes and make decisions in an informed manner.

ResPublica is a free resource which can be read by any citizen, who can also share, repost, or comment on the posts in line with professional standards on moderation policy.

Media are also free to use the content published on ResPublica, particularly since ResPublica complements the space between media and the lack of continuous and reliable sources of information for in-depth analysis of public interest issues.



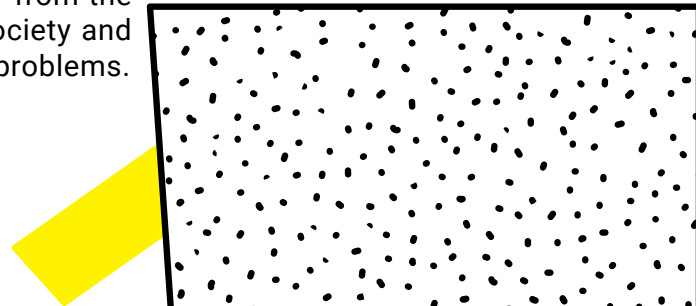


Just Ask is a digital platform of the Institute of Communication Studies (ICS) through which we answer citizen questions, research and inform about public interest issues.

Our platform is recognised as a bridge between the citizens and the institutions since it enables to break through the non-transparency that the public sector is shrouded in. The interactive tools of the website and social media allow citizens to ask questions for the problems that trouble them and receive relevant answers from institutions and civil society organisations.

At the same time Just Ask uses journalistic stories, analyses, video stories, photo stories and interviews, to inform about important societal themes of public interest which are side-lined by the mainstream media. In that manner, we raise awareness of the Macedonian public for essential issues from everyday life which jeopardise the quality of life and ask for action from competent authorities, in order to solve them.

Just Ask also offers educational resources allowing citizens to navigate the administrative labyrinths more easily and understand societal issues. Thus, Just Ask creates active citizenry which demands transparency and accountability from the institutions and together with them, with civil society and the media will contribute to solving the societal problems.



Testimonials from partners in the Alliance

Nazim Rashidi:

Alsat – M: We worked on themes that we have not considered before

The campaign helped to put issues in focus. To illustrate, there were media stories which would not have been published if it had not been for the campaign, such as stories on pollution of waters used for irrigation. There was more information regarding the issue which was not there before. It was useful that media were involved from the creation of the campaign. The Alliance was successful because it provided opportunities to work on themes that we have not considered before and enabled us to reach more experts and sources of information.

4

COMMON ISSUES RAISING CONCERNS FOR CITIZENS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS REGION

Research conducted within the Connecting the Dots project revealed that good governance and transparency of public institutions are themes of shared interest across the Western Balkans countries. These issues have become more important as we all jointly have been facing the dire effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. ResPublica's team identified the potential in the shared issues, for triggering a conversation allowing the audience from the region to be exposed to various views.

ResPublica published several blogs, vlogs and podcasts which frequently were translated in Albanian, Bosnian, Macedonian, Montenegrin, Serbian and English. Media content focused on shared themes such as how the region was handling the COVID crisis, corruption, transparency of government measures, freedom of media. Authors were journalists, experts, influencers, representatives from civil society and public institutions from several countries, who used their experience to share analytical views for current issues. That is our main advantage – reaching different countries and audiences with our content. There was presented a broad range of views, verified numbers and official data which contributed to the credibility of the media content. The tech team produced excellent visual of the media content, which helped in packaging media content into easily digestible product.



Work within the project has shown that there can be quality cooperation with other organisations from the region. ResPublica has 44 partners from civil society, online media, radio, as well as policy blogs from Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia. The advantage of the co-operation is raising the awareness for themes of regional importance and the possibility for our audience to follow different perspectives and views. People should know what is happening in the Western Balkans and the wider region.

ResPublica gave a platform to voices in the society which were not presented in other channels. These views were not frequently presented in mainstream media. Expanding the media content with authors from the region demonstrated that there is interest and desire for co-operation in the Western Balkans. Regional experiences should be shared by media. It might not be a novel thing, yet it is more than necessary.



Some of the things that can be done in the future is to identify themes that are most of concern for the region, that raise the interest of the public, they should be professionally researched and put into local context in reporting. ICS had worked on regional projects before and we drew on previous experience in identifying partners in the region for this project. Building links between key stakeholders opens the door for future partnerships on diverse issues of common interest, particularly in view of the EU and NATO integrations.

Testimonials from partners in the Alliance

Jugoslava Polenak,

Sloboden Pecat: The public now has clearer picture about the environment challenges

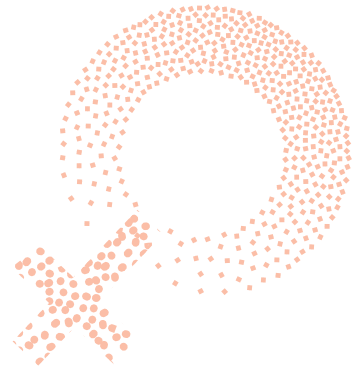
The campaign launched a stream of important issues in the area of water protection, gaps in laws application, irresponsible institutional behaviour and offered potential solutions. The public now has clearer picture about the state of affairs and the challenges. The desired changes are reorganisation in the competent institutions, adoption and amendment of legislation in line with the desired changes, adoption and amendments of bylaws which are missing or have been tailored to protect certain interests, not the environment.

5 EQUAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN

Equality and inclusion are among the key principles applied by ICS in every project. Within the ICS there is heterogeneous structure of employees, both women and men are provided with equal opportunities for work, leading and decision-making, equal pay and learning and development.

Within the Connecting the Dots project, gender equality and inclusion were guiding principles from several aspects: there was adequate representation of women and men in managerial positions, within the project team, as well as in leading components within the project.

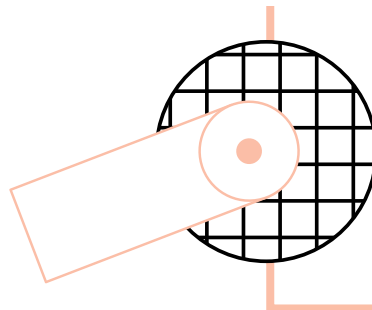
Women and men have equal opportunities to be part of the “Clear It Up!” Alliance and air their views. There is a partner organisation within the Alliance that works on gender issues. ICS provides guidance to its partners that women and men should have equal opportunities to express views in the produced media content. There is balanced gender representation of the production team and sources of information. When quality control of media content is performed, gender perspective is considered, avoiding prejudices and stereotypes when presenting solutions and inspiring examples. Special attention is paid to representation of women in media content produced within the project. Stereotypes are avoided and more focus is put on the leading roles that women have, or should have in the society.



We produced several media stories and interviews featuring women who are opinion-makers, activists, decision-makers, oversight, businesswomen and innovators. In addition, ICS worked with the Association of Business Women in organising round tables with women from rural areas, showcasing the active role that women have in an important sector such as agriculture and food production.

The project has shown that there was insufficient awareness within the public institutions about the importance of gender balance in decision-making. Research within the project has shown that management of natural resources is dominated by men. Some institutions lack awareness regarding the importance of a consultation process which includes less-represented groups, or the influence of the polices and the decisions have on these groups.

The project has shown that there is a need to support local civil society organisations in working on gender issues in order to create long-lasting benefits. It also demonstrated the lack of representation of the gender dimension in media stories and public interest issues. The public has an appetite to be informed and aware about gender issues. We should encourage women to be more involved, to engage for good governance and improved services by public institutions.



Women's Voices in Connecting the Dots Project



The video story *The Fossil Treasures of Macedonia*, which we published on DOMA, showed the paleontological depot of the Natural Science Museum of Macedonia and the richest paleontological sites in the country, which are neglected by the authorities. The story featured the single palaeontologist in the country, Biljana Garevska. She shared her experience of being the only woman in this field of science. Garevska's work was featured in the media content following the work

in Dolni Disan excavating rare fossils together with a team of colleagues from Bulgaria, where she is the sole woman. The story underlined two important aspects – it helped for media to give more space to a scientific field which rarely receives media attention to be featured, and show that Macedonia has potential for protected areas. It also gave media space to the only woman palaeontologist in Macedonia, breaking a stereotype and showcasing a successful woman scientist, theme rarely present in Macedonian media, which can be encouraging for other women to work in natural sciences.

In a vlog for ResPublica, professor and activist **Ana Martinoska** presented the underestimated dimension of the consequences that the Covid-19 pandemic had on women. She presented arguments how the pandemic bestowed a burden on women by encouraging the silent pandemic on women's health. Women do unpaid domestic work, have the role of caretaker, the educator, homemaker and there is increased number of domestic and family violence. Martinoska pointed to the need for the state to act and include the women's perspective in policy and decision-making.

ResPublica published a vlog by writer **Ana Golejshka-Dzikova** who presented another overlooked female dimensioning in the pandemic, the balance of being an author, working woman and a mother during the pandemic. She argued that the mountain of obligations was growing during the pandemic, and women, in lack of wider societal support are using their own self-preservation skills to complete the endless stream of tasks while being left without space and time for herself.

Ana Avramoska from the National Network against Gender-Based Violence spoke about the invisible pandemic of domestic violence, in a vlog for ResPublica. She underlined that while there were ongoing campaigns during the pandemic for people to stay at home, it appeared for many women home was not the safe place. The Network's analysis on femicides has shown that 60% of the victims were killed by their intimate partner. Avramoska pointed that there was a need for amendments in the Criminal Code to define and amend the terms "rape", "sexual harassment" and "stalking" since violence against women is not a private problem, it is society's problem.

Just Ask investigated the work of the predominantly female workers in textile factories in Shtip amidst the pandemic and their struggle to provide for the families, while working in a sector that has been hit the hardest from the pandemic.

The Dean of the Faculty for Physical Education, **Lence Aleksovska-Velickovska** in a vlog for ResPublica pointed to the need of increasing the representation of women in sports in the country. She underlined that in 2004 there was 2% representation of women in all sports organisations, nowadays that has increased to 8 % which is still a defeating number. Aleksovska-Velickovska said that if we wait for female representation to increase for 5 or 10 % in sports every twenty years, there will not be any progress in sports, and in order to have more women in sports and sports organisations, there is a need for increased investments.

The “Clear It Up!” campaign featured few women with specific experiences in areas where women are rarely visible



Danka Ilijeva, woman who runs a farm in the village of Zrnovci in Eastern Macedonia was featured in the media stories prepared within the campaign on water management. She called for the need of functional hydro system to advance opportunities for progress in farming and food production.



Zivka Gjurcinovska, woman farmer and an entrepreneur from the village Tumcheviste near Gostivar shared her views about the lack of water system and effective water management which influences farming, food production and quality of life. Gjurcinovska spoke about the need for effective use of water which should follow the agricultural production.



Vidojka Gerasimovska, senior woman farmer, provided a retrospective on agricultural work in the past and present. Her experience helped in providing a picture of continuity of women farmers in the country.



Suzana Dimitrievska from the village of Mustafino in Eastern Macedonia has produced organic food for more than 15 years as a self-taught food producer and entrepreneur. Having water as key resource, Suzana underlines that water, along with the sun and the wind are important for farming and therefore water should be kept clean and well managed. She drew on her experience in assessing the quantity of needed water in crop production. According to Dimitrievska, farmers should be trained on the dynamics and ways of using water for irrigation since the various use of water affects food quality.



Sonja Angelevska Koleva from Negotino is an inspector in electrical engineering overseeing quality control in power plants regarding electricity production. This is a rare profession for women and she works on preventive measures for water, land and air protection. Being an avid advocate for clean environment, she spoke about the need for systemic solutions to protect the environment and preserve biodiversity. Working as a mentor for high school pupils in electrical engineering, she also encouraged young people to be interested and work in science.

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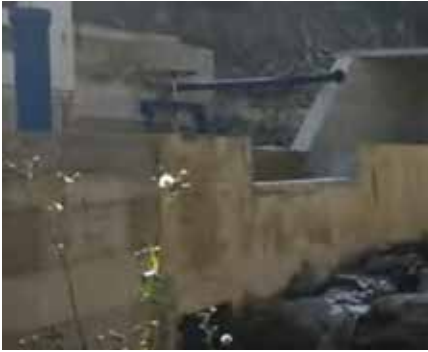
SUCCESS STORY: EXPOSING THE COST OF SMALL HYDROPOWER PLANTS

Construction and operation of small hydropower plants in North Macedonia is a public interest issue which was absent from the public discourse. DOMA's team decided to research this theme which was shrouded with secrecy, appears complex and has significant impact on everyday life of citizens.

Macedonia and the countries in the region are challenged in gaining energy independence without destroying the nature and small hydropower plants seem simple and inexpensive solution. DOMA's research revealed that small hydropower plants require little investment, but they significantly use river water and affect biodiversity in and around river basins. They produce insignificant amount of energy and receive substantial subsidies from the government, which does not make them cost-effective.

Media rarely or never report on the issue. Government and public enterprises do not release data about subsidies provided to small hydropower plants.

The DOMA team co-operated with journalists, experts, civil society activists in researching this issue, publishing data that informed and educated the public about the construction and operation of hydropower plants. We also spoke to owners of small hydropower plants in order to present a rounded picture about the issue. Media content included documentaries, short video stories and media articles exploring the construction, operation and government support of small hydropower plants. Additionally,



for the first time on the DOMA platform, there was designed a digital map which showed all small hydropower plants in Macedonia – by geographical location, ownership data, licence period, scale of production and subsidies in 2020.

We managed to obtain and release the official data on governmental support to owners of small hydropower plants. Data showed growing number of subsidised small hydropower plants in North Macedonia due to a 2010 government policy which allows the state-owned operator on the energy market MEPSO to buy energy from preferred energy producers by regulated price. The cost in the end is paid by the tax payers, citizens who are the consumers of the electrical energy. Despite the fact that the government buys electrical energy from other producers such as wind farms, photovoltaic power stations and biogas power plants, the largest payments are for electrical energy for preferred tariffs from small hydropower plants.

Research into the issue of small hydropower plants helped us learn the following lessons:

Providing rounded picture busts myths

Media products included views of eco activists, experts and owners of small hydropower plants. This has helped in providing clear data on money that the state spends on small hydropower plants, return on investment and the effect that the small hydropower plants have on environment.

The media team challenged the cost-effectiveness of the small hydropower plants by showcasing that 70% of the money for support of energy from renewable sources ended with small hydropower plants, whereas they contributed to energy supply with 3.8%. Data we gathered in the research showed that governmental support was most beneficial to individuals and companies that own small hydropower plants.

Eco activists underline that small hydropower plants affect level of rivers and biodiversity. They also claim that some small hydropower plants are constructed in protected areas and national parks, against government recommendations. Eco activists consider that the increasing number of small hydropower plants leads to decreased level of river water, dried out rivers, altered river flow, which affects biodiversity and is hazardous for the environment.

Persistence is key for producing quality work



When the ICS team of journalists investigated the issue of small hydropower plants, they faced several challenges. Public institutions would not release data on subsidies, there was handful of experts and civil society activists for this issue and there was very low media coverage. With hard work and perseverance, the team managed to produce media products that gave rounded picture of the researched issue, had wide audience and triggered government response which resulted in publishing data regarding cost-effectiveness of small hydropower plants.

Include all stakeholders

Having regard to the sensitivity of the small hydropower plants issue, the media products included stakeholders and people with relevance who presented their views: from experts who worked on the issue, public officials and owners of small hydropower plants. This helped to make the case and at the same time provide platform for experts, activists and public officials to discuss the issue and for the public to hear diverse views. It was an opportunity for experts to present various solutions for renewable sources of energy such as wind and solar energy and argue why governments in the region should invest in solar energy, as a viable solution.

Co-operation and partnerships are key for regional work

Energy independence appeared to be a common theme for the countries in the region. DOMA presented the national picture on North Macedonia and presented views from the region on energy independence and alternative sources of energy production. DOMA's team presented the cases of Serbia, as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina, trying to find answers for overcoming the energy crisis in the region. The research revealed that these countries as well practise model of government subsidies for small hydropower plants and insufficiently use alternative sources of energy. Given the fact that the ICS has worked with partners across the region, it was easy to reach out and get relevant interlocutors to produce quality media stories from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Clear data makes media content easily digestible for the audience

Detailed and clearly presented data helped in making stronger arguments regarding the low cost-effectiveness of small hydropower plants. Data was crunched into readable numbers, messages were produced in plain and simple language, which helped for the media content to be easily digestible for the audience.

Civil society can influence change in work of institutions

Following the publication of the stories on the DOMA platform, the State Environment Inspectorate (SEI) launched an investigation into the work of the small hydropower plants which were alleged to be operating contrary to the law. The Director of the State Environment Inspectorate publicly stated that the small hydropower plants implicated in DOMA documentaries (HPP Belica and HPP Lesnica) operated illegally or violated work rules and procedures, hence the Inspectorate planned to take action against them on resolving the issue of the damaging effect to the environment caused by the small hydropower plants.

The findings of the ICS team were confirmed in the 2021 compliance audit by the State Audit Office for Exploitation of water resources in electricity generation for the period 2012 - 2021. The report revealed that during 2012-2021 the small hydropower plants were paid 90 million euros, i.e. 41 million euros more than the market value due to the legally provided preferential tariffs based on 20-years contracts at the expense of end

users. The audit found that there was lack of systemic approach in assessment and granting licenses for construction of small hydropower plants, lack of co-ordination and inefficient control by competent institutions. The absence of functional system of assessment, approval and oversight procedures, gaps in data, incomplete overview of the work of small hydropower plants leads to difficulties in pinpointing accountability. This results in incorrect picture about the effect that the small hydropower plants have on the environment and the measures that need to be taken to preserve the natural resources and biodiversity.



All of the above makes a stronger case for the advocacy and lobbying activities of the Clear It Up! Alliance, demanding government institutions to be transparent when it comes to small hydropower plants, as their work has broader effect in the society connecting accountability, quality of life and environment.



SUCCESS STORY: FIGHTING MALPRACTICE IN URBAN PLANNING AND CONSTRUCTION

The campaign for adequate urban planning and environment protection led by the ICS and its partners is an example of the crucial role that civil society could play in safeguarding the public interest.

Urban planning has been a controversial topic for Skopje in the past two decades. There have been allegations for malpractice by local governments, specifically for central Skopje. Experts have been vocal about the inadequate urban planning and serial decision-making in favour of the political or business, instead of the public interest.

Centre Municipality declared ban on construction in 2017. The decision was overturned by the Constitutional Court following a complaint by the Construction Chamber and the Chamber of Commerce of North-West Macedonia in 2019. The construction ban was quickly reinstated through a new decision by the municipal authorities, however it applied to limited number of submissions. This opened path for numerous requests or approvals for construction to be activated in 2020 and 2021, leading to construction of several buildings in the central city area, many of them followed by reactions by citizens.

Lifting the construction ban enabled the construction of skyscrapers near the Holiday Inn hotel, in a dubious case which led to controversies. Together with civil society we campaigned against the construction as it tackled two key concerns for citizens – increased pollution and allegation for malpractice of institutions.



The campaign helped us learn the following lessons:

Civil society has the power to shape public opinion

Campaigning that we led together with civil society organisations launched a conversation on urban planning, attracting broad media coverage and created demand by citizens for government response on decision-making which directly impacts environment and quality of life. The campaign included following actions:


- Publishing roles and responsibilities of institutions, which allowed the public to be informed about where accountability lies
- Influential people from academia, civil society, media, joined the campaign against construction of the skyscrapers
- Publishing a visual of the planned construction, with architects providing qualified opinions, which triggered public attention and media interest
- Mayors of Centre municipality, Skopje and Transport Minister were pressured to publicly elaborate the grounds for decision-making which allowed the construction.
- Online petition supported by several thousands of citizens

Joint civic action helps in getting accountability from institutions

Civil society organisation which is co-operating with other partner organisations can successfully demand and achieve government responsiveness. The campaign that we led together with our partners gathered wide public support and set the agenda of urban planning and environment at the centre of media coverage. This narrowed the room for manoeuvre by public institutions, which had to publicly elaborate the grounds and processes of their decision-making.

Civil society can contribute to societal changes

The campaign attracted broad media coverage. The partnership with architects and experts helped to release significant amount of data and qualified opinions regarding lack of proper planning in Skopje and explanation how municipal decisions on urban planning affect citizen quality of life. The lift of the moratorium and the institutional unwillingness to act, allowed the inadequate urban construction to continue. However, due to the strong campaigning, citizens have become more aware about how municipal decisions affect people's daily life.



Environment has become a mainstream theme, one of the key issues in electoral programmes for the 2021 local elections and there was for the first time significant number of independent lists running for municipal councils. In few municipalities, including Centre, the vote of the independent councillors will be the decisive factor for the decisions that the municipality can make. This shows in practice the influence that civil society can have in the mid and long-term for improving transparency, accountability and good governance of institutions.



COVID-19 PANDEMIC IMPOSES ITS DYNAMIC AND DIFFERENT THEMES OF PUBLIC INTEREST

Response to the COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered our way of work in the Institute of Communication Studies (ICS), while managing to deliver activities at pace. For large portion of our work we used digital tools, there was enhanced communication with partners and flexible approach to media content, while managing to focus on issues of good governance and public participation.

With the start of the pandemic, we set the target of providing answers for issues of public interest which demanded responses during and after the state of emergency. We researched the themes regarding public procurements, the decisions and government decrees, rules regarding the curfew, patient treatment, vaccination. We made an effort to answer citizen questions, offered a wide spectrum of views by people from medicine, education, culture. There was significant production of media content, with two thirds of content focused on the COVID-19 pandemic.

We tracked transparency of government institutions regarding published data on infections and measures to fight the pandemic. The goal was to inform, raise awareness and educate citizens about COVID-19 and build trust between citizens, institutions and media.

Working throughout the COVID-19 pandemic helped us learn the following lessons

Adapt to changes and circumstances!

Starting from November 2020, in the ICS we had begun with conducting training for young journalists. The open call received 27 applicants on national level and the selection committee chose 22 participants. The training was online, although the initial plan was for 10 participants to be trained, with physical presence. The training was fully adapted for delivery of lectures via digital tools. Trainers and participants communicated through an Intranet system made available by ICS. Most of the participants were in the second or third year of studies in journalism and public relations, as well as employed who work in digital communication and need to improve their writing techniques. Lectures were held by experienced journalists from the country, who have years of professional experience working in and leading newsrooms and editorial teams in media.



Led by the goal of raising awareness about the different perils caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, we developed an e-mail newsletter that summarized content related to the pandemic. The newsletter distilled the key blogs, vlogs and podcasts published on COVID-19 related themes and was distributed to public institutions, NGOs, media and student community.

Prepare for the unknown and the unexpected!

The pandemic has shown how fast an immense change could happen in people's lives and work. They could be required to be resilient and organisations to activate crisis management plans.

Due to previous work through crisis and diverse portfolio of staff and skills that employees in the ICS have, we were able to swiftly reorganise and continue to deliver results of the work programme. We did not stop with production and publishing of new content. Content was steadily published on DOMA, ResPublica and Just Ask. ICS took necessary precautions for safety of staff, working from home, using digital platforms for communication, while work results kept their quality.

Numerous public institutions in the country worked with reduced capacities which was a challenge for providing answers to citizens on the Just Ask platform. Due to the vast network of institutions that ICS cooperated with, the delivery of this service was not

impacted. Moreover, the Central Registry of Macedonia reached out for co-operation on a set of questions from citizens, providing the answers.

Staff welfare should be maintained

The pandemic has shown the need to focus on human capital and welfare management. ICS is committed to continuous investment in people by enabling staff to work on their education, acquire new skills, expand their knowledge, personal development and maintain work-life balance.

9 METHODOLOGY

This review was produced following methodology designed for evaluating the implementation of the Connecting the Dots project.

Project documents were reviewed by an external communications and writing expert. The overall project documentation was reviewed - the project proposal document, narrative and financial reports for the implementation of the project, presentations of the project and the Clear It Up! campaign as well as the latest updated results framework. The expert analysed case studies of the project's achievements, reviewed media content produced within the project and media reports regarding project's activities and results.

Project components which have been successfully implemented were identified, along with specific project successes. Specific examples were selected to be included in the lessons learned review: urban construction - the case of building skyscrapers across the Holiday Inn hotel; licensing and operation of small hydropower plants; regional co-operation on common themes in the Western Balkans and the Clear It Up! campaign on advocacy and lobbying.

There were several internal discussions by the ICS team regarding lessons learned from the project implementation. The project achievements were analysed to identify actions that led to success, or need improvements in future, as well as actions that may be applicable to other stakeholders.

Questionnaire was prepared and distributed online to partner organisations on national level, and organisations in the region. The aim was to generate feedback from ICS's partners about the collaborative approach of the project, to capture diverse views and experiences. The concluding step was the writing of the report provided herein.

With the release of this document the Institute of Communication Studies (ICS) considers that it would be helpful to other civil society organisations that plan to design and implement projects that focus on safeguarding the public interest, by processes of coalition building, public demand for accountability of institutions and aim for change of policies designed by the public institutions.



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PROJECT STATISTICS

Published media products

546 news stories

335 blogs. Regularly published by 16 media, national partners

54 vlogs

152 gender-sensitive media products

24 podcasts


18 video documentaries

42 interviews

23 Multimedia investigative stories

88% of media products shared by national media

54% by regional media



Designed and published 6 policy papers and briefs
Participation in 4 consultations on legislation changes
Delivered 2 training modules in advocacy and lobbying
Completed 2 training modules for young journalists
Completed training of 22 young journalists

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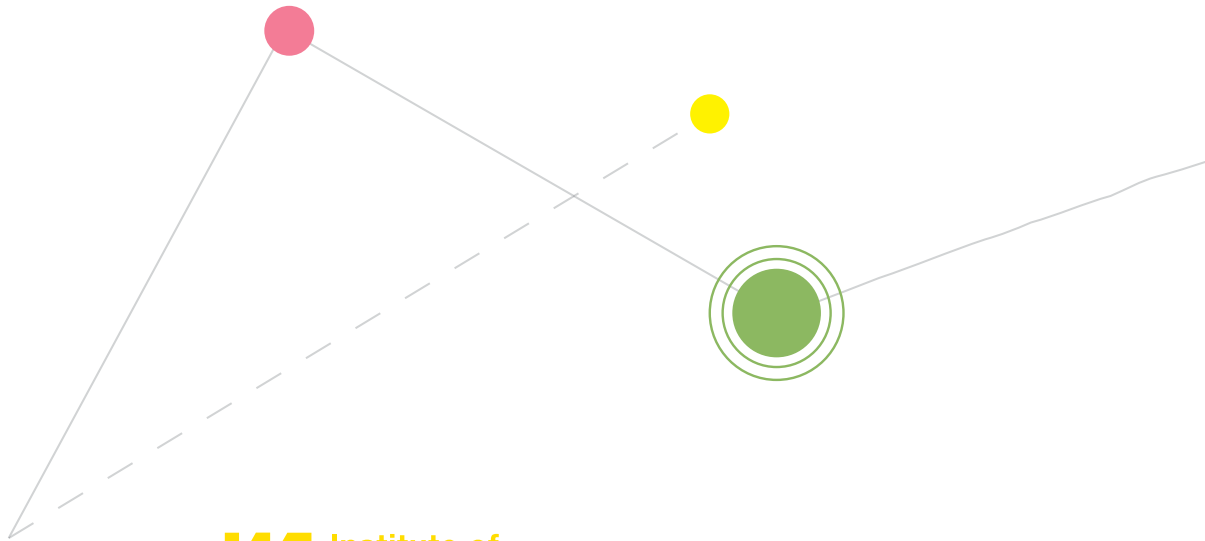
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