The National Network for Children: Achievements, Challenges and Sustainability Prospects

Summary points from the Assessment of the NNC’s project “I have Rights” supported by UNICEF and OAK

I. About the Assessment: objectives, approach and methodology

The assessment was commissioned by UNICEF to explore the effectiveness and impact of the support provided together with OAK Foundation to the NNC upon its organizational development, institutional positioning and effectiveness as a national network for advocacy and promotion of better policies, environment and practices for fostering the rights of children in Bulgaria.

The assessment was implemented in May – July 2011 by CREDA Consulting Ltd. It was designed to fit the formative nature of the evaluation, as both OAK and UNICEF will be providing continued support to the NNC. The applied approach was participatory and facilitative in order to stimulate reflection, feedback and strategic thinking forward on behalf of the members of the network, as well as of related key outside stakeholders. For this purpose we worked closely with the NNC Secretariat to adapt all instruments to the nature of the network and to integrate the external assessment as a supportive accompanying process for the NNC strategy assessment and upgrade processes, including the annual General Assembly on 23-25 June, 2011.

II. The National Network for Children Today: achievements, strengths and challenges

1. Strategic Relevance

The NNC is viewed by all respondents, both members and outside stakeholders (other NGOs and government), as an important initiative and influential actor responding to critical needs for consistent advocacy, policy and awareness work for changes of frameworks, capacities and attitudes in the field of children welfare. It is needed because:

- The complexity of the issues of children require multiple level reforms and interaction among institutions and with civil society;
- The change of policy and the practical implementation of the changed policies is a slow and challenging process that requires motivation and competence of institutions at the central and at the local levels;
- Introducing and sustaining children rights principles and practices require putting them firmly on the agenda of public debate thus increasing the base for public support.

The major strategic asset of the NNC is its nature of a platform uniting the efforts and voices of civic organizations working in different areas of children welfare. Its main role is seen in four aspects:

- Advocate for improvement of policies and practices;
- Developer of capacities of different stakeholders of importance to the practical implementation of policies (both institutions and civil society and especially at the local level where competencies are still missing or fragmented);
- Convener of different groups, interests and organizations around problem solving and initiatives;
- Public speaker for the importance of children rights, expanding the awareness of media and the public at large.

All these roles will be needed in the long term and all participants in the assessment consider that NNC is best fit to play them. A challenge for the network will be how to accommodate all of them, to identify and mobilize the needed resources in order to fulfill them effectively.
2. Organizational Development: Achievements and Challenges

Launched as informal coalition of leading organizations for children’s rights, in the past two years NNC has made the critical step towards a mature institutionalized organization. The support within the “I Have Right” Project provided by UNICEF and OAK has greatly aided NNC to turn into a professional national civic network with rapidly growing internal and external resources, legitimacy and visibility with institutions and the public at large.

The key achievements and potential challenges can be outlined in the following areas:

2.1.1. Membership development

- **Rapid growth of members and coverage.** In the course of only two years the NNC has grown twice, reaching 86 members in 2011 and expanding its membership base not only as number of member organizations but also thematic and geographic representation. 55 % (47 NGOs) are based outside Sofia and cover all but 3 of the 28 Bulgarian administrative regions. In 2010 the members of NNC have provided services or worked directly with 58 163 children and 13,733 families. Until 2010 NNC proactively sought appropriate new members and invited them as a part of its development strategy. In the last year and a half the process has gradually inverted and now more NGOs are joining the network on their own initiative attracted by the possibility to be part of a respected and visible platform for children’s rights.

- **Access to resources.** The diversity of the member organizations provides a rich variety of resources to NNC: specialized expertise, skills, practices, outreach to various children groups as age, ethnicity, level and aspects of vulnerability, etc. This in turn allows for identifying the most appropriate integrated answers to the complexity of needs in the field of children rights and in the country across themes, levels of interventions and target groups.

- **Members’ motivation.** There is a very strong motivation and self-identification of individual members with the network. They consider the network as truly important and useful to their organizations in several aspects:
  - belonging to a community of shared values and commitment to work for children welfare;
  - opportunities to participate in policy process at the national level, to be represented and heard by institutions;
  - opening new horizons: access to information, knowledge, contacts, new types of initiatives;
  - identification of new approaches/focus on children in the framework of their broader work for community development, social inclusion of marginalized groups, education etc.;
  - for locally based organizations – raised legitimacy with local institutions as a well informed and credible stakeholder/partner;
  - for social service providers – joint feedback to institutions to improve existing or introduce new services and upgrade related regulations.

- **A major challenge for NNC will be to keep the focus and have resources to balance the diversity and growing number of members.**
  - The growth of NNC as number of members is not on the top of its agenda now. Rather, the priority is effective work with the existing members to meet their needs and further consolidate their already quite diverse interests and visions for the network. This need has been confirmed by the interviews with members and their requests for more assistance and services related to access to information, acquisition of new skills and sharing of knowledge and practices, regionally and country wide. This request is especially strong at the local level, where the need for development of capacity of both NGOs and local institutions is very high;
  - At the same time, with the success of the network and its growing visibility, more organizations are applying for membership. The existing members often act as ambassadors of the network and attract other organizations from their region. As noted by the majority of the members, the network is a civic structure, it cannot be a closed club, and needs to stay open to new organizations. The main advantage of NNC growing as membership is the
strengthening of its role as a nationally representative association with massive knowledge in the subject area, influence and outreach to all target groups and stakeholders nationwide. The main risks are the insufficient time and resources to work with large number of members, difficulty to manage the diverse expectations and interests of the members, reach agreements on common policy positions. If these processes are no adequately managed the result may be decreased motivation and withdrawal of some members. The growth of NNC needs to be managed strategically, following a clear vision and revised criteria and forms of membership.

2.1.2. Internal organization and structures

- **There is a clear division of responsibilities among the different levels of the network** – General Assembly, Board and Secretariat. The Board is active and involved, and the working relations with the Secretariat are professional and friendly. The introduced practice of organizing expanded Board meetings in the different regions of the country are highly valued by all members. The key strategic documents (strategy plans and code of ethics) have been developed, and regularly updated at the GA meetings, based on consultative process with members;

- **All members value the professional and dedicated leadership of the Secretariat.** This, together with the value-based motivation at all levels of the organization, was stated in many interviews as key drives for the success of the network so far.

- **The NNC has expanded its Secretariat from 2 to 6 people since 2009, which was beneficial for a more professional response to the growing tasks and operations.** Based on our individual interviews with the staff members, there is a clear division of responsibility, high professionalism and commitment of each of the member of the team. Though some staff have joined the Secretariat very recently, they quickly acquire the needed skills due to the existing good system of supervision and support, provided by the management or colleagues. The NNC members value the prompt response of the team to their requests and the assistance on concrete issues, the level and quality of provided information on different topics, the bulletin, as well as organized trainings and/or meetings.

- **Both structures and decision making are based on the genuine commitment of the Board and the Secretariat to ensure participation and involvement of members.**
  - NNC has four thematic groups (Education, Family, Justice and Health) where members participate depending on their area of expertise and interest. Each of the groups has adopted rules and principles of functioning and has a Chair (selected by the members with a mandate of 2 years) and a coordinator (from the staff). The groups have adopted strategy priorities and annual plans for their work, with concrete objective/results, as well as well established communication channels;
  - NNC has a functioning mechanism for reaching agreement on key public and policy statements and positions related to strategic or immediate issues of importance. It provides for each member of the network to directly participate, provide suggestions, disagree or support the position. In the cases when there has been no reaction the principle of “silent agreement” is valid.

- **The different structures for participatory decision making and involvement of the members are assessed differently by the members.** Most consider them effective. They provide for members opportunities to get actively involved on issues they are interested in and can contribute to. At the same time some consider it will be important to regularly review and update the process and mechanisms of reaching shared agreement, as well as to optimize the work of the thematic groups – they are too broad as areas, with multiple objectives to accommodate different aspects and interests of participating organizations;

- **There is an open and regular communication within the network.** Members assess very high the communication with the Secretariat, though more visits on site and meetings among the members in the regions are requested. More opportunities for regional meetings and joint initiatives among members are another need stated mostly by NGO members from outside the capital.
2.1.3. Institutional Positioning of the NNC as a key advocate for children’s rights

- NNC has succeeded in developing effective outside communication – good internet site, bulletin (liked and red by members, state institutions, associations of municipalities, NGOs), widely disseminated statements, public presentations;
- NNC has organized four successful national campaigns that have brought for its visibility not only within the targeted institutions, but also with the general public. The network also mobilizes support for important campaigns of its members;
- NNC is recognized by major institutions as the leading NGO platform for children’s rights. Its opinion on policies and regulations is considered and often requested by the institutions. There is a growing number of cases when the media approaches the network for opinions and input on children related issues and cases. NNC is participates in practically all committees or working groups at different state agencies and/or ministries working on child-related issues. It is represented by the Secretariat and/or by its members. Based on interviewed representatives of the institutions, the NNC is considered as one of the best and most credible civic organization;
- The network has an enormous resource for advocacy – nation-wide representation of NGOs, diverse and rich expertise, access to locally based practices from all parts of the country that can serve as representative advocacy cases for policy change and improvement in different areas of importance to children rights;
- The effectiveness of the NNC advocacy initiatives so far are assessed differently by its members. Some consider them as meaningful and effective. Others are more critical, and consider that advocacy is still at a very initial stage and the potential of the network is not fully utilized. Some members have not found their place in the advocacy campaigns and think the campaigns so far have not reached the roots of the problems of concern to their particular target groups and areas of work. A major challenge will be how to define advocacy efforts focus and priorities, that is considered equally important by all members and that renders account not only of needs, but also of opportunities for change, time and resource needed.
- The institutions covered by the interviews share two points of frustration. The first is in the cases when a representative of a member organization is stating an opinion: the confusion here is whose is the opinion – of NNC or the member NGO. The second one is related to the expectation of the institutions for more support rather than criticism on behalf of NNC – in this case it is not just the traditional complaint of the administration from watch-dog NGO, but rather the need for more deep and informed cooperation.

II. Summary of Conclusions and Recommendations

NNC has made an impressive progress for the short period of two years. Based on this assessment and compared to most of the civic networks in Bulgaria it is one of the most dynamic and successful ones – visible and legitimate with institutions and the public, meaningful and committed to bring for better environment and wellbeing of children. Some suggestions for further attention and improvement include:

1. Strategic coherence

1.1. Better focus and clear priorities both strategically and tactically, based not only on the needs and diverse interests of members, but also on careful analyses of the feasibility of the desired change, the existing and/or needed resources and the means of developing the missing ones. Priorities must be situated in a clear timeframe – defining the short-term and the long-term priorities will help build developmental space for testing approaches and increasing capacities and resources.

1.2. NNC needs to develop shared vision on the growth of the network
- It can consider activating some of the adopted by the Board but still not practiced provisions for associated members. The network can also provide for mobilizing supporters or associates on regional basis – with one or a group of existing member organizations in the relevant region providing for coordination of the regional efforts.
More focus on growing capacities at the local level is considered of critical importance by members and outside stakeholders. The increased capacities of the NNC members, especially in the field of advocacy, are an investment not only in strengthening of the local NGOs but also in the future success of NNC in implementation of children rights.

2. Further optimization of structures and organization for increased impact in advocacy

2.1. Optimizing the work of the Board

- The established good principles of work of the Board from the previous mandate should be formalized as internal Standards of Work of NNC Board, defining roles, responsibilities and functioning. The standards may be discussed during the planned meeting of the former and newly established Board;
- It will be good to introduce the practice of concrete thematic or functional responsibilities of individual Board members in overseeing aspects of the work of the NNC. They can serve as coordinators of broader Board committees or consultative groups thus better contributing to the growing needs of the NNC.

2.2. Optimizing the work of the Thematic Groups

- There is a need of further upgrade of the thematic working groups. The role of the chairs of the thematic groups, as well as the forms of engagement of the members, needs to be clarified. Based on suggestions of members, smaller sub groups (ad-hoc, problem solving or on more specific issues) may help better utilizing the participation and resource of members;
- Better link between the work of the Thematic groups and the Board can be considered, by organizing expanded meetings of the Board with participation of the Chairs of the groups.

2.3. Increased presence in the regions. NNC must increase its work on the local and regional level towards both mobilizing members from one region and more effective interaction with local and district administrations. NNC should not develop regional structures, but rather empower select members to organize and coordinate processes and initiatives on behalf of the whole network. These can involve regional meetings, regionaly based campaigns involving local members, concrete local advocacy actions, etc. In the longer term, this can bring for expanding the outreach of the network by mobilizing active member organizations to serve as coordinators for broader circles of supporters and associates. Developing partnerships with the regional associations of municipalities will greatly aid the process of expanded work on the local level.

2.4. Further growth and upgrade of staff. Three main capacities of the staff will be of critical importance in the future: capacity development of members, advocacy and policy work and donor communication and fundraising. The recommendation is that these capacities are developed within the existing staff members.

3. Fundraising – Strategy

3.1. Thanks to the support of Oak and UNICEF, in the last two years the main efforts of NNC have been focused on the development of the network as influential, respected and visible advocate for children rights. The time allocated for additional fundraising has been limited, although the Secretariat and the Board have discussed potential sources of funding and some steps had been made in approaching leading donors available in the country, e.g. America for Bulgaria Foundation. The possibility for attracting direct State subsidies is high on the agenda, as NNC can claim to be nationally represented association.

3.2. In the coming period NNC needs to elaborate a thorough fundraising plan. This by itself will be a long process requiring at least 6 months – the pros and cons of the available types of funding should be explored (in terms of effort, harmony with the mission and goals, acceptable level of compromise, etc), the practical dimensions of avoiding competition with the members should be defined, the fundraising
plan with its priorities and types of projects to be developed should be agreed by all members, targeted relations with prospective donors should be established, the opportunities offered by EU programs managed in Brussels should be specially monitored and analysed.

3.3. For drafting the fundraising strategy NNC may consider developing a Fundraising consultative group consisting of members with experience in fundraising, the secretariat, representatives of the Board, as well as outside consultants to assist exploration of sources and feasibility of funding.

3.4. The support by UNICEF and OAK will continue to be of critical importance for the success of the network and its further sustainability. It has been an investment rather than just a grant, as it has provided strategic space and resource for systematic work for consolidating the network, establishing its institutional positioning and credibility. From this perspective, we would suggest that next phase of support is provided as a core support, or institutional grant, rather than a project one. This will respond best to the needs of NNC and greatly aid the accomplishment of its long-term goals.

4. Fundraising – identifying and raising resources for the network

4.1. Approaching key donors in Bulgaria

- The donor environment in Bulgaria has changed. There are no donors providing institutional support to civic organizations and networks. Those that have done it in the past have phased out from the country with its European membership. Those that stayed, provide support to projects and programs in the framework of their priorities;
- The few existing donors that can potentially support the network for projects related to its civic nature (advocacy, advancing participatory culture, effective interaction with government, etc.) usually react to the area of children rights as “social work” and/or service provision. They do not consider it as part of their priorities of good governance, civil society, policy work etc.;
- This narrow perception of NNC needs to be addressed. If NNC just applies to such donors (e.g. America for Bulgaria Foundation, Trust for Civil Society, Balkan Trust for Democracy) its chances for success will be minimal, unless its shifts away from its nature and core goals in order to fit within their preconceived areas and types of activities/programming;
- Approaching the above donors needs to be perceived as part of the advocacy and lobbying work of the network for its cause – the needs of the reform processes and the capacity building nationally and locally to turn reforms into working practices. In other words it needs to be preceded by a focused and consistent donor education and building relations.

4.2. Direct State subsidy as a nationally representative organization

- This option exists in the strategy of NNC and some steps had been made to explore it as a possibility. Though in theory it may be possible, it will hardly be feasible in the coming few years. First, NNC should be included in a special law, i.e. the Child Protection Act. The process of lobbying for such a decision will be challenging due to both its high political implications and the frustration of some governmental officials by the public criticism of NNC to certain state policies and approaches. Furthermore, the current Government is very skeptical about the use and effectiveness of providing funds from the national budget to NGOs and may cut them significantly;
- There is no shared agreement among the members on the benefits of this type of funding. While for some of them it will greatly contribute to the sustainability and the legitimacy of the network, others consider that it will seriously affect the independence of NNC. Based on the evidence in Bulgaria and internationally, if subsidized by the State NNC risks clashes with its advocacy role as a critical and independent civic voice for policy change;
- A strategic question for the NNC is what will be the cost of the state financing as efforts, time, resources and as compromises.
4.3. Project funding

The main potential for attracting funds are the structural funds (Operational programs) and other EU programs open for member countries. A challenge in exploring this potential is how to identify projects that will not be in competition with the members of the network. (Avoiding competition with its members has been a clear policy for the NNC.) Some suggestions that came from this assessment that may be of use for the discussions on project funding:

- Joint or “cluster” projects of groups of members. NNC can thus facilitate access to resources of smaller organizations, and within these joint projects provide for capacity development and learning;
- Advocacy projects – for example in relation to coming elections and need to advocate with newly elected local officials for adopting children rights based policies;
- Advocacy campaigns, action research etc., related to larger-scale EU initiatives;
- Capacity development projects – training and education in different thematic areas. Some European programs (for ex. the European Citizenship) can provide for expanding capacities through learning and exchange with other EU countries.

4.4. Raising support from other sources

- Together with the Bulgarian Donors Forum, a strategic partner of NNC, the network may develop a strategy for fundraising from businesses and individuals. An opportunity in this direction will be eventual support from the C. S. Mott foundation for developing philanthropy around the issues of children. As corporate support is still underdeveloped in Bulgaria and many NGOs try to attract it, NNC should manage the risk of competing not only with its members, but with other partner organizations;
- Service and resource provision may be a source for funding in the longer term. At this stage the planned resource center will be more useful if targeting the needs of capacity development at the local level – by providing training to local stakeholders, institutions and its members. It is unlikely that the Resource Center will become a serious source of income from paid trainings; however, it can serve for raising project support, as well as raising the credibility of the network as trusted resource provider.
- It is not likely that the membership fee can grow to provide for sustainability of the network. Based on the experience of networks with large income from membership fees (e.g. the National Association of Municipalities in Bulgaria), the organization will be still dependent on project funding – it will have to learn how to integrate in the projects some of the institutional costs for salaries and administration. As shared by the National Association of Municipalities, their current sustainability is due to the fact that they have one decade of institutional support provided by USAID and other donors, which guaranteed their establishment as organization and credible stakeholder. Another lesson from their experience is related to their role as resource center and trainer of local administrations. Again, the proper fulfillment of this role required years of marketing, testing and competing with other resource and training providers – NGOs, universities, businesses, international organisations, etc.