

Round table

Criteria for Allocation of State and City Owned Office/Work Spaces to CSOs

During the NGO Days, a Roundtable was held on the 15th of June 2012 at Tribine Grada Zagreba, on the subject of “Criteria for the Allocation of State and City Owned Office/Work Spaces to CSOs”. 64 persons participated at the roundtable discussion: 50 representatives of CSOs and 17 representatives of various state and local administration bodies (the Office of the City of Zagreb, the City of Rijeka, as well as the State Property Management Agency and the Government Office for Cooperation with NGOs). Roundtable discussion was moderated by Mr. Igor Vidačak, acting director of the Office for Cooperation with NGOs of the Government of the Republic of Croatia and Ms. Gordana Forčić, executive director of the Organization for Civil Society Development SMART.

The aim of the roundtable was to discuss the criteria for the allocation of state and city owned office/work spaces to CSOs for the execution of their programs and projects for common good, as well as to initiate dialogue with the interested public about this question, which has tremendous influence on the sustainability of the work done by NGOs and other CSOs in the Republic of Croatia.

Office space is one of the main factors in CSO sustainability. According to the results of the study “Assessment of CSO development status in the Republic of Croatia” done by the National Foundation for Civil Society Development in the second half of 2011 on a sample of 651 CSOs (253 being from Zagreb) it is clear that a half of the sample carries out their activities from a donated office space, which was given to them rent-free, while slightly less than a third of them rents the office space. About 14,8% of CSOs do not have an office space in which they could perform their activities, whereas 7,6% owns their own office space. CSOs from Zagreb and its surrounding area rent their office space more often than CSOs from other regions and it is less often that they receive donated office space than CSOs in other regions. The importance of securing office/work space for CSO activities is also apparent from the fact that within the draft National Strategy for the Creation of an Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development from 2012 to 2016, within Strategic Area 1: Institutional Framework for the Support of Civil Society Development a measure was defined “Establish a transparent procedure for the allocation of state-owned office/work spaces for CSO perusal for the purpose of carrying out programs and projects in the interest of the common good”.

During the introductory part of the roundtable, presentations were given by Mr. Igor Vidačak, acting Director of the Office for Cooperation with NGOs of the Government of the Republic of Croatia and Mr. Danijel Škugor, secretary of the State Property Management Agency. Moreover, the roundtable also featured examples of good practice of successful public-civil partnerships in using city and state-owned office/work spaces: Mr. Toni Vidan, manager of the project “Solar Academy for South Eastern Europe – Šolta” by Zelena akcija and Ms. Mirjana Rimanić, program coordinator of “Pogon - Zagreb Centre for Independent Culture and Youth”.

In his introductory presentation Mr. Igor Vidačak pointed out two main approaches for allocation of public property office space for CSO activities, as well as their advantages and shortcomings:

- Expression of interest by CSOs to the relevant bodies – preparation of a list based on the established criteria.
- Open call – office space is assigned to CSOs based on the established list of available property planned to be assigned and clear criteria.

Mr. Danijel Škugor, secretary of the State Property Management Agency presented the current status as concerns allocation of office/work spaces to CSOs. Currently there are over 120 office spaces owned by the Republic of Croatia, which are being used by CSOs for their activities. Mr. Škugor pointed out several key challenges related to allocation of office spaces to CSOs: lack of clearly defined criteria for allocation of office space, lack of a clear list of the existing office spaces owned by the Republic of Croatia, which might be assigned to CSOs, non-existence of a register of office spaces that are used by CSOs and which are a property of the Republic of Croatia, and illegal use of office spaces by CSOs, which either inherited the space from previous owners (e.g. the City of Zagreb) or entered into it by force. At the same time, a large number of state-owned spaces are in poor condition and require large investments to make them functional as office/work spaces. Mr. Škugor announced that state-level criteria concerning allocation of office spaces should be adopted by September 2012.

Mr. Toni Vidan, manager of the project “Solar Academy for South Eastern Europe – Šolta” by Zelena akcija, briefly presented the Solar Academy Project. This project represents a unique example of how an abandoned and devastated military facility can, through volunteer work, be transformed into an internationally recognized educational centre for environmental issues, becoming an attractive spot for young people who want to learn more about environment protection and green technologies. The facility in which Solar Academy is implemented is the property of the Republic of Croatia and has been assigned to Zelena akcija for the duration of 10 years. The ten-year period expires this year and they plan to request an extension of the contract for the use of the facility.

Ms. Mirjana Rimanić, presented Pogon – Zagreb Centre for Independent Culture and Youth, which is a hybrid cultural institution, founded on a new model of civil-public partnership. The founders of Pogon are CSO Alliance Operation Zagreb and the City of Zagreb. The mission of Pogon is to establish an open local centre for the development of independent contemporary culture and art and the active involvement of youth in cultural and social life. The main challenges in managing the assigned space concern the lack of financial resources for further equipping and decorating of the space, so that it might become fully functional. Furthermore, during program implementation it became obvious that the need for space of CSOs working in the area of independent cultural scene has still not been fully met, referring primarily to the lack of office space for these organisations.

The discussion resulted in the following suggestions/conclusions:

- It is crucial that the Government office for Cooperation with NGOs and State Property Management Agency closely and continuously cooperate in the interest of the most effective and transparent process of adoption of criteria for allocation of office/work spaces. It is also necessary to organize public consultations on the prepared proposal for the criteria.

- It is important to take into consideration the pros and cons of both approaches, which were presented at the round table, when making the decision on the most appropriate method for allocation of office spaces to CSOs.
- When defining criteria for allocation of office spaces, it would be important to consider the following aspects and features of CSO activities: the profile of the beneficiaries with which CSO is working, references and organizational capacity of CSO, number of CSO members, joint perusal of space by several CSOs, openness for the use of space for different target groups, etc.
- It is important to establish a practice of signing partnership contracts when implementing programs of the strategic interest, in cases when the state is not able to offer that specific type of service, and such programs should have a priority in allocation of state or local administration owned space.
- It would be necessary to consider establishing a separate fund at the National Foundation for Civil Society Development, which would have open calls on annual basis for renovation and fitting of devastated spaces used by more than one CSO in implementation of common good activities.
- A list should be prepared of all non-commercial spaces that were or currently are available to CSOs, and this list should be agreed on through the process of consultation with the public. Moreover, a revision of the existing perusal of spaces by CSOs should be carried out.
- In order to establish continuous process of revision of the system of space usage by CSOs, a system of “fast” evaluation should be in place, through which a revision of the efficiency and quality of space usage would be carried out annually.
- Cost of utilities for the space owned by CSOs should not be the same as the amount payable by entrepreneurs.
- The contract on allocation of space should have a clear clause concerning a deadline by which the allocated space should be renovated/fitted, or by which a plan for renovation/fitting of the space should be submitted. With such deadlines in place the revision and monitoring of quality of the usage of space by CSOs should be made easier.
- In order to increase transparency of activities by the Committee for the Allocation of Office/Work Spaces to CSOs, it would be necessary to also include independent experts into the Committee’s work, as well as CSO representatives, wherever possible, keeping in mind to avoid a conflict of interest of the CSO representatives, as well as the members of the Committee.
- It is recommended to extend the standard duration of leases to CSOs, keeping in mind that the CSO already using an office space should have a priority concerning re-allocation/extension of contract. It would also be necessary to provide for short-term, medium-term and long-term leasing.

- Use as much as possible the advantages of the internet to increase transparency of the process of allocation of office/work space and definition of the criteria for the allocation of space.
- Invite all those interested in these issues to submit their comments and suggestions concerning criteria for allocation of state-owned office/work spaces to CSOs working in the area of common-good projects and programs.
- Organize a public debate on the subject of allocation of office/work spaces to CSOs by the City of Zagreb and make the existing criteria for allocation of office/work spaces to CSOs on the territory of the City of Zagreb more transparent.