

# **BULGARIA DEMOCRACY NETWORK PROGRAM**

**DEMNET I**

**1995-1998**

**FINAL REPORT TO  
THE U.S. AGENCY OF INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**COOPERATIVE AGREEMENT NO.**

**DHR-032-A-00-5017**



INSTITUTE FOR SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES  
56 COLLEGE STREET  
MONTPELIER, VT 05602  
PHONE 802-229-2900 | FAX 802-229-2919  
ISC@ISCVT.ORG | WWW.ISCVT.ORG

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## I. Executive Summary

This final report summarizes the implementation strategy and results of the Democracy Network program in Bulgaria, carried out during the period April 1995 through November 1998. The Democracy Network program (DemNet I) is one of the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) efforts to improve citizen participation in Bulgaria in both qualitative and quantitative ways. The idea behind DemNet I was that nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) would help citizens understand important issues by organizing public meetings, bulletins, trainings, and media campaigns. Additionally, NGOs would serve as catalysts and channels for citizens to express their views in the development of policies that affect their lives by establishing citizen committees and conducting surveys whose results would be transmitted to decision makers. An important facet of DemNet I was promoting NGOs' ability to influence public policy making – from the village to the national level in four priority sectors: democracy, social safety net, economic development, and environmental protection. Changing laws, regulations, and procedures that govern Bulgarian citizens to be more in tune with their interests and aspirations characterized many of the projects funded under DemNet I.

The Institute for Sustainable Communities (ISC) administered the DemNet program. ISC grants were given to 111 Bulgarian NGOs during DemNet I to carry out 124 projects related to a wide variety of issues including: promoting ethnic tolerance, local government reform, social and civil rights, handicapped rights protection, voter education and mobilization, consumers' rights, environmental protection, worker safety, educational system reform, and decreasing violence against women. The fields of activity of DemNet grantees were as impressive as they were diverse. Among their most notable achievements were:

- Fifty-five documented cases of NGOs **influencing laws, rules, and regulations** from the local to national levels. Examples of national legislation that DemNet grantees have influenced over the past two years include laws on worker safety, child protection, and environmental protection. A new non-partisan election law, drafted by a DemNet grantee in partnership with the Ministry of Justice, will be considered by Parliament in the fall 1999 session.
- Significant **public participation in local self-government** in towns such as Plovdiv, Varna, Razgrad, Dobrich, Veliko Turnovo, and other municipalities. Instruments used ranged from “low-tech” (facilitating public involvement in council meetings) to “hi-tech” (establishing a computerized telephone opinion collection system).
- **Use of the media to educate and inform the public of NGO activities.** More than 2,000 instances of DemNet I grantee media coverage, including publications (articles in newspapers, magazines, news bulletins) and broadcasts (radio and television) occurred during the DemNet I period.
- **Partnerships** between DemNet grantees and other NGOs, media, and governmental bodies were numerous. These partnerships almost always increased the chances of project success and sustainability of project activities. Sixty-four DemNet-funded projects involved such partnerships.

During DemNet I, ISC was not only concerned with funding NGO project activities, but also substantially improving the organizational capacity, effectiveness, and chances of sustainability of grantee NGOs. To achieve this, ISC offered:

- **Institutional strengthening grants** to 42 Bulgarian NGOs that paid for administrative costs, office equipment, and in some cases, limited project activities.
- **An extensive training program** that delivered over 100 group-training modules on 25 topics to almost 900 individuals from 133 organizations. These trainings covered internal management topics (for example, human resource management, strategic planning, and project management) and externally oriented topics (for example, working with the media, advocacy, and building multi-sectoral partnerships). In addition, more than 20 DemNet I grantees took advantage of the opportunity to receive further in-depth, individualized training in their own offices on topics related to organizational development and project implementation.
- **A consulting program** that sent consultants, upon request by DemNet I grantees, to work on project-related problems and/or organizational development concerns. For example, ISC consultants helped several NGOs improve their media strategies in order to improve public understanding and involvement in their projects, and helped many organizations develop strategic and income-generation plans, as well as improved governance structures.

The results of the DemNet I training and technical assistant program have been substantial. In ISC assessments, 94 of the 111 DemNet I grantees show a strong improvement in their organizational capacities. DemNet grantees are more effective in their internal management and external relations due to ISC DemNet I help. The NGOs supported during the DemNet I program have become a core group of active and vibrant organizations throughout the country that are models for other NGOs working to increase citizen participation in policy decision-making.

## **II. Goals and Objectives**

In ISC's original proposal for the DemNet program, four main goals and objectives were listed:

- To develop a sustainable community of NGOs in Bulgaria;
- To increase the management effectiveness of Bulgarian NGOs;
- To increase the public credibility of NGOs in Bulgaria;
- To link NGOs in Bulgaria more effectively with one another and with international NGOs.

In fact, as ISC began implementing the DemNet program in Bulgaria, and as USAID began developing its Strategic Objective Framework in 1995, ISC's originally stated goals and objectives became more articulated and refined. The Democracy Network program in Bulgaria was an important element of USAID/Sofia's Strategic Objective 2.1, "Increased Better Informed Citizens' Participation in Public Policy." NGOs were viewed as a channel for mobilizing citizen

participation and representing citizen interests to local, regional, and national policy making bodies. *Supporting target NGOs<sup>1</sup> in their endeavors to increase citizen participation as well as influence public policy was one of the critical goals of the Democracy Network program.* Selecting NGO projects that had the best chances of influencing policies and increasing citizens initiatives was the driving force behind ISC's grants program. The other main goal was *increasing the effectiveness of NGOs and the chances of sustainability of NGOs*, and this was the impetus behind ISC's training and technical assistance programs.

In ISC's Mid-term Strategy paper, the goals and objectives of the program were further refined and elaborated. The goal of the Program was stated as: *to support and strengthen a critical mass of NGOs which have an impact on building civil society in Bulgaria by engaging citizen participation in public policy debate and advocating for policy change.*

## **A. Program Impact Objectives**

To achieve the primary goal of the program, ISC identified four *program impact objectives* that paralleled ISC's strategy to support individual NGOs and the NGO sector:

1. Improve the ability of the DemNet program target NGOs to carry out their missions and activities effectively.
2. Improve the public accountability, credibility, and image of the DemNet program target NGOs and the NGO sector.
3. Increase the ability of NGOs to mobilize citizen participation in policy formation and expand the number of opportunities for citizen participation in activities that contribute to the strengthening of civil society and the democratic environment in Bulgaria.
4. Improve the ability of the DemNet program target NGOs to be effective advocates for public policy change.

## **B. Operational Objectives**

Three *operational objectives* were also identified that aimed at improving the overall effectiveness of the program:

5. Support the growth of indigenous assistance efforts.
6. Maximize the impact of United States Government (USG) and other donor assistance in the areas of democracy strengthening and NGO development.
7. Strengthen ISC's program management and reporting capabilities.

Along with these objectives, a series of quantifiable expected results were developed. In almost all cases, the actual results exceed the quantifiable expected results. **Attachment A** summarizes the results of the ISC-implemented DemNet I program according to USAID-approved goals and objectives.

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<sup>1</sup> Target NGOs were ones selected by the ISC DemNet program to receive grants. Grantees also benefited from training, technical assistance and other support under the Program.

### **III. Highlights of Strategic Impacts**

ISC's Democracy Network program strategy was to lead and support both individual NGOs and the NGO sector (via the critical mass of the DemNet program target NGOs) along a general *development path*<sup>2</sup> that started with organizational strengthening and ended with effective advocacy for policy change. The main purpose of this sector-wide development strategy was to bring previously autonomous NGOs together into coalitions and partnerships that enabled them to be effective advocates for policy change.

ISC's strategic approach to fulfilling the DemNet program objectives had three stages -- strengthening target NGOs, creating a critical mass of NGOs, and helping the critical mass of NGOs have an impact on public policy in Bulgaria.

#### **A. Strengthening Target NGOs**

##### **Organizational Capacity**

The DemNet program target NGOs were selected through three grant rounds. To strengthen target NGOs, ISC integrated grantmaking, training, and technical assistance to individual NGOs to enable them to carry out their missions and activities effectively. DemNet favorably impacted the development of the organizational capacity of 98 NGOs.

##### **Citizen Participation**

Grants supported the institutional strengthening of target NGOs and/or activities that provided opportunities for citizen involvement in policy formation in four priority sectors: democracy, social safety net, economic development, and environmental protection. Citizens were involved in legal defense in court, legislative changes, and public hearings that changed the decisions of local administrations. For example, the Municipality of Plovdiv, as a result of a grantee's project, changed its regulations to ensure that citizen opinions on public safety and welfare issues are taken into consideration before a council vote can be held.

##### **Public Outreach**

In addition to supporting internal organizational development and improved project management, ISC's training and technical assistance program assisted NGOs in improving their public outreach and advocacy capabilities. Grantees involved the public in their activities through a variety of public outreach mechanisms including public meetings, press conferences, seminars, public hearings, surveys, and referendum campaigns. Additionally, three regional conferences and a national meeting were held to facilitate networking, coalition building, and discussion of common issues.

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<sup>2</sup> In the Strategy paper, it was posited that NGOs with which we work will progress on a development path that includes four phases: 1) Establishment Phase; 2) Consolidation Phase; 3) Public Outreach Phase; and 4) Effective Advocacy Phase.

## **B. Creating a Critical Mass of NGOs<sup>3</sup>**

### **Partnerships**

From the inception of the DemNet program, target NGOs were encouraged to network and form alliances among themselves and with other like-minded NGOs and institutions, such as think tanks, to learn from each other and improve their programs accordingly, and to become an enlarged force for public policy change. Partnerships were formed in 64 such projects. Partners included over 60 municipalities across Bulgaria, and the Ministries of Environment, Foreign Affairs and Justice.

## **C. Helping the Critical Mass of NGOs Have an Impact on Public Policy in Bulgaria**

### **Public Policy**

After strengthening the capabilities of individual target NGOs and encouraging them to improve their operations and expand their impact by forming alliances with each other and additional like-minded institutions, NGOs supported by the DemNet program were encouraged, individually and in groups, to form partnerships with other sectors of Bulgarian society. Partnerships were encouraged with local government, business, and the media to increase their effectiveness in involving citizens in public policy change. These partnerships occurred at the local, regional, and national levels. Grantees contributed to changes in policy or practice at these three levels. Examples at the national level include influencing legislation in the areas of election law, environmental protection, worker safety, and child welfare. On the local level, grantees changed environmental planning decisions, consumer protection practices, and land distribution procedures.

## **IV. Program Activities**

In this section background information about the project and the activities of the ISC Democracy Network Program are described. Project legacies, lessons learned, and recommendations are included in later sections of the report.

### **Background Information**

The Cooperative Agreement DHR-032-A-00-5017-00 between the United States Agency for International Development and the Institute for Sustainable Communities for the Democracy Network Program in Bulgaria was signed on February 10th, 1995. The total amount of the original Agreement was \$3.5 million, and it was scheduled to terminate on February 27<sup>th</sup>, 1998. As with the other Democracy Network programs being implemented across Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic States, the purpose of the three-year DemNet program in Bulgaria was to develop and strengthen a broad range of indigenous public policy-oriented NGOs working in four main areas: democracy building, social safety net, economic development and environmental protection. ISC's role was to run an open and transparent grant making process, and provide training and technical assistance to NGOs in the priority areas. The Democracy Network Programs were unique in their administrative structure in that the U.S. Embassies, through the Democracy Commission, played a key role in setting the direction and approving grantees for the Programs.

ISC's Country Director arrived in Sofia in April 1995, established residence in May, and started processes related to hiring staff and opening an office. At the same time, he held intensive discussions with USAID/Sofia staff and NGO leaders about the Program, in order to draft a workplan. A plan was drafted in June and accepted by USAID by mid-July 1995. Given the administrative structure of the DemNet program, the Democracy Commission (DC) was then given the workplan to approve. The Democracy Commission requested a series of revisions to the workplan,<sup>4</sup> and approved it at the end of September 1995.

The Program was launched in October 1995, with a series of informational meetings around Bulgaria where ISC conducted a survey of NGO needs and expectations of the DemNet program. In November, the competition for the first grants round was launched. This round was considered by ISC and USAID to be a "pilot round" whereby all systems and procedures – including monitoring, financial control, and application evaluation – could be tested. This competition was limited to supporting organizations and projects in the democracy strengthening area.

ISC launched the second grant round competition in June 1996, which was open to NGOs working in the area of Democracy Strengthening and Social Safety Nets. Before launching the third, and final, grant round in March 1997 (which was open to NGOs working in all four eligible areas), ISC requested a no-cost extension of the Program from USAID. This extension was requested with the knowledge that because of cost-savings, and a later than anticipated program launch, there would be sufficient funds for another 9 to 12 months of operation past the scheduled end of the project, thereby allowing additional time for the implementation of grantee activities.

In response to the extension request, USAID/Sofia decided to conduct a mid-term evaluation of the Program, which started in March 1997, and was carried out by Management Systems International. In April 1997, USAID/Sofia and ISC held a retreat, with the participation of USAID/Washington, senior ISC Sofia and ISC Vermont staff, and an outside facilitator, to discuss the findings of the evaluation. As a result of this retreat, it was decided that ISC would write a new strategy paper for the remainder of the program<sup>5</sup> and that based on this strategy, USAID would determine the exact length of the no-cost extension. The strategy paper was accepted by USAID in June 1997 and subsequently the agency agreed to a nine-month no-cost extension (through November 30, 1998) which was processed shortly before the end of February 1998.

## **A. Grants Program**

ISC developed a grants program that offered Bulgarian NGOs four types of support:

1. Project Assistance Grants
2. Partnership Grants
3. Institutional Strengthening Grants

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<sup>4</sup> The most significant changes to ISC's workplan that the Democracy Commission insisted on were: elimination of four Bulgarian expert panels to review grant applications, with review responsibilities given to ISC, USAID and the Democracy Commission; and re-ranking of some of ISC's proposed grant evaluation criteria.

<sup>5</sup> The major elements of the new strategy are discussed in section III.

#### 4. Training Grants

Some grantees also received “Combined Package” Grants – awards of more than one of the above grants together.

Most target NGOs received Project Assistance Grants which were given to NGOs to carry out a project in line with the priorities of the DemNet program. An element shared by all Project Assistance grants was some contribution to the strengthening of democracy/civil society, no matter what specific sector the grant was allocated for. For example, a grant given to the Roma Regional Development Foundation in Plovdiv was for establishing citizen committees to oversee distribution of municipal land to poor Roma families. The Social Development Club, Dobrich helped citizens better understand and use the services of the Municipality. Club Economics 2000 developed draft regulation for Solid Waste Management, which was used in a series of municipalities for their own regulation needs. Meeting Foundation conducted projects on social rights promotion and assistance in Kurdjaly, Sliven, and Dobrich. See **Attachment C** for complete grantee project descriptions.

ISC consciously tried to support a wide mix of NGOs, most of which were either located outside of Sofia, or carried out activities that benefited areas outside of the capital, in addition to Sofia. ISC stressed on supporting grassroots NGOs and activities, as well as a variety of different types of organizations within the DemNet program priority fields, for two reasons. First, the Democracy Commission as well as USAID conveyed to ISC at the outset of the project that NGOs in Sofia, particularly large, well-developed ones, were not the priority of the Program<sup>6</sup>. Secondly, ISC believed that a lively mix of organizations, both from a topical and geographic perspective, was important for establishing a “critical mass” of NGOs active in the DemNet program’s four priority areas. The areas for which the DemNet program provided target NGOs funding were:

***Democracy Strengthening*** to: encourage the emergence of civil society by focusing on human and civil rights promotion and protection and promote citizen participation in local self-government; encourage local government reform, voter education and mobilization; improve electoral legislation; increase civil rights, legal system improvement, and anti-corruption laws; and democratize the educational system and promote parliamentary transparency;

***Social Safety Nets*** to: improve systems and procedures to assist Bulgarians at risk; increase the number and capacity of NGOs working in the social safety area; improve legislation protecting child and worker safety; and promote and protect social rights and benefits;

***Environmental Protection*** to: improve key legislation in protected areas; promote citizen participation in solving local environmental problems; improve national park protection and usage; and improve public awareness and Black Sea protection;

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<sup>6</sup> 60% of all registered NGOs are located in Sofia. Before the start of the Democracy Network Program, there was a propensity for donor assistance to benefit a limited number of NGOs based in the capital. Recognizing this, and the pent up “demand” by non-Sofia based NGOs for project financing, USAID and the Democracy Commission recommended that ISC make funding grassroots initiatives outside of Sofia a priority.

***Economic Development*** to: expedite land redistribution; reduce unemployment; increase community economic development planning; promote business associations, economic development agencies, consumer rights, and stockholder rights.

In selecting grantees for Project Assistance (and Institutional Strengthening) awards, key criteria evaluated included the *potential impact* of the project or organization, as well as *capability* and *track record*. To promote democracy strengthening and other important objectives of the DemNet program, many of the funded projects:

- established or helped consolidate *mechanisms* of citizen involvement, civic awareness and policy making. Such mechanisms included citizen committees, conflict resolution structures, and school boards;
- supported efforts of NGOs to change *procedures* of public bodies in favor of including citizen opinion and involvement in official decision making and problem solving;
- supported citizen/NGO involvement in *drafting legislation, carrying out lobbying campaigns* and taking related actions to influence public policy;
- increased NGO activities that *involved* and *better informed* the public;
- protected *the rights* of Bulgarians, in the human, civil, and social spheres.

Institutional Strengthening Grants paid for administrative costs, office equipment, and in some cases, limited project activities. To qualify for an institutional strengthening grant an NGO had to have a mission closely associated with democracy building, and present a convincing case that the funds would be used to transform the NGO into a well functioning organization. The funding of a computer, for example, was often justified by the fact that an NGO needed such technology to issue a bulletin, start a membership database, or have access to electronic communications. Funding for office space and related administrative expenses often allowed NGOs to move from a small room in the founder's apartment, to a quarters that allowed for full time operation and better access to the public. In rare cases, institutional strengthening grants were approved for well functioning organizations as a way of giving core support to an NGO which was not project driven, but had continuous activities that required funding<sup>7</sup>.

In the third grant round, a new kind of Project Assistance sub-category of grants was created, called Partnership Grants. Applicants were given incentives for collaboration. If they entered into a formal partnership with another institution or organization (including other NGOs, local governments, state institutions, central government bodies, and media), they would have a much better chance of receiving a grant than if they did not have such a partnership.<sup>8</sup> Three quarters of third round Project Assistance grants were in the partnership category. Partners included: 60 local governments, 4 ministries, and more than 10 media organizations.

Training Grants were an innovation that began with the DemNet program third grant round. ISC, as part of our mid-term strategy, took the lead in funding organizations that provided services to the

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<sup>7</sup> Two such grants were given to the Human Rights Project, the largest NGO in Bulgaria concerned with Roma civil rights.

<sup>8</sup> Partners were required to actively support and/or be involved in the implementation of a project, and certify this by filling out a form stating their view of the project, their intended contribution to the project, etc.

NGO sector.<sup>9</sup> For example, the Union of Bulgarian Foundations and Associations received a grant to provide trainings and consultations in under-served areas of Bulgaria. The Bulgarian Charities Aid Foundation received funding to study the readiness of Bulgarian businesses to support NGOs.

In many cases, NGOs applied for Institutional Strengthening and Project Assistance funding (and in the third round competition, a Training grant as well). There were 42 Combined Package awards during the Program, which accommodated these requests. The logic behind such a mixed grant award was that NGOs, particularly young organizations, would benefit substantially through administrative strengthening and project implementation experience. In several instances, however, groups that applied for combined assistance were only given one type of award.<sup>10</sup> **Table 1** summarizes the grant making activities of the DemNet program.

**Table 1: DemNet Grants Summary  
Number of Grants by Round and Priority Area**

	<b>Democracy Strengthening</b>	<b>Social Safety Nets</b>	<b>Economic Development</b>	<b>Environmental Protection</b>	<b>Training</b>	<b>Total</b>
First Grant Round	18 grants \$323,817					18 grants \$323,817
Second Grant Round	17 grants \$126,952	16 grants \$125,133				33 grants \$252,085
Third Grant Round	31 grants \$352,231	11 grants \$86,681	12 grants \$87,771	11 grants \$140,326	8 grants \$59,827	73 grants \$726,836
<b>Total</b>	66 grants \$803,000	27 grants \$211,814	12 grants \$87,771	11 grants \$140,326	8 grants \$59,827	<b>124 grants \$1,302,738</b>

### **Chronology of Grants Program**

In the first grant round, which was launched in November 1995, there were eight Project Assistance grants, five Institutional Strengthening grants, and five “Combined Packages.” Awarded in March 1996, most grants were for approximately one year, and had a total value of \$323,390. Activities in

<sup>9</sup> The general goals of the second phase of the DemNet program in Bulgaria were known when ISC submitted its strategy paper to USAID in May 1997. Therefore, as a bridge between the two programs, ISC devised a strategy that included funding of training grants (and some related services) that benefited a larger section of the NGO community.

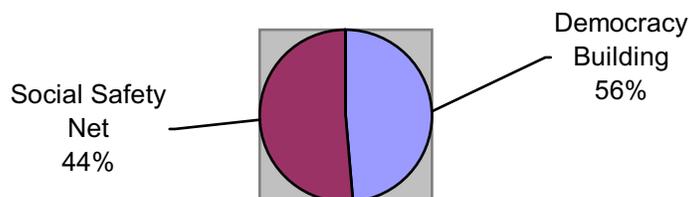
<sup>10</sup> In some cases, it was determined that fairly well developed NGOs would only gain a marginal benefit from institutional strengthening assistance, but could carry out a great project. In other cases, it was determined that the NGO needed to undergo institutional strengthening before it could be successful in project implementation.

human rights, educational system reform, and stimulating citizens involvement in local self-government were among the types of grants supported.

After awarding grants, ISC began its monitoring activities, as well as started its training program.<sup>11</sup> The “pilot” phase was underway successfully, and ISC decided to launch the second grant round in June 1996, only three months after first grants were made.

During spring 1996, the economic situation in Bulgaria began a rapid deterioration. Inflation was skyrocketing, and the national currency began slipping in value. Bulgarians at risk – including poor children, minorities and pensioners -- were increasingly threatened. In this environment, ISC and USAID decided to open the second grant round to NGOs working to improve the social safety net in Bulgaria, as well as continue to focus on strengthening democracy. ISC received 165 applications in September 1996 and awarded 33 grants in December 1996 - 17 in the democracy category and 16 in the social safety net category. **Chart 1** shows the distribution of second round grants between these two categories. Twenty-four of these grants were for Project Assistance and seven were for Institutional Strengthening. Protecting social rights and promoting economic opportunities for socially disadvantaged groups were among the themes of the newly approved social safety net grants.

**Chart 1: Grant Round 2 - Priority Areas**



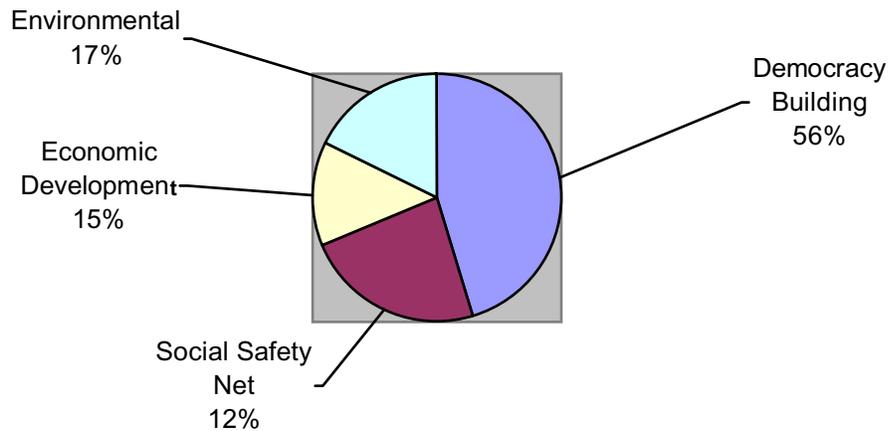
Over the winter of 1996, economic conditions in Bulgaria continued to rapidly deteriorate. Hyperinflation and hyper-leva devaluation prevailed, leading to daily massive street protests. The Socialist Government which had been in power since January 1995 resigned and agreed not to try to form a new government until early 1997. This led to fresh national elections, two years earlier than originally planned, won by center-right political parties. In March 1997, shortly before the new elections, ISC launched the third and final grant round of the DemNet I program. A two-step application process was introduced, whereby eligible NGOs were able to submit up to three project concept papers. ISC staff selected the concept papers that seemed to be closest to the DemNet program priorities to be developed into full-blown proposals. ISC received over 800 concept papers from 500 NGOs at the start of this competition, and some 240 were developed into proposals. ISC recommended 75 of these proposals for funding, more than 50 of which were “Partnership Projects.”<sup>12</sup> Third grant round awards were made in all four DemNet priority areas and awarded in

<sup>11</sup> The ISC training and technical assistance program is described in the following section

<sup>12</sup> During the third grant round two new categories of grants were introduced: training grants (where eight NGOs were given funding to train other NGOs) and partnership grants (where an NGO had a formal agreement with another organization or institution to cooperatively implement the project). The highest number of partners were local governments, followed by other NGOs, and central Government bodies such as ministries, and media.

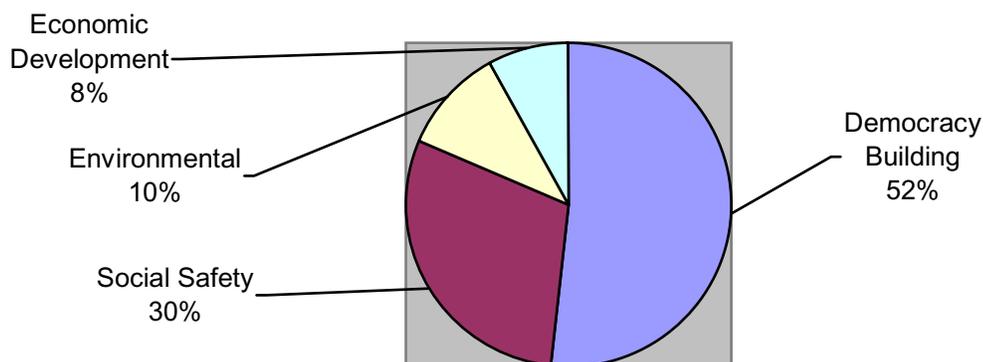
September 1997, for a period of six months. **Chart 2** shows the distribution of third round grants by priority area.

**Chart 2: Grant Round 3 - Priority Areas**



The third grant round was shorter than rounds one and two because ISC's three-year Cooperative Agreement with USAID for implementing the DemNet program was scheduled to expire at the end of February 1998. When the nine-month no-cost extension was approved, ISC agreed to a process with USAID/Sofia to grant cost and no-cost extensions to deserving grantees, primarily third round grantees. The process involved carrying out an evaluation of all grantees applying for such extensions, and recommending only those whose projects had substantial impacts and who could consolidate their success through an extension. A total of 40 extensions, valued at \$136,192, was given with USAID approval. **Chart 3** summarizes the distribution of grants across sectors in all grant rounds of DemNet I.

**Chart 3: Total Grant Rounds - Priority Area**



### **Highlights of National/ Regional Impact on Public Policy**

Grants were given to organizations in all eight regions of Bulgaria, and many grantees' work spanned several regions. NGOs involved and represented citizen interests to local, regional, and national policy making bodies. Below are highlights of the national and regional impact of NGO efforts to increase citizen participation and influence public policy in Bulgaria with support of the DemNet program.

#### ***Bourgas***

##### **Local Government Decision**

- The Municipal Administration passed Strategies for Cooperation with NGOs and adopted improved procedures for recruitment of municipal environmental officers. (Bulgarian Association of Municipal Ecological Experts)

#### ***Haskovo***

##### **Local Government Decision**

- A municipal decision was passed and enforced providing populations in an outlying area of Kurdzhali with a new bus line servicing school children and the general population. (Balkan Forum Association)

#### ***Lovech***

##### **Ministerial Decision**

- An agreement was made with the Penitentiary Department of the Ministry of Justice to allow volunteers to work with prisoners inside the Bulgarian prison system to reduce recidivism. (Association for Support of Convicted and Their Families)

## *Sofia*

### **National Legislation**

- Changes were made to the Healthy and Harmless Working Conditions law, which resulted in a special fund to support the law. (Democratic Society for Safe and Harmless Working Environment)
- A draft election law was introduced which was scheduled for discussion with the Parliament Majority. (Foundation “Bulgarian Institute for Analysis and Research”)
- Proposed changes to Parliament were presented on a draft law to protect children. (Bulgarian Association of University Women)

## *Plovdiv*

### **Local Government Legislation**

- As a result of a citizen’s referendum, Perushtitza broke away from the Plovdiv municipality and established itself as a separate municipality. (Center for Development of Perushtitza Municipality)

## *Varna*

### **Local Government Legislation**

- The Municipality of Varna allocated a portion of its budget to conduct regular public opinion surveys on environmental issues. (Public Center for Environmental and Sustainable Development)

## **B. Training Program**

### **Activities**

The Democracy Network Program featured one of the most intensive NGO training programs in Bulgaria. In the first, three-year phase of the program, ISC designed and delivered approximately 100 group training modules on 25 topics covering a wide range of organizational development issues, including strategic planning, budget development, project planning, NGO management and governance, coalition-building, advocacy, NGO-local government relations, conflict resolution, and effective leadership. (See **Attachment B** for details.)

The DemNet training program goals and objectives were to:

- improve the effectiveness of NGOs in fulfilling their mission, goals, objectives and activities;
- increase the long-term viability of NGOs;
- strengthen the role of NGOs in promoting citizen participation in problem-solving and in advocacy and public policy making;
- encourage co-operative partnerships between NGOs, government and the private sector in developing public policy and carrying out activities;
- improve NGOs understanding of the current legal framework in Bulgaria, and possible changes envisaged under the draft NGO law;
- build and strengthen an active network among public policy NGOs in order to increase their effectiveness;
- develop the training resources for the NGO sector in Bulgaria;
- improve skills for successful DemNet proposal writing and project performance, resulting in increased public impact.

To implement these goals, ISC conducted an institutional and training needs assessment of the NGO sector. Based on an analysis of the assessment, ISC created the strategy for the training program and refined training topics. ISC developed a network of trainers, consisting of 60 people with both the willingness and the ability to serve the NGO sector. The network of trainers constituted an important part of the ISC training strategy. ISC introduced the core team of trainers to the DemNet strategy, priorities, needs assessment analysis and training standards. The trainers' network met on a regular basis throughout the project to share good practices, exchange materials, discuss possibilities for joint projects, create NGO training standards, and develop a trainers registry.

ISC's training program was open to NGOs funded by DemNet to develop their organizational and project performance capacity and to organizations which had not received a DemNet grant but had the capacity to improve their organizational performance. All trainings were designed and developed to be user-friendly, interactive and customized to Bulgarian conditions. During each training, participants were able to:

- learn **best practices** from foreign and Bulgarian trainers;
- share and **exchange experience** of their own organizational and managerial life; and
- **develop a plan** on the topic discussed during the training.

The training modules – that is, ISC training activities – consisted of five components: 1) individual needs assessments of each organization at various stages during the training process; 2) introductory trainings introducing DemNet strategy, priorities and requirements; 3) mandatory training in grant management and project management; 4) trainings in any of the 25 topic areas; and 5) on-going evaluations to assist in improving the training program.

Organizations were required to send at least two people to participate in each training module to ensure that skills acquired at the trainings could be put into practice at the organizational level. In addition to the introductory and specific trainings, organizations could request in-house trainings driven by the organization's specific needs. This strategy simultaneously and successfully met a number of objectives, including effectively customizing the ISC training program to the needs and circumstances of Bulgarian NGOs, and building the organizational capacity of staff and of NGOs.

Specific results include:

<b>Trainees</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Over 900 individual representatives of NGOs participated from 161 organizations (grantees and trainees)</li> </ul>
<b>Trainings</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Over 100 training seminars delivered on 25 different topics</li> </ul>
<b>Trainers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Over 60 trainers delivered trainings</li> </ul>
<b>Books</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 150 resource documents translated</li> <li>• Over 100 workbooks designed and developed</li> <li>• Self-guided books on six topics published with 1,000 copies circulated</li> </ul>
<b>Standards</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training standards developed and published with 1,000 copies circulated</li> </ul>
<b>Trainers Network Established</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More than 100 meetings held</li> </ul>

### **C. International Exchange Programs, Trainings and Conferences**

ISC took advantage of international exchanges, trainings and conference opportunities as a way of facilitating networking for grantee staff and learning from the “best practices” of other organizations. These exchanges were organized by a wide range of groups located in Bulgaria, the CEE region, and the United States. Groups included the Union of Bulgarian Foundations and Associations, United Way/Hungary, Freedom House and ISC itself. The conferences and exchange opportunities aimed at increasing the skill levels of the participants in areas vital to their organizational effectiveness and sustainability, such as advocacy and fundraising. The DemNet program sponsored a total of 76 grantees to participate in the following programs and events:

- Freedom House U.S. Exchange: a total of 12 grantees participated in the U.S. internship program of Freedom House. Typically this six-week exchange involved an orientation period, and limited time spent in one or more American non-profit organization that had similar goals and missions to the participant’s organization.
- Freedom House Regional Exchange: two grantees took part in a regional exchange in which an NGO representative from another Central and East European country spent up to two weeks working with our grantee.
- International Fundraising Conferences: in 1997, thirty grantees were sponsored by ISC to participate in the International Fundraising Conference organized by the Union of Bulgarian Foundations and Associations. This conference was attended by more than 100 NGO representatives from across CEE and the NIS.<sup>13</sup>
- Two trainers participated in Train the Trainers Workshop on Working with Media sponsored by Freedom House in August 1996, in Budapest, Hungary.
- Volunteerism Conference: three grantees and one Advisory Committee member were sponsored by the DemNet program to attend the Junence was focused on sharing best practices to increase volunteerism in the social and economic development sector, and included participants from across Central and Eastern Europe.
- International Advocacy Training: five grantees participated in the June 1998 U.S. based training facilitated by the TRANSIT project. The goal of the training was to give participants skills in advocacy and lobbying, and broad exposure to organizations, issues and institutions based in the U.S. that are involved in advocacy campaigning.
- Three trainers attended the spring 1998 week-long workshop on running training events organized by the Open Education Center, which took place at Lake Ohrid, Macedonia.

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<sup>13</sup> ISC/the DemNet program also co-funded the production and editing of a training video based on this conference in English and Bulgarian which is available to the entire NGO sector through the Union of Bulgarian Foundations and Associations.

- Nine trainers participated in the fall 1998 training in Mediation Techniques organized by the Partnership Foundation.
- Ten grantees, and three staff participated in the ISC Southern Tier Fundraising Training in October 1998. ISC organized this training, which was given by trainers from Johns Hopkins University and partially funded by Freedom House. Thirty-two other DemNet program grantees and trainers from Macedonia, Romania, and Albania also attended this three day event.

#### **D. Technical Assistance Program**

The Bulgarian DemNet program had one of the most comprehensive technical assistance programs of all the nine DemNet programs implemented in Central and Eastern Europe. Like the DemNet trainings, ISC's technical assistance offerings became more developed as our program evolved. At the outset, ISC's technical assistance was primarily delivered by staff, who gave advice about proposal writing or in response to grantee inquiries. Starting with the second grant round, ISC developed more sophisticated systems and procedures for grantees to access technical assistance, and expanded the types of technical assistance available and the pool of experts who could deliver the assistance. By the third grant round, for example, ISC had put together an easy to use "request for technical assistance" form that grantees completed to define the area where they needed help, what kind of assistance they were requesting, and what they would do to ensure that the requested assistance was effective. ISC's Deputy Director was in charge of the technical assistance program and a Monitoring and Technical Assistance Consultant helped to coordinate its implementation. Technical assistance steps (by the third grant round) included:

1. Development of a Technical Assistance form by ISC that was explained to grantees at the Project Management training.
2. Formation of an ISC Technical Assistance Committee<sup>14</sup> that met at least bi-weekly to review technical assistance requests.
3. Assessment for technical assistance after the technical assistance request was approved. Usually a consultant was sent to the grantee to determine exactly what type of work had to be done. In most cases, the consultant and the grantee then developed a scope of work, which was approved and contracted by ISC.
4. Consultant report on his/her work with the NGO.
5. Grantee quarterly technical report, on the kind of assistance ISC offered during the period, and comment on the effectiveness of the assistance.
6. Periodic evaluation by ISC for the effectiveness of all technical assistance interventions.

Twenty-four short-term consultants and ISC/Sofia staff members provided 69 technical assistance interventions to 52 grantees (in addition to proposal development, described below). ISC's technical assistance to grantees included:

- Proposal Development: Preceding each of the three grant rounds of the DemNet program, ISC senior staff gave detailed briefings in municipalities around Bulgaria about the program's priorities, evaluation criteria, and proposal requirements. This tour was followed by an open

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<sup>14</sup> The technical assistance committee consisted of the Deputy Director, Monitoring and Technical Assistance Consultant, Training Coordinator and the Country Director.

house policy that allowed all applicants the possibility of coming into the ISC office or telephoning to get clarifications or additional information on anything, which was of concern to them. Activity planning, budgeting, and capabilities presentation were just some of the areas where ISC staff gave applicants assistance around proposal development. More than 1,500 individuals took part in our information seminars around Bulgaria over the three grant rounds, and roughly half of them received one-on-one telephone or in-person consultations. The result of this assistance included a much better understanding of the logic and sequence of writing good proposals, particularly ones that complied with USAID strategic framework priorities.

- Project Budgeting and Planning: Once NGOs were awarded the DemNet program grants, they were required to attend two mandatory trainings. The first was in grants management and the other in project management. The purpose of these trainings was to give grantees an orientation and skills related to planning, budgeting, reporting, task scheduling and allocation. Before and after these trainings, ISC staff met with grantees to help them with project planning and budgeting issues, resulting in more focused projects that were almost all implemented on time and within the approved budget. These project planning skills were useful both for the DemNet program and future grantee activities.
- Continual Access to Staff Advice in ISC Office and by Phone: Unlike any major donor operating in Bulgaria, ISC staff maintained an open door and open phone line policy for the DemNet program grantees. This was especially helpful for NGOs located outside of Sofia (more than 50% of the grantees). Advice on budgeting, reporting, and overcoming project implementation problems was often given in these meetings with staff. In some cases, grantees were advised to fill out technical assistance request forms, and a more specialized consultant would be brought in to address grantee needs.
- In-House Trainings: Described in the Training Section above, in-house trainings were considered by ISC to be an important form of technical assistance. These trainings were customized to the NGO's needs, and delivered at the grantee's place of business (or a convenient training facility nearby).
- Organizational Development Assistance: One of the most important categories of technical assistance aimed at improving the organizational performance of a grantee. In many cases, this kind of assistance was delivered through "in-house" trainings. The development of a customized strategic plan, a marketing plan, or a plan to increase the number and effectiveness of volunteers working for the organization, are examples of the types of organizational development technical assistance offered by ISC staff and consultants to grantees. ISC also helped grantees that had experienced rapid expansion with restructuring plans, and provided experts to assist NGOs develop income generation plans. Another form of organizational development assistance given by ISC staff and consultants was teaching NGOs how to best employ technology or computer equipment to increase the effectiveness of their work.
- Project Implementation Assistance: In many cases grantees needed staff or consulting help to overcome problems related to the implementation of their projects. For example, ISC sent consultants to the Youth Initiative Center in Rousse that was carrying out a project aimed at reducing women's unemployment, without much effect. The consultant gave the NGOs staff training in how to more effectively build a network among the target beneficiaries, and carry out

trainings that would increase the target group's employment potential. ISC staff and consultants also gave project implementation assistance to grantees on issues related to increasing citizen participation (e.g., establishing effective citizen "hot-lines" and committees) and improving the effectiveness of project implementation teams (through team building, strategic planning, etc.). Consultants also gave grantees advice on local economic development plan preparation and strategies for employment market restructuring in connection with the objectives of their the DemNet program grants.

- Governance Assistance: ISC staff and consultants were called upon, from time to time, to advise grantees on how to improve their management structure and board effectiveness. These requests, which usually grew out of the Governance training modules that were part of our training program, included asking for help in replacing ineffective board members and developing new procedures for more efficient board operation.
- Media Relations Assistance: ISC became increasingly active in providing media relations assistance to grantees soon after our mid-term strategy paper was accepted by USAID in June 1997. This assistance had several aspects. First, ISC involved working journalists in "Working with Media" trainings in giving custom advice to grantees on their media issues during and after trainings. Second, ISC followed up these trainings with larger meetings with journalists and grantees in Sofia, Varna, Plovdiv, and other cities around Bulgaria to develop strategies on increasing and improving coverage of NGO activities on a local basis. Third, ISC sent consultants (particularly NGO leaders with significant experience in developing media and public relations) to grantees to help them develop media outreach and publicity plans in response to specific technical assistance requests. Finally, ISC hired two media relations consultants to assist grantees (as well as ISC/Sofia) with improving media coverage. One of the tasks of these consultants was to organize press conferences for grantees to showcase their achievements. Before these press conferences these consultants gave the grantees briefings and advice on how best to present their achievements and interact with media representatives.
- Financial Management and Operations Assistance: ISC/Sofia's Financial Manager carried out an auditing and technical assistance program that benefited all 111 grantees. With assistance from a team of six financial auditing consultants, the Financial Manager visited each grantee, audited their financial records, and examined their accounting systems. In addition to checking on the proper use of DemNet program funds, the other main purpose of these visits was to give technical advice to the grantees on ways to improve their financial management and operations systems. In some cases, for example, grantees were shown how to improve their record keeping so that it would better meet Bulgarian and/or ISC standards, or were given advice on accounting software that would make their accounting faster and more accurate. One of the main outcomes of the financial technical assistance was a recommendation by the Financial Manager that ISC develop specialized accounting software for NGOs<sup>15</sup> which is now being finalized. Another type of financial assistance given to grantees was regular articles published in the DemNet program newsletter, written by the Financial Manager, that updated NGOs on changes in Bulgarian legislation, tax and accounting regulations that affected their operations. Special

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<sup>15</sup> This software, in its final stages of development, was co-funded by the EU funded Civil Society Development Foundation. It will be distributed through NGO Support Organizations during the second phase of the DemNet program.

trainings for NGO accountants and financial managers (described in the training section) were also held on a regular basis to clarify these kinds of changes and answer specific questions on accountancy and financial management issues. Twenty-two monthly updates, more than 200 individual (face-to-face and on the phone) consultations and over 110 organizational financial systems checks were accomplished by the Financial manager and his team.

- Organizational Assessments: ISC devised an organizational assessment procedure that ranked a grantee's capabilities in office management, project implementation skills, and ability to influence their external environment. These assessments were done in cooperation with as many grantees as possible at the NGO's offices. By engaging the grantees, these assessments had a technical assistance effect themselves, as the organizations became much more aware of their strengths and weaknesses. The assessments gave both grantees and ISC a baseline that helped later measure the impact of ISC assistance and were used to design trainings and technical assistance interventions to strengthen the NGO's performance.
- Self-Monitoring Procedures: Starting with the first grant round, ISC created a self-monitoring instrument for grantees that the NGOs themselves carried out. Organizations ranked themselves in public prestige, mission clarity, and governance systems. They also predicted their future situation along a number of different areas, such as improved capacity to influence public policy and improvements in resource management systems. ISC time series data show that grantees self-ranked improvements of 30% to 65 % following receipt of DemNet program support. The technical assistance effect of teaching an NGO to monitor itself is quite high, keeping in mind that being able to regularly assess organizational soundness is an important factor in an NGO's long-term effectiveness and sustainability.
- Distribution of Books and Other Materials to Assist the Sector: ISC considered provision of timely and accurate information to grantees in areas that affected or could improve their operations an important kind of technical assistance. Besides financial information, mentioned above, ISC also provided a range of written materials on subjects such as fundraising under Bulgarian conditions (written by a Sofia University professor who was a DemNet trainer) and democracy strengthening (from the U.S. Information Agency). On occasion, ISC commissioned a special study to be written and distributed, such as one compiled by a social sector grantees on how social service NGOs can work effectively with the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs in the current legal framework.
- Policy Updates: More than 20 policy alert papers were sent to grantees. Policy alert papers on topics such as the NGO Draft Law, the Social Assistance Law, and the Public Administration Law gave information to NGOs on upcoming and recently taken decisions about national and local policy issues. The papers highlighted important issues and helped NGOs focus their own efforts to influence policy changes.
- Electronic Linkages: Supporting grantees' linkage to e-mail and internet systems was an important element of ISC's technical assistance and networking program. Over 20 such connections were funded, which allowed grantees to communicate more easily with one another and with their international contacts, as well as take advantage of information resources from around the world.

- **Referrals:** ISC was pleased to give more than 20 referrals of our grantees to other donors, which helped diversify and sustain their funding levels. The ISC Country or Deputy Director wrote letters of referral upon request as long as the requesting group had successfully implemented its project.

## **V. Legacies**

### **A. Public More Aware of NGOs Role in Civil Society**

This section highlights some of the legacies of the DemNet program according to the expected results outlined in ISC's mid-term strategy paper. ISC's activities related to improving the public image of NGOs started early on in the Program, and grew in intensity after the submission of our mid-term strategy paper to USAID. In addition to better informing the public about NGOs, ISC also attempted to improve NGO accountability, transparency, and credibility, and the ability of target NGOs to garner public support for their objectives and activities. Also, through conferences and press coverage, the general public and governments at every level became increasingly aware of the role of NGOs in civil society.

Towards these ends, ISC implemented a varied range of activities, including:

- Technical and financial oversight for accountability. DemNet technical and financial oversight was directed at ensuring that grantees were publicly accountable and credible organizations. Continuous oversight activities, including ISC's technical and financial monitoring, by three staff field monitors and an auditing team led by ISC's financial manager, were carried out to make sure that grantees were managing USAID funds appropriately, and were effectively carrying out the project that had been selected for funding.
- Supporting NGO projects that informed the public. For example, the DemNet program funded the Journalists for Democracy project called "A Series of Radio Broadcasts on NGOs and Their Problems." This project was implemented by an NGO made up of professional journalists dedicated to better informing the public. They produced and transmitted on Bulgarian National Radio a series of broadcasts that explained issues that NGOs working in the DemNet program's priority areas were addressing through their funded projects. The broadcasts also featured interviews with prominent decision makers, who were able to comment on the NGO efforts and explain governmental policies that affected (or were affected by) NGOs.
- Supporting financially, and with training and technical assistance, NGO efforts to better inform the public. These efforts included newsletters, public meetings, and media components of projects. Several grantees, for example, worked in collaboration with local newspapers and cable television outlets that published or broadcast information about the project. In many cases, the media served as a key component of the project activity. For example, the Bulgarian Association for Fair Elections project in Veliko Turnovo used all of the newspapers and radio and TV stations in the town to publish results of public opinion polls on questions related to local developmental issues. The NGO also used a local cable outlet that had a live "hotline" for the public to phone in their questions and points of view to municipal officials. The Bulgarian Society for Education and Culture (BOOK) in Stara Zagara, Media with a Human Face, and TIME Ecoprojects all used the medium of television - which is how the majority of Bulgarians

get their news and information - in an interactive way to best inform the public. The TIME project worked in partnership with Bulgarian National TV to produce a weekly environmental show that informed the public on pressing environmental problems and solicited public ideas on how those problems might be solved. The Journalists for Tolerance Project in Kurdzhali involved a local newspaper in publishing a “tolerance page” every week which promoted better ethnic relations and more openness and understanding in one of Bulgaria’s hotbeds of ethnic strife. The Knowledge Association’s branches in Montana and Haskovo used radio and newspaper to better inform the public on local self-government concerns.

- Supporting publications that benefited citizens directly. For example, the Janko Sukuzov Foundation, a first round DemNet grantee, published a book entitled Bourgas: Problems and Solutions. The publication was designed to help citizens in Bourgas better understand their rights and possible ways of interacting with the municipality more effectively. The BAFE branch in Karlovo also published and distributed a local citizen’s handbook. The Consumer’s Union in Plovdiv worked with State institutions, local businesses, volunteers and others to improve standards and quality control for fresh goods sold in Plovdiv markets, and a national newspaper, *The Standard*, published the results of the NGO’s efforts.
- Supporting the inclusion of media related NGOs in our grantee pool helped the image of NGOs during their project activities and taught (through example and sharing of best practices) other NGOs how to better communicate with the public.<sup>16</sup>
- Offering externally oriented trainings in NGO Marketing, Public Outreach, Fundraising, Volunteer Mobilization, Working with the Media, and Advocacy in order to help NGOs recruit supporters and allies, communicate their achievements effectively, and achieve their project objectives.
- Sending consultants to organizations to assist with media plans and relations, as well as developing marketing plans and fundraising strategies. Forty percent of ISC’s technical assistance activities related to these areas.
- Organizing meetings with journalists to discuss the problem of poor coverage of NGOs and develop a joint strategy to improve this situation. Starting in early 1997, and continuing through October 1998, eight such meetings were held. One of the early results of these meetings was to include more working journalists in our Working with Media trainings. Another result was to organize working meetings with journalists at the local level (this was a natural follow-up of the Media training). Strategies for better interaction among NGOs and journalists were developed in Sofia, Plovdiv and Bourgas. Another result of the earlier ISC meetings with journalists was a decision to regularly organize press conferences to highlight grantee achievements.
- Five press conferences on grantee achievements were organized over the last months of the program. Usually two or more grantee successes were highlighted during these events, and a

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<sup>16</sup> In addition to already mentioned groups (Journalists for Tolerance, Journalists for Democracy, Media with a Human Face) ISC also recommended funding to Free Speech Civic Forum.

total of 20 grantees received public attention as a result. Close to 100 very positive, primarily accurate, news publications, and radio and television pieces were broadcast as a result of these press conferences. When choosing grantees to be involved in the press conferences, ISC (and our media consultants) looked for groups that had interesting achievements and stories to tell, and had little or no experience in conducting their own press conferences. Several NGOs from outside of Sofia took part in the press conferences as a result.

- Starting a local conference series in the spring of 1998, at the suggestion of our Advisory Committee, was one of the more interesting ways ISC attempted to improve the public perception and credibility of NGOs. By empowering and financing grantees to organize a local conference around regional development issues and the role of NGOs in solving those issues, the public in the municipalities of Dobrich, Razgrad, and Plovdiv were able to better understand the role and potential of NGOs. In each location, local grantees worked in a coalition with non-DemNet program grantees to organize the conferences, all of which received excellent news coverage. Businesses, media, citizens, local government and representatives of central governmental bodies participated in the conferences, as well as Sofia-based think tanks. Approximately 22 NGOs were involved in the organizing of the conferences in the three municipalities, and a total of 480 individuals participated in the conferences. ISC provided financing and extensive organizational coaching to the grantees responsible for putting the conferences together. Details on each conference are provided below:

The Dobrich conference, Citizen Coalitions for Local Self-Governance, was organized by a coalition of five NGOs and the Mayor's office. Participants from the region, (Varna, Rousse, Shoumen) and Sofia discussed problems pertinent to the DemNet program priority areas (democracy building, economics, social safety, environment). Partnerships were established and local and national cooperation facilitated. Think-tanks from Sofia delivered presentations and participated in the discussion. 110 participants were present, and a staff member of one of our synergy partners, the Local Government Initiative, was the chief facilitator.

The Razgrad conference was attended by 140 participants. The Chair of the Parliamentary Economic Commission (Mr. Nikolov) and the Regional Governor (Mr. Mochev) together with 5 NGOs formed the Organizing Committee. Areas of presentation and discussion included: A) Economic Development; B) Local Governance and Human Rights; C) Youth Problems; D) Social Assistance; E) Environment; and F) International Cooperation Programs. Local businesses provided 15% of the funding for the conference. Specific agreements for cooperation were reached in most of the groups. The event was the largest ever organized in Razgrad by an NGO coalition.

The Plovdiv conference was the largest of the three, and an example of synergy partner cooperation. Twelve NGOs (most of them DemNet program grantees) formed an Organizing Committee, which developed the agenda. The USAID funded Local Governance Initiative asked for, and was granted, major responsibility for organizing one of the discussion tracks of the conference. Municipality services and reforming the local tax structure was the topic of LGI presentation. Other presentations and group discussions were on: The School in the 21st Century, Partnership for Environment, and Inter-Ethnic Relations. 230 representatives of the State, NGOs, local government, business, media, and citizens

participated in the two day conference. More than 35% of the funding of the conference was provided by local businesses.

- The October 1998 National Meeting of NGOs was initiated and organized by ISC, in cooperation with three other donors operating in Bulgaria and over 50 NGO representatives. There were several objectives of the meeting, including: facilitating networking and coalition building within the sector; providing a forum to share successes, problems and best practices; and increasing public awareness of the third sector. All of these aims were met. Participants numbered more than 600; more than 20 small working groups were active; and press coverage was quite good. A half hour film on the national meeting was produced and shown on national television in November, complementing several articles in the national press and radio and TV coverage broadcast the day of the meeting. The National Meeting of NGOs was a natural follow-up on the regional NGO meetings described above, and was supported by a Public Committee that included a Deputy Prime Minister and the Ministers of Environment, Labor and Social Affairs, and Culture. The Presidential Advisor on NGOs read an address to the meeting on behalf of the President of Bulgaria. Research findings about the NGO sector (which was commissioned in connection with the National Meeting) made headlines, as did the declaration of the NGOs at the meeting, which demanded an improved legal framework for NGOs in Bulgaria.
- ISC senior staff took an increasingly proactive role in promoting the goals of the DemNet program before the media after the mid-term strategy paper, including the goal of improving public awareness of NGO activities in Bulgaria. The Country Director and Deputy Director were usually present at all press conferences organized to promote grantees, described above, and regularly responded to questions about the accomplishments of grantees. In 1998, for example, ISC senior staff were interviewed for radio, television or newspapers at least once a month, and often more frequently.
- ISC's bi-monthly newsletter, the *DemNet Program Bulletin*, was used as a tool to increase awareness of our grantees' achievements and activities. More than 25 NGOs were featured in articles written by ISC staff that detailed successes of DemNet program grantees. Every edition also devoted space for DemNet grantees to "present themselves," and give information to readers about their work and future plans. The average printing of the DemNet program Bulletin was 2,000, and it was distributed widely throughout the NGO sector as well to other donors, media representatives, and local and central government officials.
- The bulletin of Freedom House, *NGO News*, gave interesting tips to NGOs on advocacy, getting their message out, fundraising, and other topics. It also highlighted NGO successes from the CEE region, including from Bulgaria. Early in 1998, ISC's request to Freedom House to have this newsletter translated into Bulgarian was approved, and ISC had responsibility for distributing each translated version to approximately 500 local NGOs.

## **B. Citizen Participation in Public Policy Mobilized**

Citizens need opportunities to "practice" public participation and DemNet grants provided an increased number of opportunities for such participation, contributing to the building of a civil

society culture in Bulgaria. Grantees needed to improve their skills related to involving citizens, and needed financing to carry out project activities that involved citizens.

Seventy-five per cent of all Project Assistance grants awarded by the DemNet program had a citizen participation component. Mechanisms for this participation included multi-stakeholder dialogue groups, media/outreach campaigns, and educational efforts. Grantees have worked on increasing transparency of local or central government activities, carrying out government watchdog activities, increasing the role of NGOs in carrying out traditional government activity, working in coalitions with the public and/or private sector to solve local problems, and improving the social safety net.

As mentioned in the “Grants” section above, the mechanisms grantees used to elicit citizen participation were varied. Several projects involved establishing citizen committees (representing a broad cross section of the population) to interact with local governments. Such projects were funded in Haskovo, Sliven, Bourgas, Pleven, Silistra, and Yambol.

Other projects used the media to give citizens information, as well as solicit their opinions, which were taken into consideration by local decision makers. Such projects were funded in Stara Zagora, Plovdiv, Dobrich, and Veliko Turnovo.

“Hotlines” and dedicated project office sites to collect and transmit information were the primary mechanisms to collect citizen opinion in Varna, Sofia, and Dobrich.

Public meetings where all citizens in a municipality could learn about important local policy issues, and then express their opinions characterized the DemNet program funded projects in Razgrad, Plovdiv, and Karlovo.

The projects cited above were funded in the “Democracy” field, but ISC encouraged improving citizen awareness and participation in our three other priority fields as well. For example, the main goal of the “Children of the Earth” project in Blagoevgrad was to get local citizens more involved in the management of the Rila National Park, and several activities, including establishing a citizen committee, were carried out for this purpose.

In the social field, the Perspective Foundation project taught groups of citizens how to better interact with local offices of the Ministry of Labor. Ten these citizens acted as advocates for fellow citizens who were trying to gain access to their social benefits guaranteed under Bulgarian law.

One of the elements of the Roma Regional Development project in Plovdiv, which could easily fit into three of the DemNet program’s priority areas (social safety, economic development, and democracy strengthening), was the establishment of citizen action committees that worked with municipal officials to distribute land to landless Roma families.

Relevant trainings ISC offered to help NGOs mobilize citizen participation in public policy included Public Participation, Working with the Media, and Advocacy and Lobbying. ISC staff and consultants also helped NGOs develop strategies to mobilize public support for, and participation in, their activities, often working with grantees to further develop an idea into a good project design.

ISC encouraged sharing of good practices between grantees that were working on projects of a similar orientation, particularly if there was a similarity in the project implementation mechanisms used. For example, the Public Center for Environmental Protection in Varna used a “Green Phone” hotline to solicit citizen opinion about environmental problems (and their potential solutions) facing the municipality. The NGO needed advice on optimizing the effectiveness of their “Green Phone”, and ISC put them in contact with another grantee, the BAFE/Veliko Turnovo branch, that was using its citizen hotline in its local government transparency project with great effectiveness.

ISC, in a synergy activity with the Local Government Initiative (LGI) project, commissioned a study on nine citizen participation projects that were DemNet program funded and one project funded by the Civil Society Development Foundation. This study, carried out in the beginning of 1998 by the Center for the Study of Democracy, was aimed at identifying “ingredients” of successful citizen participation projects. Among the conclusions of this study were that all of the studied projects were successful to lesser or greater degrees in reaching their objectives, and that the most successful and sustainable project activities were carried out by organizations that were able to closely involve other segments of society, such as media, in project implementation.<sup>17</sup> Another of the conclusions of the study was that ISC’s systems of assistance, including training opportunities, and access to consultants and staff advice/coaching, made a significant difference in the ability of the DemNet program-funded grantees to implement their projects well.

### **C. NGOs Advocates for Public Policy Changes**

ISC supported grantees in the Public Outreach and Effective Advocacy phases of their development. This was the culmination of ISC’s strategic approach for the Democracy Network program and drew upon all of its implementation strategies. The primary ways in which ISC achieved this goal were:

- Taking a two-step proposal development approach with grantees that started with the third grant round: ISC invited eligible NGOs working in all four priority areas to submit up to three concept papers for projects, all of which were evaluated for potential impact in terms of public policy change and increased citizen participation. Just under 800 concept papers from 500 NGOs were received, and of these, approximately 200 were selected to be developed into full blown proposals. In the period before the deadline, ISC staff gave applicants further advice on ways to supplement and focus their proposals so that they would better fit the DemNet program priorities. Seventy-six proposals were recommended for funding to the Democracy Commission from the 200.<sup>18</sup> Approved projects supported efforts to draft new legislation in the area of election law, and to modify/amend legislation in the areas of women’s rights, child welfare, worker safety, and environmental protection.
- Encouraging DemNet target NGOs to form alliances and partnerships with other NGOs and institutions, and with other sectors of Bulgarian society (such as local government, businesses, the media, and educational institutions), to bring about favorable policy change. ISC’s “Partnership grants,” a subset of Project Assistance grants described above, was the most

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<sup>17</sup> Vitosha Research, Center for the Study of Democracy, “Citizen Participation Study”, March 1998.

<sup>18</sup> This 30% approval rating was very high, and reflected the success of the concept paper/feedback process. The approval rating in the previous two rounds was 10% and 20% respectively. The “normal” approval ratio in grants competitions around the world is around 10%.

tangible way these kinds of partnerships were encouraged. Around two-thirds of the recommended grants for the third grant round fell in the Partnership category. Partners of the grantees included the Ministries of Justice, Foreign Affairs, Environment, Labor and Social Affairs, and over 60 municipalities across Bulgaria. Other grantee partners included National TV and Radio, and State institutions such as Regional Environmental Commissions and schools. In many cases, the willingness of a Ministry or other governmental body to work seriously with an NGO to solve a shared problem was in itself a major policy change. In some cases, the partnership arrangement was formed specifically to change policies and procedures. The partnership of the Ministry of Justice with the Bulgarian Institute of Analysis and Research to draft a new, non-partisan election law is an example of this type of partnership.

- Providing training and technical assistance in the areas of Public Outreach, Lobbying and Advocacy, and Public Participation. Five grantees were also able to benefit from the International Policy Advocacy training program in the U.S. This program included orientation to policy making in the United States and exposure to some of the most effective American pressure and watchdog NGOs.
- ISC distributed “Policy Alerts” to educate grantees about impending or recently enacted policy changes that could potentially affect the whole NGO sector, or certain segments of the sector. For example, the Social Assistance Legislation that was enacted in May 1998 includes a section that allows NGOs to start delivering social services formally under the exclusive domain of the State, and receive a portion of the Government budget to do so. This new law was sent to grantees as part of the Policy Alert series.
- Using the DemNet program Bulletin to highlight policy issues that affected the NGO sector. The 1998 NGO Bulletins were all dedicated to important policy issues that affected NGOs, such as the NGO draft legislation, the Social Assistance Law, income generation, etc. The Bulletins featured interviews with policy makers and explained the current status of the policy topics being covered.
- Starting the regional conference series, which brought together representatives of NGOs, Sofia-based think tanks, and decision makers from the national and local spheres. In addition to increasing the public credibility of NGOs, an important objective of the regional conference series was to provide a forum for NGOs to become more active in solving local policy issues. At each of the three regional conferences, one or more Sofia-based think tanks played an active role by moderating discussions, contributing information, and making new partnerships with the organizing NGOs. The presence of policy makers at the conferences allowed local NGOs to learn of the government’s current thinking and strategies at the regional and national levels. The Plovdiv regional conference also featured one of ISC’s synergy partners, the Local Government Initiative (LGI), which led a working group on the issue of Plovdiv municipal services and taxes. One of the results of the workshop was that several Plovdiv NGOs became local partners of LGI to continue working on the issue of improving Plovdiv municipal services and the related tax structure.
- Organizing networking events such as annual meetings of DemNet program grantees and the National Meeting of NGOs in a way that facilitated discussion and follow-up actions on policy issues. ISC emphasized from the beginning of the DemNet program the importance of

establishing a working network between grantees. ISC's 90+ training workshops were designed to allow maximum interaction and networking among participants, and many new partnerships and joint activities were started as a result. An example of a partnership that had a policy focus was the one between the Bulgarian Institute for Analysis and Research (BIAR) and BAFECR/Sofia.<sup>19</sup> ISC's grantee networking meetings, which took place four times during the project, further allowed grantees to exchange ideas, give updates on projects, and discuss the role of NGOs in building civil society in Bulgaria. The National Meeting of NGOs, held in late October 1998, broadened the possibility of exchanging information between NGOs on policy concerns and other areas.

- Starting an electronic bulletin board (list-serve) to facilitate rapid exchange of information between NGOs on policy and other issues. ISC started the electronic bulletin board in the spring of 1998, corresponding with the completion of provision of email and internet connections to grantees. By the close of the DemNet I project, close to forty Bulgarian and international subscribers were receiving information posted on the bulletin board. All subscribers have the possibility of posting messages, and all other subscribers receive them. The ISC/Sofia office took an active role in posting messages once the board was established, which included information on policy developments of concern to NGOs. Additionally, ISC posted announcements of conferences and fundraising deadlines, and forwarded messages received by the Sofia office of interest to the NGO sector. This bulletin board will continue to be available and grow for the next phase of the DemNet program.

#### **D. Growth of Indigenous Assistance Efforts**

From the beginning of the DemNet I program, ISC was concerned with what it would "leave behind" in Bulgaria once the program was completed. ISC was especially concerned with increasing the indigenous capacities of individuals and local organizations that could provide training and technical assistance in organizational capacity building and democracy strengthening topics (advocacy, media campaigns, etc.). Building local capacities in the financial area was also of key importance.

ISC's work along these lines included:

- Hiring, orienting, and giving professional development opportunities to a highly competent national staff. ISC's philosophy of working with and building up the capabilities of local experts started from the outset of the program. ISC's Country Director was the only expatriate to work in Bulgaria on the DemNet program, and while initially ISC planned on using a significant number of expatriate consultants on the project, due to the high level of skill among Bulgarian professionals, few expatriates were used. All senior ISC Bulgarian staff traveled regionally and to the United States to attend professional development conferences and seminars. While most ISC/Sofia staff are now working in the second phase of the program, those who have left have gone on to work for other USAID-funded assistance programs, the EU-PHARE program, and local NGOs.

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<sup>19</sup> BIAR, in partnership with the Ministry of Justice, drafted a non-partisan election law. BAFECR held a series of local meetings with citizens to discuss the draft and get feedback.

- ISC cooperated closely with indigenous NGO support organizations and took advantage of existing NGO support structures and information channels to disseminate information about the DemNet program from the Program's beginning. In all grant rounds, ISC used the network of Open Society clubs and information centers to help organize local meetings on the upcoming grant competitions. Open Society, the NGO Information Center, and the Bulgarian Association for Fair Elections (BAFE) regularly distributed information and grant application packages of the DemNet program. ISC was able to use consultants from these organizations to give advice to potential applicants on the DemNet program application procedures and program priorities. ISC also regularly published information about the DemNet program in NGO oriented publications, such as the bulletins produced by the Union of Bulgarian Foundations and Associations and the Open Society Foundation. ISC, the DemNet program, and the NGO community benefited significantly from this arrangement. These NGO support organizations also benefited in that they gained prestige and respect from the NGO community by being able to distribute the DemNet program information.
- ISC, through an open and transparent recruitment process, built up a team of approximately sixty trainers and consultants who were the primary deliverers of our training and technical assistance programs. Wherever appropriate, ISC gave our trainers coaching and guidance on all aspects of the training process, including use of interactive training techniques, compiling user-friendly workbooks, and evaluation techniques. ISC started this process in the summer of 1996, and continued meetings with trainers to improve performance through the entire project. Coaching was also given individually, as all trainings were monitored by ISC staff, who worked closely with trainers before, during, and following trainings. While ISC staff started the Program by delivering most of the trainings, outside trainers were increasingly used in the DemNet program. In fact, close to 90% of the approximately 100 training offerings under the program were delivered by non-ISC staff. Several more meetings were held with the trainers in 1997 and 1998, which led to the development of a registry and training standards.(see below).

ISC also concentrated on developing materials and orientation for technical assistance consultants. In February 1988, for example, ISC convened a meeting for consultants that were registered with the Sofia office. More than 40 experts attended this day long orientation; roughly half of these were later given consulting assignments by the DemNet program. ISC made the most concerted effort to date in Bulgaria to orient, hire, and use consultants and trainers in well functioning, complex, NGO training and technical assistance programs. This group of experts represents a significant, sustainable legacy that will be available to the Bulgarian NGO sector into the future.

- In cooperation with the community of trainers and experts, a set of standards for offering training and consulting assistance was developed. Starting in February 1998, ISC's meetings with trainers expanded and took on a national scope and purpose. The trainers agreed with ISC's belief that standards for trainers and delivering trainings should be clarified and improved. A series of meetings took place throughout the country between trainers and ISC, culminating in the fall of 1998, when a set of "minimum" standards for offering trainings was accepted by a broad cross section of the most active trainers in Bulgaria. These standards were subsequently published by the DemNet program, and widely distributed at events such as the National Meeting of NGOs. This achievement both empowered Bulgarian trainers and helped improve the quality of indigenous training assistance.

- Along with the work related to developing training standards, another group of trainers and experts began the process of creating a register of individuals who are qualified to offer different types of trainings and technical assistance, and who agree to uphold the elaborated standards for doing so. This register of trainers and experts is the first such directory published in Bulgaria. It will be useful to NGOs who wish to engage qualified trainers to assist their organization develop or be part of a project team. The register has already been requested by other donor groups, such as the United Nations Development Program, in order to identify qualified individuals who could work on different assistance efforts.
- The relevant workshops ISC sent staff and trainers to for their professional development include: international fundraising workshops in 1997 and 1998 (the 1998 workshop was organized by ISC); board development (sponsored by the National Center for Non-Profit Boards); volunteerism; business mediation; refresher course in training methods, and international policy advocacy.
- ISC developed agreements for NGOs to offer training and technical assistance to other NGOs starting in 1997. The Partnership Foundation, for example, was engaged to give trainings in conflict resolution, improving inter-sectoral dialogue, and running effective meetings in 1997. Three other NGOs were contracted by ISC to organize the 1998 regional conferences in Dobrich, Razgrad and Plovdiv. The Center for the Study of Democracy's research arm, Vitosha Research, carried out two surveys (one contracted with USAID and the other with ISC) which benefited the project.
- The category of Training grants, started in the third grant round, supported for NGOs to deliver training for the benefit of the NGO community. Eight such grants were awarded to NGOs with demonstrated training capabilities and offered trainings in areas of interest to the DemNet program: organizational capacity building, democracy strengthening, public policy advocacy, etc. ISC worked closely with all of the training grantees, and offered one on one coaching and other technical assistance to strengthen their training capabilities. ISC helped the training grantees in areas such as training delivery, workbook preparation, and training evaluation.
- One of the chief observations of ISC/Sofia's Financial Manager in early 1998 was that many Bulgarian NGOs keep poor accounting records, which may or may not meet ISC and Bulgarian accounting standard requirements. For this reason, it was suggested that ISC (along with another donor) commission the development of easy to use accounting software for NGOs that could be distributed free or at cost. Since financial accountability is imperative for the short and long-term effectiveness and sustainability of NGOs, ISC accepted this recommendation, and a contract for the production of this software was made in the summer of 1998. This product has taken longer than expected to produce, and most likely will be distributed as part of the DemNet II program.
- Another important DemNet I contribution to the long-term development of NGOs in Bulgaria, and thus of local assistance efforts, achieved by ISC was the production of a series of self-guided training workbooks. These workbooks were produced by ISC trainers, based upon the larger number of training workbooks ISC developed for the DemNet I training program. The self-guided workbook series contains practical exercises and local case studies, and is meant to

be used by any NGO, without a trainer present. The idea of the series is to spread training resources across Bulgaria, and to allow NGOs to improve their strategic planning, marketing, media relations and other skills, at low or no cost.

## **E. Maximizing Donor Assistance**

ISC played a leading role in forging cooperation agreements and initiatives with other donors operating NGO programs in Bulgaria, as well as with USAID synergy partners, in order to maximize the impact of U.S. donor assistance. ISC's activities along these lines included:

- Being a founding member of the Bulgarian Donor's Forum. This body was set up on an informal basis in early 1997 to facilitate the exchange of information about different donor programs and initiatives. The Forum, while still not operating at optimum efficiency, has played a useful role in changing the culture among donors operating NGO programs in Bulgaria. Before the forum, exchange of donor information was ad hoc and infrequent. Now it is regularized and expected. The Forum has also served as a springboard for individual donors to cooperate more closely on a bilateral basis.
- Signing Cooperation Agreements with the EU-funded Civil Society Development Foundation (CSDF) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). These cooperation agreements ensure that our organizations regularly exchange information and coordinate activities as much as possible. The agreements have also led to specific bilateral initiatives between ISC, CSDF and UNDP. For example, ISC and UNDP co-financed the production of the NGO Accounting Software. ISC, UNDP, and CSDF along with the Regional Environmental Center cooperated to finance the costs of the 1998 National Meeting of NGOs.
- ISC started the practice in Bulgaria of sharing lists of potential grantees with other donors (before decisions were finalized) in order to reduce the risk of double funding of the same project. We also freely shared our DemNet application materials and evaluation procedures, and these were copied or adapted by groups such as the Civil Society Development Foundation and the Democracy Commission.
- ISC cooperated in over ten joint initiatives with other USAID synergy partners. The Local Government Initiative (LGI) and ISC, for example, worked closely together on citizen participation issues. We co-funded a research study on the characteristics of successful NGO citizen participation projects. LGI requested, and was given, major responsibility for implementing one of the three workshops held at the DemNet program-funded Regional Development Conference in Plovdiv. ISC also shared training materials and trainers with LGI in the citizen participation area.
- ISC cooperated with the FLAG Consortium and with the GEF Biodiversity project by funding NGOs that those groups worked closely with. Our cooperation with the Pro-Media program included successfully soliciting their participation in the Regional Development Conference series and the NGO National Meeting. Pro-Media also helped ISC arrange a public service campaign to inform the public about the NGO National Meeting.
- ISC's cooperation with Freedom House included giving them feedback on all regional grant applications, and candidates that applied to participate in their exchange programs from

Bulgaria. ISC also requested that Freedom House's newsletter be translated into Bulgarian, and we distributed NGO News within Bulgaria. The DemNet program also sent ten candidates to Freedom House sponsored exchange programs. In October 1998, Freedom House co-sponsored an international fundraising workshop organized by ISC for Southern Tier countries. ISC were active participants in the semi-annual Country Directors meetings that Freedom House organized in the region.

- ISC cooperated actively with the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL) by supporting their efforts to create a legislative and regulatory environment favorable to Bulgarian NGOs. ISC/Sofia and ICNL regularly exchanged updates on developments related to the draft NGO legislation. ISC regularly briefed ICNL representatives when they passed through Sofia on the progress of the DemNet program, and any legal/legislative issues that may have arisen during the period between meetings. ICNL was invited to participate in the 1998 National Meeting of NGOs; two ICNL representatives participated in the general meeting and the specific working group on the NGO draft legislation.

## **V. Lessons Learned and Recommendations**

The following are several lessons from the DemNet program which should be of interest to future NGO strengthening programs, including the second phase of the DemNet program in Bulgaria.

### **Partnership Grants Worked**

Partnership grants were very successful for all parties -- ISC, USAID, NGOs, partners, and citizens. With these grants, NGOs were given an incentive to reach out to other societal groups and establish working relationships for project implementation purposes. The chances of a project's success increased substantially with additional partners.

*Recommendation: ISC should promote the concept of partnership grants regionally, and particularly in the second phase of the DemNet program.*

### **Building a Network is Critical**

ISC was the only donor program operating in Bulgaria that devoted resources for grantees to become acquainted, and feel they were part of a working network. Trainings were structured to facilitate networking. Grantee events, such as award ceremonies, annual meetings, and regional conferences spurred networking, as did ISC's newsletter, funding of email/internet connections, and an electronic bulletin board. The results of these efforts include broadening grantees awareness of other NGOs working in their field(s), increasing partnerships and joint activities, and changing the culture related to information sharing (from "anti" to "pro"). This network presents a model for the next phase of the Democracy Network program.

*Recommendation: In the next phase of the DemNet program, efforts should be made to keep the networking activity effective both at the Support Organization level and the "NGO" level.*

### **Integrate NGO Assistance for Maximum Impact**

ISC concentrated its support, including project financing, training, technical assistance and network building, on the organizations that were awarded grants. This allowed NGOs to have adequate resources to implement a project which fit under the USAID strategic framework to increase citizen participation and awareness and to develop organizationally by receiving training and consulting

services. The overall impact of this support on the recipient NGOs was substantial, and allowed ISC to achieve one of its fundamental objectives of the DemNet I program I – creation of a “critical mass” of over 100 NGOs. The downside of this approach was that ISC’s direct assistance only reached a certain portion of the NGO sector. On balance, however, ISC recommends this concentration of resources approach, based on the positive results of the program.

### **Outside Evaluators Would Have Helped Increase Transparency of the Grantmaking Process**

ISC’s winning proposal for the DemNet I program suggested establishing four independent Bulgarian panels, based on USAID’s four priority areas, to help evaluate grant proposals. The Democracy Commission rejected this approach, and ISC staff were given sole responsibility for conducting all steps of the evaluation process and making recommendations to USAID and the Commission. While ISC believes its staff did an exemplary job in the proposal evaluation process, a portion of the NGO community believed that the evaluation process was too closed. Use of independent reviewers would have enhanced the transparency of the evaluation process to all observers.

*Recommendation: Independent evaluation of grant proposals, or evaluation by a broad-based committee, is an important tool for maintaining transparency of the selection process to outside observers.*

### **Feedback is Everything**

ISC took an open door approach towards giving NGO applicants information about the DemNet program priorities, grant application requirements, eligibility considerations, etc. This approach led to more focused proposals that were closer to the DemNet program priorities than otherwise would have occurred. ISC took the feedback approach to new heights in the third grant round when we had a two-step proposal development approach that started with NGOs being able to submit three short concept papers. ISC staff chose the concept papers that had the highest potential impact, and these were later developed into full proposals after the NGOs received personal feedback from ISC staff. The result was a very high percentage of fundable, high impact proposals; more than 70 projects received funding.

*Recommendation: Give feedback and assistance during the proposal development period to improve the quality of grant applications.*

### **An Advisory Committee Can Play a Very Useful Role**

Initially the Democracy Commission did not support the formation of a Bulgarian Advisory Committee; however, ISC was able to establish an Advisory Committee starting in the second year of the project. On the whole, this committee played a useful role for the Program by giving advice and feedback on how the program could be improved and new initiatives. It is important to have a clear charter or mandate for the committee as some members felt it was not clear. Well known, extremely busy people may not be the best members for the committee as they are often too busy to attend meetings.

*Recommendations: Advisory Committees play an important role, both in creating local ownership of the project and as a source of valuable feedback and guidance to the implementors. For the DemNet II program, the Committee should be involved at the design stage, thus registering as a*

*stakeholder at the initiation of the project. A larger Committee, with regional membership, that perhaps meets less frequently should be considered.*

### **Share Materials and Grantee Information with Other Funders**

ISC structured its grant application on a question-driven basis in order to get consistent, comparable information from all applicants. ISC gladly shared its application format and guidelines with other funders operating in Bulgaria, many of whom adapted them for their own. This had a beneficial effect for the NGO community, as the logic and structure of proposal applications became more uniform. ISC also started the practice of sharing information about short-listed applicants with other donors before the recommendations were sent to the Democracy Commission for final approval. This helped alleviate double funding of the same project submitted to the DemNet program and other donors, and it would have potentially drawn attention to applicants who had poor records with other donors (although this was not an issue).

*Recommendation: For the DemNet II program, all grantmaking Support Organizations should consider using a similar, question driven grant application, and share information about applicants to avoid duplicative funding problems.*

### **Grant Round vs. Non-Grant Round Competition**

Having a grant round system has advantages and disadvantages. On the plus side, it's the most transparent thing to do, and concentrates all grants decisions in certain times of the year. On the minus side, it may raise expectations and, lead to the artificial creation of NGOs and waves of heavy working periods. It also reduces the possibility of easily responding to pressing needs of NGOs to carry out time sensitive campaigns in response to new policy initiatives.

*Recommendation: Programs should have options which maintain the flexibility to respond to issues or needs not identified at the start of the project. Grantmaking could be done using a combination of grant rounds and "open window" grant making to allow for this flexibility.*

### **Communication of Results is Critical**

ISC carried out one of the most innovative, exciting, and comprehensive of the Democracy Network Programs. A learning organization, ISC was continually improving and refining the DemNet program, and adding new components (such as the Partnership and Training categories of grants in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grant round, and the regional conference series). Many Bulgarians, and even, at times, USAID, were not aware of all the facets of the program, nor of its successes. An important lesson is that an equal amount of time and effort should have been devoted to communicating results of the program as was spent in refining the program in order to maximize results. This was the impetus for ISC's starting a press conference series in the spring of 1998.

*Recommendation: A communications plan should be drawn up early in the project that takes into consideration the different information needs of various stakeholders.*

### **NGOs May Need Encouragement to Use Services, such as Technical Assistance**

ISC designed one of the most comprehensive technical assistance programs for NGOs in the CEE region, and all of our grantees merely had to fill out a request form to gain access to experts to help them with project or organizational development needs. However, many NGOs did not automatically request technical assistance in spite of their needs. This led ISC to do "technical assistance marketing" where staff and consultants visited NGOs and conducted joint needs

assessments describing the benefits and possibilities of certain kinds of technical assistance. This marketing led to an increased demand for technical assistance services, and ultimately resulted in more successful projects and more organizationally developed NGOs.

*Recommendation: For DemNet II, Support Organizations should: a) be taught how to effectively offer technical assistance for both project and organizational development purposes; b) be able to "market" technical assistance through participatory needs assessments; and c) be able to offer technical assistance on a variety of topics (from grant writing to board development) through different mechanisms from phone consultations to drop in centers to on-site consultations.*

### **Training Needs to be Valued**

ISC offered a comprehensive training program to grantees without charging fees, nor making public the costs of the trainings. While our training program was very successful and led to widespread improvement of organizational behaviors and practices, some of the participants were not particularly motivated. Some were given the opportunity to attend trainings (which offered "free" food and lodging in a pleasant setting) as a "gift" from their NGO. If the grantees had had to pay for the trainings, or compete for "training grants" to attend, then overall motivation and interest probably would have probably been higher. We may also have been able to accommodate non-grantees in our training program who were willing to pay for the opportunity to participate.

*Recommendation: Developing mechanisms where NGOs have to pay a nominal fee or allocate a certain amount of their grant for training purposes, may help them place a greater value on training opportunities. In addition, a more demand driven training program is more likely to address the priority needs of participants.*

### **Training Should Be Offered at Different Levels Using Different Mechanisms**

ISC started its training program by offering one module each on a variety of topics related to the external and internal development needs of organizations. This program mixed organizations that had no experience in an area (such as working with the media) with NGOs that had some or a great deal of experience. Starting in the second year of the program, ISC began offering most of its topics on a beginning and advanced basis. This allowed for an NGO with little experience to take both modules and make substantive progress in an area. Those NGOs with more experience took the more advanced module. ISC also began offering "in-house trainings" to grantees upon request, where, after an NGO sent representatives to one of our group trainings, that same training could be delivered at the office of the grantee in a more customized fashion. The "in-house" trainings further increased the impact of the training program on the overall effectiveness of the recipients.

*Recommendation: Continue offering trainings at different levels of complexity and preserve the possibility of delivering customized "in-house" trainings.*

### **Openness has a Price – Efficiency**

ISC operated the only donor program in Bulgaria without set visiting hours, and NGO leaders felt free to drop in any time for consultations, information, or to say hello. While encouraging (or at least not discouraging) this practice gave ISC an excellent reputation among clients and potential

clients, it, along with constantly ringing phones, probably diminished staff efficiency. The trick is to find the balance, without alienating “customers”.

*Recommendation: Future NGO support program should adopt an open door policy for clients, but consider setting office hours if the demand for consultations is overly disruptive.*

### **Sustainability is Critical**

ISC factored sustainability into every part of its grant decision making and follow up process. For ISC, a sustainability plan was a key part of the application process. If not convincing or plausible, a grant was not recommended. Sustainability also was key in decisions related to follow-up grants, reserve funding, and cost-extensions. NGOs were “taught” the value of sustainability through these mechanism and criteria.

*Recommendation: ISC should continue to target sustainability as a key operational and strategic target at every appropriate point in the DemNet II program.*

## Key Program Results

The following information summarizes the results of the first phase of the ISC-implemented Democracy Network Program based on USAID-approved program objectives and expected results. All figures cited below are conservative estimates and have been gathered using grantee reports and evidence, field monitoring reports, and independent evaluations (related to ISC's training program, for example). Figures related to public participation, public policy changes, press releases, etc. are verified and on file in the ISC/DemNet Program's monitoring database.

Objective	Expected Results	Actual Results
1. <b>Improve the ability of the DemNet target NGOs to carry out their missions and activities effectively.</b>	Strengthen the organizational performance and/or project impact of 80-100 of the DemNet target NGOs.	<b>NGO development</b> — 98 NGOs strengthened their organizational capacity and/or project impact due to DemNet program financial, training, and technical assistance according to ISC and grantee assessments. ISC's training program was independently evaluated as the best available in the country.
	Public support of, and/or participation in, the activities of 60 of the DemNet target NGOs.	<b>Public support</b> — 96 grantees involved the public in their activities through a variety of public outreach mechanisms including public meetings, press conferences, seminars, public hearings, surveys, referendum campaigns, etc.
2. <b>Improve the public accountability, credibility, and image of the DemNet target NGOs and the NGO sector.</b>	60 instances of favorable media coverage of the DemNet target NGOs throughout the country.	<b>Favorable media coverage</b> — There are more than 2,000 documented cases of positive media coverage of the DemNet target NGOs throughout the country, including newspaper and magazine articles, radio interviews, TV shows, and bulletins.
	Start an ISC Press Conference series.	<b>Five press conferences</b> were organized, highlighting NGO achievements.
	Start a Regional Conference series organized by grantees.	<b>Three regional conferences</b> were held in Dobrich, Razgrad and Plovdiv, all organized by grantees.

Objective	Expected Results	Actual Results
<i>continued</i>	Initiate and organize a National Meeting of NGOs.	<b>More than 700 Participants attended the 1998 National Meeting of NGOs</b> , organized by ISC and co-financed by three other donors.
	Increase the quality and distribution of ISC's DemNet Program Bulletin.	<b>The DemNet Program Bulletin was published quarterly</b> , featuring successes of grantees and coverage of policy issues. More than 1,000 copies of each edition were circulated.
	Establish an electronic bulletin board for NGOs.	<b>An electronic bulletin board for NGOs was established</b> in July of 1998.
<b>3. Increase the ability of NGOs to mobilize citizen participation in policy formation and increase the number of opportunities for citizen participation in activities that contribute to the strengthening of civil society and the democratic environment in Bulgaria.</b>	Active citizen participation in 100 DemNet target NGO-initiated events or activities that include public input into policy formation and/or contribute to the strengthening of civil society and the democratic environment in Bulgaria.	<b>Citizen Participation</b> — There are 132 documented cases of public participation in DemNet grantee-initiated events that influenced public policy. These events included legal defense in court, legislative changes, and public hearings that changed the decision of the local administration. For example, the Municipality of Plovdiv, as a result of a grantee's project, changed its regulations to ensure that citizens' opinions on public safety and welfare issues are taken into consideration before a council vote can be held.
<b>4. Improve the ability of the DemNet target NGOs to be effective advocates for public policy change.</b>	50 activities implemented jointly by DemNet target NGOs with other NGOs and/or other sectors of Bulgarian society, e.g., local government, media, businesses, and educational institutions.	<b>Joint Activities</b> — 54 of the projects supported in the third grant round were formal partnership projects. In the previous two grant rounds, at least 10 such cases can be counted, for a <b>total of 64 partnership projects</b> . Partners included more than 60 municipalities across Bulgaria, and the Ministries of Environment, Foreign Affairs, and Justice.

Objective	Expected Results	Actual Results
<i>continued</i>	Start Policy Alert series for grantees.	<b>Policy alert bulletins were started</b> in 1998, giving grantees critical information on new government laws, legislation under consideration, and new government policies.
	25 cases of policy or practice change stimulated by DemNet target NGOs.	<b>Policy Change</b> — (There are 55 documented cases of NGOs contributing to changes in policy or practice) at the local, regional, and national levels. Examples at the national level include influencing legislation in the areas of election law, environmental protection, worker safety, and child welfare. On the local level, grantees changed environmental planning decisions, consumer protection practices, and land distribution procedures.
	Build linkages between Sofia-based think tanks and grantees.	<b>Linkages were made between Sofia think tanks and grantees</b> in the DemNet Program Regional Conference series where such groups as the Center for Social Practices, Economica 2000, and the Center for the Study of Democracy participated.
<b>5. Support the growth of indigenous assistance efforts.</b>	10 organizations with stronger capacity to provide training, technical assistance, and/or project support to Bulgarian NGOs.	<b>Training implementation grants</b> —11 NGOs were recipients of grants to provide training and other services to NGOs, and all benefited from ISC technical assistance and project support.
	Build a team of experienced NGO trainers and consultants.	<b>A training and consulting team of more than 60 experts operating at high standards was formed</b> and is available to continue providing assistance to the NGO sector. A register of such experts was published in September of 1998.

Objective	Expected Results	Actual Results
<i>continued</i>	Facilitate development of improved training standards for the sector.	<b>Standards elaborated by training activists assisted by ISC were published and disseminated</b> in the fall of 1998, as a result of training standards meetings held throughout Bulgaria during the year.
	Use NGO support structures to deliver DemNet Program information.	<b>Open Society Clubs, NGO information centers, and other NGO networks were used by ISC</b> to deliver information about grant rounds and outcomes throughout the program.
	Initiate “self-help” products to improve indigenous assistance.	<b>6 self-guided training workbooks were prepared</b> in the fall of 1998 in such areas as Strategic Planning and Working with Media. <b>NGO accounting software was developed.</b>
<b>6. Maximize the impact of USG and other donor assistance in the areas of democracy strengthening and NGO development.</b>	10 cases of DemNet program cooperation with other USAID grantees/contractors or donors.	<b>Donor cooperation — More than 20 cases of such cooperation with USAID partners and other donors were documented.</b> For example, ISC cooperated with the FLAG consortium (funding its assisted groups), LGI (carrying out a joint study on citizen participation, and working with the Foundation for Local Government Reform in preparing materials for its citizens participation conference); Pro-Media (funding media associations it works with) and GEF (funding NGOs it works with on park protection). Cooperation with others donors included co-funding the National Meeting of NGOs, NGO accounting software, and regular exchange of programming information.

Objective	Expected Results	Actual Results
<i>continued</i>	20 Bulgarian participants in international exchange programs.	<b>20 Bulgarians participated in international exchange programs</b> , including through Freedom House-sponsored regional and U.S. internship programs and the international advocacy-training program in the U.S. supported by TRANSIT.
<b>7. Strengthen ISC's program management and reporting capabilities.</b>	Establishment of a Donors Forum.	<b>Donors Forum</b> — ISC was one of the founders of the informal donors forum that meets once a month.
	A highly productive program that remains responsive to Bulgarian conditions, including an efficient and transparent grant review process, extensive training and technical assistance services, close monitoring of subgrantees, and frequently publicized success stories and project results.	<b>Productive Program</b> — ISC's grant process has been a model for other donors. Its training and technical assistance program has been continually refined and expanded, along with its financial and technical monitoring. Success stories are a feature of the ISC/DemNet Program newsletter, USAID quarterly reports, and Bulgarian press interviews given by ISC staff.

## Training Program

ISC's DemNet training program delivered more than 100 group trainings to more than 900 people from 133 organizations. Topic areas included issues in internal management — strategic planning, human resources and project management, among others — and external management — advocacy, working with the media, and building partnerships. Many DemNet grantees received further in-depth individualized trainings. The following training modules were developed based on the results of a needs assessment of the Bulgarian NGO community.

### External Management

- Advocacy and Lobbying
- Campaigning
- Media Relations
- Public Relations
- Partnerships with other NGOs (within and outside Bulgaria)
- Public Participation
- Coalition Building
- Government, Business, Media, and NGO Partnership

### Internal Management

#### Operational Network

- Legal and Financial Framework for NGOs
- Strategic Planning
- Governance for NGOs
- NGO Management
- Marketing for NGOs
- Fundraising
- Proposal Writing
- Project Management
- Budgeting
- Monitoring and Evaluation

#### Financial

#### Management Network

- Financial Regulation for NGOs
- General Accounting
- Financial Management
- Banking

#### Human Resources

#### Management Network

- Communication Skills
- Team Building
- Decisionmaking
- Conflict Resolution
- Meeting Management/Facilitation
- Effective Leadership
- Management
  - Staff
  - Volunteers
  - Board of Directors

The two required trainings for grantees were:

- **Grant Management** — provided knowledge and skills for effective project management according to DemNet standards.
- **Project Management** — included all main topics related to management, monitoring, and evaluation of projects presented through practical exercises. It also included standardization of control and accountability mechanisms in accordance with ISC requirements.

Following is a brief description of selected optional topics:

### External Management

- **Advocacy and Lobbying** — The purpose of the seminar was to present basic knowledge and skills for advocacy and offer models and techniques for lobbying. Issues addressed were: who are the people who will support NGO ideas; how to involve and make them partners; how to design an effective advocacy campaign; how to influence public policy change; and how to involve decisionmakers and make them partners.
- **Media Relations** — The aim of this training was to acquaint participants with the essence and principles of how the mass media operates and present a structural method for working with the media.
- **Public Participation** — This training offered information and practical skills for designing a strategy for public participation and for developing techniques to actively engage citizens in NGO efforts.

### Internal Management

- **Legal and Financial Framework for NGOs** — The aim of this seminar was to acquaint the participants with Bulgarian legal and tax regulations for NGOs and improve their practical skills in financial management and accounting.
- **Strategic Planning** — This course presented the modern theory of strategic planning. It included lectures on the basic elements of the topic and practical exercises utilizing the NGOs' experience. Analyses and development of general procedures and models of strategic planning were presented. The course enabled participants to develop and design a strategic plan, as well as indicators for its efficiency.
- **Governance for NGOs** — The seminar was directed at increasing the managerial competence of NGO leaders. Current theoretical concepts in the field of organizational management were presented to the participants and they were able to strengthen their managerial skills through practical exercises. The seminar offered self-analysis and self-evaluation of NGO leaders, as well as clarity of functions and evaluation of the current effectiveness of the organization's board.
- **Marketing for NGOs** — Marketing was an unknown world for most Bulgarian NGOs. The purpose of this module was to introduce participants to marketing concepts. Participants learned to define the unique niche of their NGOs; reach the desired audience with a motivating message; and focus public attention, support, and enthusiasm on the NGO's mission.
- **Human Resources Management**

## Attachment B

- **1st module** — The training included formation and development of skills for self-expression, and adoption of self-expression as an important value for developing a sensibility towards others.
  - **2nd module** — This module focused on social skills and developed skills for communication and social partnership. This training was obligatory for managers.
  - **3rd module** — The focus of the 3rd module was on team building skills. The training included procedures, rules and personal skills for team building and development.
- 
- **Working with Volunteers** — This training presented basic knowledge in strategy development for recruiting and retaining volunteers.

### Specific Trainings

- **Economics of the Third Sector** — The aim of this seminar was to acquaint participants with legal and tax regulations that allow NGOs to perform economic activities and improve their knowledge in fundraising to increase the financial sustainability of their organizations.
- **Partnership** — This seminar acquainted participants with the importance of building partnerships and developing networks as a step toward sustainability. Skills taught included how to strengthen the position of the organization by working with different sectors and how to maximize effectiveness by networking with other NGOs.

**Attachment C**  
**Institute for Sustainable Communities**  
**Democracy Network Program I - Bulgaria Grantees by Region\***

**Bourgas**

- Bulgarian Association of Municipal Ecological Experts
- Blue Stone Foundation-Silven
- Janko Sakuzov Foundation, Bourgas Branch
- New Life for the Bulgarian Roma Foundation
- Partners for the Future
- Partnership Foundation
- United Roma Union

**Haskovo**

- Association “Opportunity and Protection”
- Association “Opportunity and Protection”
- “Balkan Forum” Association
- Bulgarian Society for Education and Culture
- Bulgarian Society for Education and Culture-Stara Zagora
- Journalists for Tolerance Foundation
- Meeting Foundation
- Meeting Foundation
- Science and Technology Union
- Society for Dissemination of Knowledge “Thought”
- Youth Education Center

**Lovech**

- Association for Support of Convicted and Their Families
- Bulgarian Association for Fair Elections and Civil Rights-Levski
- Bulgarian Association for Fair Elections and Civil Rights-Lovech
- Center for NGO Development Pleven
- “Homeland” Foundation
- Initiative for Sustainable Development
- NGO Center-Pleven

**Montana**

- Association for Dissemination of Knowledge
- House of Technology-Vratza
- Roma Union for Social Democracy

**Plovdiv**

- Association for the Revival of Plovdiv

- Bulgarian Association for Fair Elections and Civil Rights-Karlovo Branch
- Bulgarian Association for Fair Elections and Civil Rights-Pazardzhik
- Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds
- Center for Development of Perushtitza Municipality
- Center for Sustainable Development of the Mountain
- Education for Democracy Youth Center
- Green Balkans Association-Plovdiv
- Human Rights Center “Vasil Levski”
- Journalists for Tolerance Foundation
- “Media with Human Face” Association
- Roma Regional Development Foundation-Plovdiv
- Regional Union of Consumers-Plovdiv
- Smolyan Regional Development Agency
- Society for Development of Lucky Municipality
- Union of Rhodopes Hotel and Restaurant Owners
- United Youth Councils Association
- Unity Organization-Plovdiv
- Women’s Roma Association
- Youth Center Education for Democracy-Plovdiv
- Youth Center “Education for Democracy”-Plovdiv

**Rousse**

- Association “Political Processes Research Center”
- Bulgarian Association for Fair Elections and Civil Rights-Razgrad
- Bulgarian Association for Fair Elections and Civil Rights-Veliko Turnovo
- “Demos” Foundation
- “Rousse 21” Foundation
- Youth Initiative Center-Rousse

**Sofia**

- Alternative Development Center
- Animus Association

## Attachment C

- Association “Children of the Earth”
  - Association for Dissemination of Knowledge “Citizen”
  - Association for Dissemination of Science “Knowledge”
  - Association of Practitioners in Education and Social Sphere
  - Association of Stock and Secondary Holders
  - Association of Young Legal Specialists
  - “Bi-Bit” Road Safety Clubs
  - Bulgarian Association for Fair Elections and Civil Rights-Sofia
  - Bulgarian Association for Psychotherapy and Psychological Consultation
  - Bulgarian Association of Rural and Ecological Tourism
  - Bulgarian Association “School and Health”
  - Bulgarian Association “School and Health”
  - Bulgarian Association of University Women
  - Bulgarian Charity Aid Foundation
  - Bulgarian Federation of Bakers and Confectioners
  - Bulgarian Helsinki Committee
  - Bulgarian Partnership Association
  - Center for Human Rights and Citizens Education
  - Center for Independent Living
  - Center for Pluralism
  - Center for Liberal Studies
  - Center for Social Practices
  - Citizens’ Forum Free Speech Association
  - Civil Dialog Association
  - Club Economics 2000
  - Democracy in Action Foundation
  - Democratic Society for Safe and Harmless Working Environment
  - “Dr. Zhelyo Zhelev” Foundation
  - Free and Democratic Bulgaria Foundation
  - Free Education Association
  - Foundation “Bulgarian Institute for Analysis and Research”
  - Human Rights Project
  - Human Rights Project
  - Institute for Political and Legal Studies
  - Institute for Regional and International Studies
  - Journalists for Democracy Foundation
  - National Forum “Partnership for Sustainable Development”
  - Negotiation and Conflict Resolution Foundation
  - No to Fear Movement
  - No to Fear Movement
  - Partnership Foundation-Sofia
  - Perspective Foundation
  - Potential Foundation
  - Regional Environmental Center (REC)-Bulgaria
  - Rural Women Clubs
  - Science and Technology Union of Water Resources
  - Sofia Association for Mental Health
  - Sofia Mental Health Association
  - “Solaris-3” Foundation
  - “This is My Environment” (TIME) Foundation
  - Tolerance Foundation-Sofia
  - Union of Architects in Bulgaria
  - Union of Bulgarian Foundations and Associations
  - Women for Dignity Union
  - Women with Future Association
  - Youth Center “Friendship”
  - Youth Research Foundation
- Varna**
- Agency for Regional Economic Development & Investments
  - Black Sea Center for Environmental Information and Education
  - Democratic Women’s Union
  - European Club
  - Legal Initiative for Training and Development
  - Legal Initiative for Training and Development
  - Neighborhood Center for Social Activities
  - Public Center for Environment and Sustainable Development
  - Social Development Club
  - Social Development Club