

Interview with Livio Liechti – Partnership Coordinator at United Network of Young Peacebuilders

What is your experience with EU operational funding?

We have been supported as an EU-wide network by “Key Action 3 – Civil Society Cooperation in the Field of Youth” of the Erasmus+ programme since 2015 and through administrative grants from other Erasmus+ instruments prior to that.. Alongside that, we have repeatedly received Erasmus+ project grants to fund our youth capacity development and networking activities. Due to the conditions attached to these types of project grants, activities funded through them usually result in having a big majority of participants from Europe. This limitation is increasingly clashing with the global nature of our network and our current focus on decentralising network activities and governance to ensure stronger ownership by our members beyond Europe.

In parallel, our continuous advocacy efforts for a stronger recognition of positive youth contributions to peace and security have led to gradual shifts in other multilateral and bilateral donors’ policy and programming. This has opened up new avenues for strategic-level funding support to our global network beyond Europe-focused donors such as Erasmus+ or the European Youth Foundation.

Will you be reapplying for Operational Funding by the EAC? Why?

Operational grants are an essential component to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of our organisation. Therefore, we always try to retain existing operational funding relationships whenever possible. , The reporting conditions and the trust relationship that come with such grants make it possible for an organisation to focus most of its efforts on its strategic mission without having to report on every single activity in great detail. This also allows organisations to act with more agility and flexibility, which is especially important when facing crises, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic. This is why it is important for Youth organisations and CSOs in general to be stably supported. We try to push donors in that direction. More sustainable organisations have a better chance to effectively support the social change process. Steady funding frees your thinking from limited terms. It helps to think about the core of your work; how to move forward the agenda of the organisation. This was also one of the key recommendations of a recent policy paper published by my organisation:: there needs to be more strategic level support; not projectisation of our youth-led work (<https://unoy.org/wp-content/uploads/EU-support-to-YPS-policy-brief.pdf>).

How did operational funding support the internal structure of your organisation?

Thanks to the flexibility and stability provided by this funding instrument we have been able to continuously maintain an international secretariat with paid staff, which has been instrumental in coordinating our advocacy and programming efforts to advance the youth, peace and security agenda. This continuous support has laid the groundwork for our recent growth from 4 paid staff members to currently 8 staff and 4 interns, which has largely been made possible through a new strategic partnership with the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida).

How did operational funding enhance the impact of your organisation?

It has always been relatively straightforward to raise funds for some of our activities, such as advocacy and capacity development, as they are easier to fund through project grants. . However,

network development and organisational development were lagging behind for a long time.. This is probably because financing network development and other internal strengthening measures is less attractive to funding institutions.. Continuously growing our operational funding (including donors beyond Erasmus+) has allowed us to invest in these areas by establishing dedicated coordination positions. For example, we now have dedicated staff members responsible for network coordination, the management of external partnerships and external communications. This has been transformational for our organisation and has allowed us to invest more time into the decentralisation and strengthening of our membership and activities.

Why do you think the EC prefers to support CSOs on project basis rather than operational basis?

There are a lot of reasons. First and foremost, it is an expression of the global funding ecosystem that leads to an alignment of donors about how they prefer to work: Results-oriented, guided by principles of transparency, accountability, numbers, speed; A business mind-set. This is common for bureaucrats and decision makers and politicians, as they ultimately need to be accountable to their tax payers. In light of these expectations, operational and structural funding has a difficult stand, as it can take more time to reach long-term results compared to short-term projects with more easily measurable outputs and outcomes. Furthermore,, many times even strategic funding ends up looking like a project (quarterly reports, strict controls and monitoring etc.). This leads to many organisations structure's evolving to closely match the preferences of funders. The administrative level necessary to apply for grants is quite high, even in the youth sector. There is a need for strategic, more flexible and smaller scale funding. But this often clashes with the realities of the funding system.