

Civil Society

About ISC

At the Institute for Sustainable Communities, we give passionate, committed people the tools, skills, and resources they need to make their communities better places to live.

Since our founding in 1991 by former Vermont Governor Madeleine M. Kunin, ISC has led 70 transformative community-driven projects in 19 countries around the world.

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The Balkans

Beginning in Bulgaria in 1991—and informed by our civil society programs in Russia and Ukraine—ISC has pioneered and refined an approach to civil society strengthening in the Balkans that makes it possible for communities and NGOs to achieve exceptional results and strengthen their overall viability.

At the heart of this approach is our belief that advocacy need not be heroic, adversarial or overtly political, but rather is mainstream part of everyday life. When citizens advocate, they express their concerns and priorities, press for recognition of their rights, and insist on the importance of their voice in making public decisions. By helping citizens and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) practice advocacy in a constructive and holistic way, ISC increases trust across sectors and between citizens and their government, opening doors for meaningful collaboration and real changes in society.

Central to our approach is helping passionate, committed NGOs achieve concrete results on behalf of their constituents. We design comprehensive capacity building programs to address their needs. Using two specially tailored tools—an adaptation of USAID's Advocacy Index and ISC's own Seat At The Table Index—we measure grantees' ability to effectively design and carry out advocacy campaigns, create productive partnerships with government institutions and other stakeholders, connect with and mobilize constituents, and communicate their mission to the public.

Macedonia

When ISC began our civil society work in Macedonia in 1995, most NGOs were less than five years old; many operated out of people's homes. Today, with a stronger civil sector in place, we work with a core group of 22 nonprofits to help them lead the sector and advocate for such issues as tax exemptions for charitable donations, or laws that regulate and support volunteering. ISC's Civil Society Strengthening Project is in its fifth year and is now headed by a Macedonian citizen.

- ISC has helped NGOs gain legitimacy throughout society and have a positive influence on public policy, from securing important agricultural policies to planning a regional waste management strategy with the city government.
- Local staff from ISC's earlier program formed two new nonprofits, the Center for Institutional Development, which provides training and support to nonprofit organizations and communities working on local issues, and Konekt, which is helping to develop a culture of philanthropy in the country.
- We helped the Roma community of Bair, for example, advocate to their local government for the provision of basic services previously denied to them. They have subsequently formed an NGO that now



“ISC’s capacity building program is very well-designed, since it addresses the real development needs of the organizations.”

– Marina Gjorgjioska-Kitanoska,
Deputy Director for Programs
CCI Prilep (Macedonia)

contributes to national policy formation. More recently, we helped a Roma-led NGO become a regional leader on community development issues.

Serbia

In 2002, we teamed up with Civic Initiatives, a Serbian nonprofit, and YouthBuild International to build leadership skills in young people in 20 communities as a way to help stem young people’s increasing disillusionment while growing a new generation of leaders. We soon began supporting the Youth Coalition of Serbia’s work in engaging young people in developing a national youth policy for the country that would give young adults a stronger voice in public debate. In 2008, this work led to the launch of a Ministry for Youth and Sport housed within the government, for which ISC and our partners continue to provide support.

In 2006, ISC launched the five-year Civil Society Advocacy Initiative to help build a strong civil sector, working both with established nonprofits and with grassroots community organizations to help build support for advocacy and to help shift public perceptions of NGOs from political agitators to constructive partners. To better engage NGOs and communities outside of Belgrade, our Mobile Advocacy School brings our capacity-building program to underserved regions of the country.

- With 4 elections in 2 years, ISC has worked with NGOs to help get out the vote in Serbia, particularly among marginalized and vulnerable populations who are less likely to vote.
- In 2008, ISC and its partners helped launch a Business Leaders Forum with 14 national and international companies signing on as founding participants. The Forum will encourage and support companies—and their employees—to contribute to social and environmental causes as part of their everyday operations.

Kosovo

In the fall of 2008, ISC launched a program that will bring our best practices in civil society to Kosovo, the world’s newest country, and aid its transition to an inclusive and democratic government. After years of conflict and political uncertainty, Kosovo’s newly independent status poses great challenges, including healing ethnic and political rifts while rebuilding the nation’s economy and infrastructure.

Our goal is to ensure that Kosovo civil society is an effective and influential partner to government in public decision making. With the struggle for independence behind them, we are helping NGOs tackle the broad range of issues facing the small country and assume new roles in holding the government accountable. We also will be working with both Kosovo Serb and Kosovo Albanian NGOs to ease ethnic tensions, and, to that end, have hired two capacity building/advocacy advisors, Kosovo Serb and one Kosovo Albanian, to work as a team on all capacity-building activities for the project.

Regional Opportunities

While ISC’s work is always tailored to meet the needs of each country, there are strong economic and social ties between the Balkan countries. Moreover, they share a common history and face similar challenges—all of which means that there is fertile ground for cross-border collaboration. ISC believes NGOs in the region would benefit from a regional approach to networks addressing issues such as promoting social inclusion among vulnerable and marginalized groups; promoting philanthropy and corporate social responsibility; addressing environmental problems; and better engaging young people in their communities.