

Western Balkans, Eastern Europe, incl. Central Asia

REGIONAL INTRODUCTION

1.0 Regional Context

The programme plans include both Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, incl. Central Asia region. The region share the common experience of being members of the East block or/and of the Soviet Union, though marked by a wide variety of political, social, economic and geographical conditions.

The region consists of two NCA sub-regions: **Eastern Europe, incl. Central Asia** and **Western Balkans**. Eastern Europe is defined as Russia - the Northwest and the Moscow regions as well as North Caucasus – Belarus, Ukraine, Armenia, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. However, NCA's involvement in Central Asia has so far only been in Tajikistan. The Western Balkans, described in this plan, is a sub-region of the six countries of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, and the UN-administered province of Kosovo. Apart from Albania, they are all previously part of former Yugoslavia.

Poor governance and lack of positive performance characterize a majority of the governments in the region, whether democratically elected or not. In some cases, this is related to deep-rooted political instability, while in more stable environments, corruption and lack of accountability flourish.

Despite a large increase in local civil society organizations in the region over the last decade, civil society still have major challenges to overcome in order to be recognized as relevant and legitimate actors by the State and by the population in general. The deficit in participation represents a challenge in all countries in the region.

The transition from communism to liberal market economy in the region has resulted in a sharp decline in living standards, high unemployment, falls in life expectancy and a substantial black market, which accounts for up to 60-70% of the overall economy. The social security system has deteriorated and basic rights to health services and social security are not upheld. An increasing gap, economically and socially, between groups of people and between regions – centre and periphery - can be observed.

During the last 10-15 years, according to UNDP, the sub-region of Eastern Europe has been subject to the sharpest reversal in welfare compared to any other part of the world. None of the countries have so far surpassed their 1991 level of development. The countries of Central Asia are lying at the lower end of the human development index, though they have experienced rise in income. High trade costs, environmental devastation, rising migration, rapid spread of HIV and AIDS and poor governance are some of the challenges that confront Central Asia, according to UNDP's regional Human Development Report, "Bringing Down Barriers", launched in December 2005. The countries of this region have attained international attention because of their geopolitical and economic importance, their natural resources, and their transit potential for transcontinental trade and transport. The report argues that increased cooperation among the countries will produce large gains, particularly for the poor. Officially the economy is growing in Tajikistan, but the growth is giving an inaccurate picture given the country's chronic unemployment rate and dependency on international aid and loans. Approximately 80% of the country's population lives in poverty. Widespread poverty, in turn, has abetted the growth of Islamic radical activity. Although Central Asia is rich on

natural resources, their economies have to a large extent collapsed after the loss of the Soviet investments. The need for maintenance of water supply and sanitation systems as well as education on sanitation and hygiene is significant. Unemployment is rampant in the region, leading to human trafficking and drugs trade. Some experts warn that drugs trade has the potential to overwhelm the Tajik government's economic development efforts. Corruption and lack of political reforms constitute major challenges and needs to be dealt with. Despite the bleak prospect Central Asian countries are experiencing a careful increase in investments

Nevertheless, all countries in the region experience growth in their GDPs, and in the Western Balkans in particular, certain countries demonstrate clear prospects for positive economic development; Slovenia has already entered the EU, and both Croatia and FYR of Macedonia are accepted as candidate countries. Although the reform process is still in its infancy, the EU mechanism for preparing accession talks with countries in South-East Europe, the Stabilisation and Association process, presents an opportunity to promote human rights and economic reforms to ensure compliance with the EU "acquis communautaire". Even if EU memberships are more distant for countries in Eastern Europe, certain of them, like Ukraine and Armenia, strive to become more accepted by the West, particularly on issues such as human rights, with the view of one day qualifying for membership in NATO and the EU.

The feminization of poverty is particularly apparent in all countries, also in the Western Balkans: the revitalization of old gender roles has had a strong negative impact on the opportunities for and empowerment of girls and women. During the communist period in Eastern Europe, women were better represented in decision-making positions than today. To get women (back) in decision-making positions remains a major challenge.

The rapid spread of HIV in Eastern Europe, especially in Ukraine and Russia, has turned the disease into a major pandemic, which will doubtlessly affect the population growth negatively. The Churches have accepted that HIV is an issue of great concern, and that serious action is necessary to curb the pandemic. However, the tense situation between majority and minority churches within the ecumenical network increases the equity deficit. A sharing attitude to distribution of resources and responsibilities within the ecumenical family remains a major challenge, and it will be particularly important to continue to address the equity deficit in the coming planning period. In the Western Balkans region, the HIV and AIDS programs will no longer be funded after 2008 as the disease has not turned out to be a major concern.

The continuing civil and ethnic strives in the Western Balkans and North Caucasus and the myriad of unresolved problems threaten to undermine stability both in the short, medium- and long-term perspective. The region will need continued support in ensuring protection of internally displaced living in Ingushetia or Chechnya, and in addressing their economic, social and cultural rights. In Central Asia nation building represents a major challenge. Also here development is interrupted by political and social unrests.

The threat to sustainable peace and to human security, in particular to ethnic minority groups and refugees/internally displaced, but also to others – girls and women particularly - in the form of (organized) crime, human trafficking and terrorist acts, represent the biggest challenge for the whole region in the coming plan period.

NCA believes that the continued support of the international community will be important to address some of the mentioned challenges in the region.

2.0 NCA's Added Value

At Present

Development of diaconia is at the core of NCA's identity, and we have a longstanding and broad experience in this field. In the Western Balkans, NCA has been working with the Churches/faith-based partners from two angles; with the social, diaconal organizations, represented by our core partners, and with the Churches and other faith-based communities directly, in the framework of programs for intra/inter-religious dialogue and co-operation. Based on our direct support to the poor and vulnerable in each community's constituency, we have achieved legitimacy and knowledge of local conditions. This has enabled us to challenge the religious communities to work for promotion of peace and respect for human rights. Given that the deficit in protection represents a main challenge in the region, NCA believes in the potential of the church, religious communities and their leaders as prime stakeholders in promoting peace and tolerance in post-conflict countries.

In Eastern Europe, churches and church-based organisations have traditionally been NCA's implementing partners. Other faith-based organisations have not been included in the Round Table structures in past seven years, however the relation with them is in some countries established and promising. The rights-based approach has up to now barely been visible in their strategies and programmes. It remains to be a major challenge to integrate this aspect in our common work and to develop an understanding where poor and marginalized people must be given the opportunity to become both rights holders and duty bearers in their struggle for a life in dignity. NCA has been involved in diaconia in Eastern Europe for many years, except for the countries in Central Asia, where NCA in 2004 joined the Ecumenical Consortium for Central Asia (ECCA). The members have developed programs for interventions in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. The Framework for the cooperation is a consortium with a program office in Dushanbe/Tajikistan that is supporting and monitoring the projects during the planning period. The programs are implemented through local NGOs and civil society institutions in the area. The ecumenical agencies have established joint programs focusing on specific thematic priorities, where each agency has a lead role due to its comparative advantage. However, due to Norwegian Church Aid's new priorities and a decrease in own funding to the region, some projects will be scaled down while other will be dependent on external funding. It will however, remain a priority in areas where the capacity is lacking or underdeveloped.

Cooperation with church-based, faith-based and value-based organisation allows reaching out to groups of population, which are difficult to reach for secular organisations. This is a significant comparative advantage of NCA's engagement in the region, where religion plays important role in the society. The main component of NCA's support to local partners in the region of Eastern Europe is strengthening of civil society on the grass root level and introducing them into new and challenging thematic programs (i.e. sustainable development, HIV and AIDS, gender based violence, etc.). The support of establishment of thematic networks and regional experience exchange forums enables better outreach and wide transfer of gained expertise and knowledge.

Most of the work supported by NCA in the region can be considered long-term development assistance. In the Western Balkans, NCA's transition from emergency aid to long-term development assistance and advocacy, in particular in the post-military intervention situation in Kosovo, has provided NCA with first-hand experience in how best ensure sustainability and local ownership in this specific context. In addition, an increased understanding of how peace-building can be mainstreamed into all form of activities, including physical reconstruction, has emerged.

Ambitions

Relation building, both within countries and at a regional level, will continue to be one of Norwegian Church Aid's main priorities. Even if the focus in NCA's own operational work in the Western Balkans has been primarily in the areas worst affected by conflict, first BiH and then Kosovo, NCA has strived to maintain a regional approach. This is based on a recognition that problems in one country tend to spill over in neighbouring countries, and moreover, that the majority of problems are shared. As the main challenges related to peace and security, internally displaced and refugees, minority rights and human trafficking are distinctively cross-border, NCA is well placed to deal with these challenges.

In the whole region NCA will contribute to develop ecumenical network co-operation on relevant thematic issues such as HIV and AIDS, peace-building and trafficking. We will contribute to increase the exchange of policies and programmes between donor agencies and with and among implementing partners, thereby broadening the platforms for advocacy countrywide, regionally and globally. The cooperation with the resource organisations will play a significant role in this process.

NCA will strengthen the regional approach by supporting regional and sub-regional thematic programs in the field of gender-based violence/trafficking and HIV, where core partners and strategic partners will mutually reinforce each other.

Norwegian Church Aid will continue to encourage local partners to work in partnership with central and local government structures wherever feasible, even if financial support to these structures will be limited. Cooperation with the market, which traditionally has been more limited and less emphasised than the co-operation with the State, will depend on the readiness of all stakeholders to work in a transparent way.

Competence on right-based analysis, and in particular gender analysis and gender mainstreaming needs to be strengthened among Norwegian Church Aid staff as well as among local partners. Most of our local partners are working in an environment where financial transparency and accountability is lacking. NCA will continue to share our experience and promote high ethical standards in all financial and narrative reporting. Support to main partners' communication and information work will also be one of NCA's added values.

The thematic priority of HIV and AIDS has been a major focus of the NCA work in the Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans in the past years. As available funds have been depleted Norwegian Church Aid will assist the local partners throughout the region in attracting funding from other sources. One of the main priorities will be to support main partners to link up and seek support from the Global Fund (GFATM), and influence and monitor the fund's policies and strategies.

NCA's operational projects in Kosovo is planned to be phased out during the planning period. Hence, the presence and office in Kosovo is planned to be closed in 2009 and the programmes will thereafter be managed from NCA Head office.

3.0 Thematic Focus

In the first part of the planning period all the five global thematic priorities were covered under the NCA programme in the Western Balkans sub-region, however with still another thematic area added, namely Education. During 2007 a review was implemented taking both availability of funds, partners' and NCA's capacity and various aspects of development and political shifts in the region into consideration. This review has resulted in a comprehensive scaling down and even concluding cooperation on HIV programmes,

as well as recognizing that post-conflict construction projects will no longer be funded after 2008 (including water and sanitation), and likewise recognizing that Good Governance has proven to be more a cross-cutting focus linked to other thematic areas, than a thematic area in its own right.

Accordingly, for the years 2008 – 2009, the thematic areas for the **Western Balkans** have been narrowed down and become more focused. NCA Balkans will have the following two thematic areas as mentioned in the NCA GSP:

- Religions for Conflict Transformation and Peace-building
- Men and Women address Gender-based Violence
- In addition, “Education” will be a thematic focus in relation to Roma.

In **Eastern Europe** the focus is on the following four global thematic priorities:

- Faith Communities Address HIV and AIDS
- Men and Women Address Gender Based Violence
- Communities for Fresh Water and Safe Sanitation
- In addition NCA will look into possibilities to develop and/or re-establish programmes related to Religions for Conflict Transformation and Peace Building, primary only in the Northern and South Caucasus and to look into possibilities to be a resource for partners in emergencies and to develop program related to indigenous people North Russia.

For more details on the thematic focus in the region reference is given to chapter 3 in the *Country Programme Plan, Area: Western Balkans 2005-2009, revised 2007* and to the *Country Programme Plan, Area: Eastern Europe and Central Asia 2005-2009, revised 2007*.

4.0 Geographical Focus and Presence

Focus Countries	NCA Presence and Follow-up	Professional Capacity
Sub-region (Several of the countries may be included in a regional peace-building programme.)	Area Representation: Pristina	Advisor on peace-building at Head Office Finance Manager at Area Representation
Regional Eastern Europe	Follow-up from Head Office	Advisor on Peace-building at Head Office
Other Countries of Priority		
Albania	Area Representation: Pristina	Advisor on gender-based violence at Head Office
Serbia	Area Representation: Pristina	
Kosovo	Area Representation: Pristina	Advisor on peace-building at Head Office, Advisor on Water and Sanitation at Head Office, Programme Managers in Kosovo
FYR Macedonia	Area Representation: Pristina	

Russia	Programme Coordinator at Head Office	
Belarus	Programme Coordinator at Head Office	
Ukraina	Programme Coordinator at Head Office	
Armenia	Programme Coordinator at Head Office	
Tajikistan	ECCA Regional Representation: Dushanbe	Representative Program Coordinator at Head office
Countries with Individual Projects		
Croatia	Area Representation: Pristina	

For detailed explanations related to geographical focus, reference is made to chapter 5 in the *Country Programme Plan, Area: Western Balkans 2005-2009, revised 2007* and to the *Country Programme Plan, Area: Eastern Europe and Central Asia 2005-2009, revised 2007*.

5.0 Monitoring and Evaluation

The programs are continuously monitored during the implementation and are subject to both narrative and financial reporting. For further details reference is made to chapter 9 in the *Country Programme Plan, Area: Western Balkans 2005-2009, revised 2007* and to the *Country Programme Plan, Area: Eastern Europe and Central Asia 2005-2009, revised 2007*.