



## *Supporting the Western Balkan's collective leadership on reconciliation: building capacity and momentum for the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO)*

*Steering Committee Meeting*

*27 October 2020*

*Summary report of the meeting\**

### Introduction

The second Project Steering Committee (PSC) meeting of the “Supporting the Western Balkan's collective leadership on reconciliation: building capacity and momentum for the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) project convened on 27 October 2020 at 15.00 a.m. The meeting was co-chaired by Mrs. Fiona McCluney, Resident Coordinator, UN in Albania, Mr. Đuro Blanusa, RYCO Secretary General and moderated by Mr. Eno Ngjela Programme Specialist, UNDP Albania.

Mr. Ngjela welcomed the participants and provided a background context in which the meeting is held. He highlighted that PSCM meeting normally could have been convened earlier, as per the normal practice, one year after the last Steering Committee in April 2019. Considering the force majeure factors (earthquake and covid-19), as well as the NCE approval, now it is the right time to meet among the actors involved and implementing partners, in order to provide updates about the progress to date, agree on the future implementation plan and discuss around a few issues. The project itself is a complex one, with many actors involved, but the team tried its best to manage the complexities, especially in the new circumstances created by the “new normality” of the pandemic. For Mr. Ngjela, this meeting is valuable to design the further steps for the future of the project, given that still a lot of work remains to be done.

Mr. Ngjela went briefly through the agenda, by informing participants on the main blocks of the meeting:

- Opening remarks from UN Albania, RYCO and UNPBF highest representatives;
- Information on the progress of the project; and
- Discussions for issues of common concern by the end of the meeting

### Opening remarks

In her opening remarks, the UN RC in Albania, Mrs. Fiona McCluney took the opportunity to acknowledge and appreciate the efforts of the three UN agencies and of RYCO in making progress through this project during a challenging period influenced by force majeure, locally and globally. On behalf of the UN agencies, Mrs. McCluney took also the opportunity to express the gratitude to the

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\* The Agenda is included as Annex 1



donor for the flexibility and support provided to the project, especially for the approval of a project no-cost-extension period, which is found crucial to conclude the project successfully. She reemphasized the commitment of the UN agencies to support RYCO in achieving its mandate and highlighted that working with youth in the WB6 region will be on the focus of the UN regional eligibility application to PBF.

RYCO's Secretary General, Mr. Djuro Blanuša, highlighted the huge contribution of this project for RYCO's organisational development. For Mr. Blanuša, it was fortunate for RYCO to be recognised by credible partners like UN from 2017 when RYCO was established as an institution, as it helped to diversify RYCO's portfolio, grow drastically its presence in the region, enjoy political recognition and has a financially sustainable situation. He appreciated the flexibility and understanding of UN to respond to RYCO's needs and to support RYCO to grow and realise its ambitions in making tangible change for youth in the region. Mr. Blanuša highlighted some of the challenges faced, starting with the force majeure, which could not be anticipated in the project design stage. He reiterated as a lesson learned for both RYCO and UN, on strengthening the regional perspective and ownership of the project, instead of implementing it as an Albania' driven project, given that the focus of RYCO is the whole region. Mr. Blanuša brought into participant's attention the political context and complexity in which RYCO operates. He highlighted that due to fragility of political relations and of some bilateral disputes in the region, RYCO's Governing Board, could either not convene or could not ensure the necessary quorum to take important decisions, which hindered the efficiency of RYCO in delivering the programs and reach its annual targets. Regardless of all challenges listed, Mr. Blanuša stated his confidence that the project has made its progress and will be concluded successfully, and he takes the opportunity to praise RYCO's project team and the UN team for all efforts invested to this project, which is a "full plate" for one middle size organisation like RYCO, as relates to the level of ambitious and number of activities it involves. Mr. Blanuša concluded his word with the congratulations for the 75<sup>th</sup> UN anniversary and expressing the pleasure to have partners with 75 years of knowledge, which are fighting for the causes of peacebuilding and social cohesion like RYCO. As such, he emphasized the willingness of his organisation for a sustainable and long-term cooperation with UN.

Mr. Harald Thorud emphasised the strategic and particular interest of PBF in gender and youth initiatives and therefore the last annual call for proposals, where both UN agencies and CSOs are eligible to apply, was focused on promoting gender and youth promotion initiatives. This particular project is very much in line with these PBF priorities and for Mr. Thorud, based on this experience and in the framework of regional eligibility application, Albania could apply in 2021 through the same funding window. It is now a good moment for the project, knowing that a no cost extension is approved so the project has the proper time to conclude its activities and that the second tranche will be released in a few days. It is important for Mr. Thorud, that project partners have a cooperation with the EU. PBF is also lately established and is increasing the partnership with the EU, to align synergies in the framework of EU integration processes of WB6 governments, but also because Germany is one of the biggest PBF donors. Thus, it is important to hear about the progress and lessons learned of this project, so PBF can use the experience gained from these initiatives to generate funds and provide further support. The main aim of these PBF funding windows, is to be catalytic and ensure



sustainability of interventions. As such, the PBF is interested to kick start processes which are taken over from other partners or governments and ensure long term sustainability of the organisations that it supports. Mr Thorud concluded by expressing his interest to see and support other similar initiatives in the WB region in the future.

## Presentation of progress report major activities

**Output 1: Education/ Schools (UNICEF)** - *Mrs. Linda Bushati* stated that although she is presenting the component covered by UNICEF, all the project implementation consists of a close collaboration and joint work with the two other UN agencies and RYCO at all the levels of the work. The first component promotes the dialog and peacebuilding in the schools and intends to develop a peacebuilding methodology for them. The peacebuilding methodology is developed based on the desk research and positive experiences in the region, but also challenges and lessons learned, in order to have the know-how from other countries. In addition, the ideas and opinions of young people are important in this process and therefore, the UNICEF engaged about 4500 youngsters in three countries to know their perspective on peacebuilding and intercultural dialogue learning in their schools. Both mapping of the best experiences and the poll results with youth opinions, were reflected in the peacebuilding toolkit developed for WB teachers. Teachers from WB region were trained based on the toolkit and the training served also to test the toolkit. A second online training will be held in November before the toolkit is considered as a final document. The finalized document will be printed and also be transformed into an online tool for teacher training, all that to serve to the sustainability in the long term, but also in supporting online training activities with teachers during the pandemic.

Another issue addressed by UNICEF component is the support to schools to increase the financial resources for youth exchange, peacebuilding and intercultural activities in the region. For this purpose, a manual for fundraising and a training methodology for fundraising is developed for schools in the WB6 region.

After having prepared the necessary tools and mentored the schools to plan and implement their peacebuilding initiatives, UNICEF intends to support teachers with small grants for IT equipment necessary to facilitate the e-learning, so schools have the opportunity to exercise the learning accumulated from the support provided by this project.

**Output 2: Youth groups and grassroots organizations (UNFPA)** – *Mrs. Elida Nuri* described the complementarity of the UNFPA component, to the one of UNICEF. While UNICEF is working with youth in schools, UNFPA is mostly reaching the marginalized and hard to reach youth as well as the grassroots organizations, following the principle of the UN Agencies, of leaving no one behind. This choice was also made in response to the lessons learned from the first RYCO's open call for proposals, back in late 2018, where some youth groups from hard to reach communities were having little access to these funds for various reasons. As such these groups would be reached through using the y-peer training methodology on peacebuilding. UNFPA adopted the methodology for the project purposes, through a very comprehensive and participatory process, which includes consultations and inputs of all UNFPA offices across the region, RYCO staff in HO and Local Branch Offices (LBOs) and with the input of



international and national consultants. The manual developed was tested during the two ToT sessions and will be further used by trained youth trainers to organize hybrid or face to face local workshops with their youth peers from hard to reach groups, who may not have the adequate IT facilities and infrastructure accessible. RYCO and UNFPA will be utilizing their channels of communication and connections, to ensure that local workshops are attended by different youth groups, minorities, and have a balanced gender representation. UNFPA intends to support afterwards, identification and implementation of the best innovative peacebuilding ideas evolving from the local workshops.

Ms. Vladica Jovanovic emphasized the value of the regional dimension of the youth peer peacebuilding manual for RYCO, which helps the organization reach its targeted youth communities in the region and give voice to those underrepresented. She highlighted the important support of UNFPA to RYCO institutional strengthening through the development of its communication strategy. This support is coming in the moment when the project will be promoting the results of all outputs and will be developing the advocacy initiatives to promote the research findings of Output 4, which will allow for alignment of project's communication strategy with the project's advocacy initiatives, in order to jointly promote the project achievements to different audiences, in a harmonized way, by featuring the best practices, knowledge, experiences, insights, human stories and emerging discourses on the role of vulnerable young people in peacebuilding and reconciliation, linked to relevant SDG targets.

**Output 3: RYCO capacities strengthened (UNDP)** – as this component consists in direct support of UNDP for RYCO institutional capacity building, it was presented jointly from Mrs. Rodika Goci and Ms. Vladica Jovanovic. Although that the original project plan foresaw support to mainly enhance RYCO's grant facility schema, a micro assessment conducted before the signing of the partnership agreement between two agencies, informed the real needs for technical support of UNDP to its partner RYCO. As such, in discussions and agreement with RYCO, the current support of UNDP is extended beyond the original plan. The signature of the partnership agreement was followed with the recruitment of 11 RYCO staff in HO and LBOs, to implement this ambitious project. RYCO's second open call for proposals concluded in contracting in late 2019, 41 organisations across the region, while the implementation started in December and January 2020. The projects' implementation faced certain challenges and slowed down due to pandemic, as such the support is provided to grantees to conclude their projects by end of November 2020. Seven grant monitoring experts are supporting both the grantees and RYCO on the financial grant monitoring and with RYCO staff capacity building activities.

Monitoring and evaluation framework and other RYCO policy/guideline development are important processes for the present state of the organisation, but also valuable for the new RYCO's strategic planning which will be due by late 2021. The policy/guidelines development, and M&E framework development, are all connected with a capacity building component, as mean to ease their practical implementation.

**Output 4: Evidence on youth perceptions of priorities for sustainable peace in the WB and youth-led advocacy and dialogue for peacebuilding (UNDP & UNFPA)** – Ms. Susanna Dakash provided an overview of the work conducted under this component which aims to provide opportunities to young



people from diverse backgrounds in the region to identify common issues of peace and security and lead into advocacy initiatives with their peers, decision makers or public in general. This output aims to increase the capacities of young people to be the actors of change in their societies and increase confidence of decision makers and youth in entering in constructive dialogues.

The work under this output builds upon an action research that will strengthen the evidence on youth priorities for peace and security in the region and I create the basis for youth-led advocacy and improved future programming for UN and other peacebuilding actors in the region, as well as support RYCO's strategic visioning and planning. The activities under this component can be clustered into three main groups, the research on youth perceptions, capacity building for young people, and the dialogues and advocacy to spread the message and amplify the voice of youth.

The work started with an inception workshop last year to understand where the research should focus, by looking at the gaps of the existing research and consulting among UN agencies, RYCO and civil society in the region. With the support of two recruited experts, a quantitative survey was designed in collaboration with a youth co-design group of 23 young women and men, selected through an open call and representing different groups across the region. This group will be involved in all stages of the process, starting from analysis of data to designing the advocacy strategy and organising the dialogues.

A company has been recruited to conduct the quantitative data collection during December and January and compliment it with the qualitative data (focus group discussions). The gathered data will then be analysed in collaboration with the youth group and RYCO, through local workshops. Another round of capacity building for young people will take place, to help them design advocacy initiatives/ideas and support them to implement these ideas.

At last, a regional event and a number of local workshops or dialogue events will be organised to showcase the research results or gather further momentum for the topic. The study as well as the identified main messages will be showcased through several communication products such as a website and video, photo and social media material, with young people at the forefront of the advocacy work. Due considerations will be given to align the advocacy and visibility actions with the overall project advocacy strategy.

Mr. Rune Brandrup highlighted the importance of the grants dedicated to youth groups and youth trainers, in encouraging activism of young people to build and sustain peace in the region, by giving the due space to those who are left behind. Another activity will be the organisation of a virtual youth hackathon as a mean to encourage youth to find ways to engage with other peers in the region to promote peacebuilding.

### Discussions and comments

Mr. Eno Ngjela expressed some challenges faced, such as the earthquake and pandemic, which affected the project overall. Discussions were run with RYCO to mitigate the risks, especially with the



grantees. He praised all the project team who adapted quickly to online working and appreciated the communication with PBF on the continuation of the project during the pandemic.

In the unclarity of the pandemic especially during this winter, there will be needed a good planning and resource mobilisation to complete the activities, especially the workshops and research field work. Mr. Ngjela raised a few questions for PBF, regarding (1) the end date of the project and whether commitments could be made until the end date of the project, while the closure of the contracts can be made beyond that date, and (2) the release of the tranches. The second tranche delay has penalised UNICEF which utilised the first tranche early and could not follow on with the planned activities, until the two other agencies could prove that 75% of the first tranche was utilised. The second tranche will be processed soon, and the project team needs some clarity about the third tranche release, in order to make our planning accordingly, and avoid the risk, to have it released very close to the end date of the project.

On behalf of RYCO, Mr. Jan Z. Kulenović acknowledge that although RYCO is not a 75 years organisation, this organisation is growing quickly. The considerable number organisational strengthening processes supported mainly by UNDP, are a challenge in itself for the organisation to handle, in terms of time and coordination within RYCO, given the involvement of different staff and departments. For RYCO it is important to integrate these products into the daily operations of the organisation. The sustainability of the products, developed in all components of the project is also a challenge, in order to make them usable for RYCO in the future.

With the corona outbreak RYCO was challenged to bring young people together, in activities of the second open call grantees, and the closure of these projects by ensuring the desired impact is already a challenge, given that face to face contact serves better the purpose of peacebuilding and reconciliation processes, compared to the online activities.

With regard to final evaluation of the project, Mr Kulenović brought into attention of participants, the need to allocate proper time to this process, so it cannot only document the lessons learned, human stories and impact to beneficiaries for the sake of project final report, but can also help RYCO in evaluating and planning the work of the organisation, and can serve to visibility and communication purposes.

Related to the research component, the advantage of having in hand a political advocacy tool for RYCO, goes hand in hand with the risk of politically correct formulation of the results. So we all have to be aware and jointly manage any potential political risks in this regard.

Mr Kulenović concluded with the reminder that the epidemiological situation may worsen, and a second lock down can slow down the processes.

Mr. Ngjela took the opportunity to notice that the final project evaluation will need to be consulted with the PBF guidance for this particular activity, and in case that RYCO needs support with the midterm evaluation of its own strategy, this can be discussed bilaterally and decided upon with UNDP. He also concluded by acknowledging the comprehensiveness of this project, including elements of



institutional capacity building, youth engagement, education work, survey perceptions, while the team is doing its best to manage its complexity, in the given circumstances.

Mr. Harald Thorud responded to Mr. Ngjela questions related to commitments, which as per PBF shall be made before the end date of the project, while implementation and payment, pending to the rules and procedures of the UN agencies, they can be made at a later date, if agencies have no restrictions in this regard.

With regard to the third tranche and knowing the rule of 75% of budget utilisation based on both expenditures and commitments, the agencies can plan quickly to commit as much contracts as to reach the threshold of 75% of the second tranche. Particularly UNICEF needs some planning in advance, given that the second tranche is the last one for this agency. On PBF side, there will be flexibility to speed up the process upon the request for the third tranche.

Mr. Thorud highlighted the expertise inside PBF as regards monitoring and evaluation, which can be useful to the project during the final project evaluation process. He highlighted that the project evaluations are mainly to draw on the lessons of what worked well or potentially not, in order to understand the effect of the peacebuilding work, from activity to impact level, as a result of this project. The evaluation is also to understand the catalytic effect of PBF funded projects, to find out which other partners will be interested to these results, either for UN or RYCO, or whether these results are attracting additional funding.

Mr. Thorud concluded by reminding the potentials that are available within the framework of regional eligibility application, and by emphasising that a successful closure of the project and its positive results, may feed into the eligibility application process and could be a strong argument for potential future funding of similar initiatives in the region.

## Concluding remarks

In conclusion of the meeting, the Resident Representative of UNDP in Albania, Mrs. Limya Eltayeb, praised the collaboration of the UN agencies and RYCO in efforts to unpack the elements of peace, stability and security in a fragile regional environment. Mrs. Eltayeb highlighted the importance of having a stronger regional perspective in such initiatives, which was found challenging in this project and could be a lesson learned to be taken forward in the future similar endeavours. In a region with fragile economies, politics and social fabrics, an important message for PBF was to further support RYCO in testing, refining all the tools, methodologies and policies developed in this project, and make them easily applicable in the WB6 region, with the final aim to see youth teasing out the drives of tension and instability in the region. Mrs. Eltayeb reconfirmed the commitment of UNDP, to push these efforts forward through the regional eligibility application process.

The Head of UNFPA Office in Albania, Mrs. Manuela Bello, reconfirmed the commitment of UNFPA to work with grassroots youth organisations in fragile situation, as per the mandate of the organisation. She reiterated the need for further investments of PBF to work with youth peace and security in the



WB6 region, by addressing the lack of trust, reconciliation and ethno-nationalistic rhetoric and actions. Mrs. Bello emphasised that this project experience, has been a good start and it shall lead to more mature approaches in future similar interventions that promote peace and prosperity in the region, and raised into attention of PBF the need to provide due considerations to this region and its complexities, in future funding opportunities.

Mr. Eno Ngjela made a final wrap up of the meeting, by highlighting the positive cooperation among implementing agencies and acknowledging that there is still a lot of work to conclude the project successfully. The meeting served to get everyone informed about the work done, challenges faced and mitigation strategies employed by the team, while the communication and positive spirit of cooperation shall be intensified in the remaining period until the closure of the project, and this is especially important in the uncertainties which can pandemic produce during the winter. As the next steps forward, Mr. Ngjela indicated the finalisation and submission of the Annual Progress Report 2020 to PBF on 15 November, the preparation and sharing of PSCM minutes, and the early start of the final project evaluation process in order to give sufficient time to this process.

## Annex 1: Agenda and the list of participants

### AGENDA

**Steering Committee (SC) Meeting**  
**27<sup>th</sup> October 2020**  
**Online meeting via Zoom platform**

<b>Time (CEST time zone)</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Speakers</b>
15:00 – 15:30	<b>Welcoming participants and opening remarks</b>	Mrs Fiona McCluney Mr. Djuro Blanusa Mr. Harald Thorud
15:30 – 16:30	<b>Project progress and the workplan:</b> Project Outcome 1 (UNICEF) Project Outcome 2 (UNFPA) Project Outcome 3 (UNDP) Project Outcome 4 (UNDP-UNFPA)	Mr. Eno Ngjela Mrs. Mirlinda Bushati Mrs. Elida Nuri Mrs. Rodika Goci Ms. Vladica Jovanovic Ms. Susanna Dakash Mr. Rune Brandrup
16:30 – 16:50	<b>Challenges in project implementation and mitigation strategies employed by the project</b>	Mr. Eno Ngjela Mr. Jan Z. Kulenović



	<b>team</b>	
16:50 – 17:20	<b>Q&amp;A and discussions</b>	Mr. Eno Ngjela
17:20 – 17:30	Next steps forward and closure of the meeting	Mr. Eno Ngjela

**PSCM Participants:**

1. Mrs. Fiona McCluney, Resident Coordinator, UN in Albania
2. Mr. Djuro Blanuša, Secretary General, RYCO
3. Mr. Harald Thorud, Programme Management Officer, UN PBF
4. Mrs. Jood Wasel Alharthi, Associate Peacebuilding Officer, UN PBF
5. Mrs. Limya Eltayeb, Resident Representative, UNDP Albania
6. Mr. Roberto De Bernardi, Representative, UNICEF Albania
7. Mrs. Manuela Bello, Head of Office, UNFPA Albania
8. Mr. Eno Ngjela, Programme Specialist, UNDP Albania
9. Ms. Susanna Dakash, Youth Peace and Security Specialist, UNDP IRH
10. Mr. Rune Brandrup, Youth Specialist, EECARO UNFPA
11. Mrs. Elida Nuri, Advocacy & Communication Analyst, UNFPA Albania
12. Mrs. Mirlinda Bushati, Early Learning Education Specialist, UNICEF Albania
13. Mrs. Rodika Goci, Project Coordinator, UNDP Albania
14. Mrs. Fioralba Shkodra, Team Leader Office of the UN Resident Coordinator in Albania
15. Mrs. Xhesi Mane, Programme Associate, UNDP Albania
16. Mrs. Alda Shabani | Project Assistant UNDP Albania
17. Mr. Jan Z. Kulenović, Director of Programs, RYCO
18. Mr. Besnik Vasolli, Program Manager, RYCO
19. Ms. Vladica Jovanovic, Project Leader, RYCO