

CASE STUDY

Building Islands of Integrity™ in Civil Society Organizations. The Civica Mobilitas Experience in North Macedonia (2024–2026)

The Islands of Integrity™ methodology, originally developed for public institutions, was adapted and piloted in North Macedonia within the framework of the Civica Mobilitas Program (financed by Swiss Agency for International Development, implemented with Macedonian NGO – MCIC support).

The initiative aimed to strengthen organizational integrity, transparency, accountability, and resilience to corruption risks among civil society organizations (CSOs).

Although civil society organizations are often perceived primarily as actors promoting transparency and accountability, they may themselves face integrity vulnerabilities related to governance structures, concentration of decision-making, project management, partnerships, financial management, or insufficient internal procedures. The program addressed these risks through a participatory organizational development approach focused on strengthening ethical governance, institutional resilience, and corruption prevention.

The process in the 3 CSOs was facilitated by the certified anti-corruption practitioner Ljupka Simonoska Schulz, under the mentorship of Ana Vasilache, author of the Islands of Integrity™ methodology. The three CSOs participating directly in the mentoring and implementation process were:

- Promo Idea (Strumica)
- REC – Center for Environmental Resources (Skopje)
- Pro Local (Bitola)

The experience demonstrated that the Islands of Integrity™ methodology can be effectively adapted beyond local governments to the NGO sector, where integrity risks are often less visible but equally important for organizational credibility, sustainability, and public trust.

Program Structure

The Islands of Integrity™ program unfolded in three major phases:

1. Capacity Building and Methodology Adaptation
2. Participatory Diagnosis and Strategic Planning
3. Implementation Mentoring and Institutionalization of Integrity Practices

Six local facilitators first participated in a structured learning process combining self-paced e-learning courses and online mentoring sessions. The preparation phase aimed not only to familiarize practitioners with the methodology, but also to adapt the tools and concepts to the realities of CSOs. Each of them worked with 3 CSOs.

The Capacity Building program included:

- three e-learning courses on integrity & corruption, La Paz successful strategies, the successful experience of La Paz, and the Islands of Integrity™ methodology;

- five online mentoring meetings;
- a two-day planning workshop in Skopje where facilitators jointly designed the implementation process, workshop agendas, exercises, materials, and certification approach.

A significant innovation was the integration of organizational development with integrity-building work. Rather than focusing exclusively on sanctions or compliance, the methodology approached corruption as a symptom of organizational vulnerabilities linked to monopoly, discretion, lack of transparency, and weak accountability.

Participatory Diagnosis and Strategic Planning

The implementation phase with CSOs was structured around four workshops and four homework assignments. Between workshops, participants replicated the exercises internally within their organizations, involving colleagues and leadership teams in diagnosis and solution design.

Workshop 1 – Integrity, Corruption, and Organizational Culture

Workshop 1 focused on introducing the concepts of integrity and corruption, clarifying expectations, and building trust among participants. Exercises explored both personal integrity values and organizational culture.

Participants appreciated the interactive and reflective methodology, particularly the opportunity to openly discuss organizational dilemmas, ethical challenges, and organizational vulnerabilities in a safe environment.

The workshop also established mutual commitments between facilitators and participants regarding continuity, participation, openness, and collaborative learning.

Workshop 2 – Diagnosing Vulnerability to Corruption

Workshop 2 introduced the analytical core of the methodology.

The methodology analyses corruption vulnerability as a function of excessive monopoly and discretion combined with insufficient transparency and accountability.

$$C = Monopoly + Discretion - Transparency/Accountability$$

The diagnosis process examined four critical organizational dimensions:

- finances and assets management;
- human resources management;
- project implementation and service delivery;
- management and partnerships.

The participatory diagnosis enabled organizations to identify vulnerabilities not only related to financial corruption, but also to:

- concentration of decision-making power;
- unclear procedures;
- insufficient documentation;

- informal practices;
- inconsistent accountability mechanisms.

The process encouraged honest organizational reflection and collective ownership of both problems and solutions.

Workshop 3 – From Diagnosis to Strategic Solutions

Workshop 3 focused on transforming diagnosis into strategic objectives and concrete integrity-building measures.

Participants worked on identifying practical actions to:

- reduce vulnerabilities;
- strengthen organizational systems;
- improve transparency and accountability;
- clarify internal procedures;
- strengthen participatory governance.

The workshop emphasized that integrity-building requires not only ethical commitment, but also systems, procedures, incentives, and organizational learning.

Workshop 4 – Building the Vision of an Island of Integrity

Workshop 4 concentrated on collective organizational visioning and the integration of integrity principles into each organization's identity and future direction.

Particularly notable was how participants linked organizational mission with integrity values:

- Promo Idea emphasized integrity, quality, transparency, and responsiveness to youth and citizens' needs.
- REC linked environmental sustainability with zero tolerance for corruption and transparent organizational procedures.
- Pro Local connected local development work with good governance, transparency, and collective integrity.

The organizations then developed Strategic and Action Plans to operationalize these commitments through concrete activities, procedures, and organizational reforms.

Certification and Evaluation

An important feature of the program was the certification mechanism.

CSOs were evaluated by their mentors/certified practitioners, against five criteria, including:

- leadership commitment;
- continuity of participation;
- internal facilitation;

- participatory involvement of staff;
- quality of reports and action plans.

The three organizations achieved high evaluation scores in the certification assessment conducted by the certified practitioner:

- REC: 100/100
- Promo Idea: 96/100
- Pro Local: 93/100

The evaluation process reinforced the idea that integrity is not a declarative commitment, but a measurable organizational practice requiring participation, consistency, and leadership engagement.

Mentoring the Implementation Phase (2025–2026)

The second phase of the program focused on mentoring organizations during implementation of their Strategic and Action Plans.

Ljupka Simonoska Schulz conducted regular online orientation and feedback meetings with each CSO and reviewed newly developed internal documents, procedures, and organizational processes.

The mentoring phase revealed several important lessons:

- integrity-building is a long-term organizational learning process rather than a one-time intervention;
- CSOs need continuous support to translate values into operational procedures;
- written procedures and transparent systems increase predictability, reduce discretion, and strengthen institutional memory;
- networking among participating organizations generated additional value beyond anti-corruption objectives.

All three organizations reported significant progress in implementing their action plans and integrating integrity principles into everyday organizational practice.

Reflections from Participating Organizations

The testimonials from participating organizations illustrate the transformative dimension of the process.

“Integrity is not built overnight and is not limited to a declarative commitment. It is built through everyday work, through clear rules and consistent procedures, and through continuous care to ensure that activities are implemented with quality and substance.”

— Promo Idea

“The program contributed to strengthening our understanding of integrity, transparency and accountability... It encouraged us to think critically, act responsibly, and actively contribute to a more ethical and equitable society.”

— Pro Local

“The program helped us conduct a deeper evaluation of the organization’s performance and identify where improvements were needed... It also helped us reduce monopoly and discretion in decision-making and strengthen organizational resilience.”

— REC – Center for Environmental Resources

The organizations also emphasized the value of networking and collaboration among CSOs from different sectors, which created opportunities for future cooperation and coalition-building.

Conclusions and Lessons Learned

Several broader conclusions emerge from this pilot experience.

First, the Islands of Integrity™ methodology proved adaptable to civil society organizations despite having been initially developed for public institutions. The methodology’s participatory and systemic approach resonated strongly with NGOs because it combined ethics, organizational development, strategic planning, and corruption prevention.

Second, the process demonstrated that corruption prevention in NGOs is not limited to financial controls. Vulnerabilities may emerge through informal governance, excessive dependence on individuals, weak procedures, or insufficient accountability mechanisms. Addressing these vulnerabilities strengthens both integrity and organizational effectiveness.

Third, the methodology created safe spaces for reflection, dialogue, and collective ownership. Rather than imposing external controls, it encouraged organizations to diagnose their own vulnerabilities and design their own solutions.

Finally, the pilot showed that integrity can become a strategic organizational asset. The participating CSOs not only strengthened their internal systems, but also improved collaboration, transparency, organizational resilience, and public credibility.

The Civica Mobilitas experience represents an important example of how anti-corruption methodologies can evolve from compliance-oriented approaches toward participatory organizational transformation.

It also demonstrates the potential for scaling the Islands of Integrity™ methodology across broader civil society networks and adapting it to other sectors seeking to strengthen integrity, transparency, accountability, and institutional resilience.

Elaborated by Ana Vasilache, 2026