

Code of Ethics



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Introduction

The Code was made by an international consortium, that is implementing together the Civic Incubator project. CIVIC INCUBATOR is a CERV dynamic initiative designed to empower grassroots civil society groups and active citizens to enhance their impact locally and at the EU level. It aims to promote European values, support informal civic initiatives, and foster citizen participation in democratic processes by creating an enabling environment for engagement and policy influence.

We envision a Europe where grassroots civic initiatives and active citizens thrive, shaping a more inclusive, democratic, and citizen-centered society. Our mission is to promote fundamental EU values—freedom, the right to associate, social inclusion, and European citizenship—while strengthening their application through the European Charter of Fundamental Rights and key EU recommendations.

We are committed to understanding and supporting informal civic groups, recognizing their crucial role in community engagement and social change. By identifying the challenges they face and providing tailored support, we aim to empower citizens, foster meaningful participation, and elevate their voices to the policy level.

Through this initiative, we encourage in-field volunteering, facilitate citizen-driven policy recommendations, and create spaces for public debate on the future of a more participatory and democratic Europe.

With creating the Code, we support the informal groups, because we see that informal groups do not have capacity mostly to work on baselines like this. The groups will have to apply the Code into their activities, and the consortium will also have to put efforts on the adaptation of it.

The informal group that adopts the content of the Code declares its commitment to the implementation of an organisational culture that goes beyond the existing legislation and internal organisational rules and regulations, and includes ethical organisational conduct.

The Code contributes to increasing the transparency of the civic sector, which is a key source of public trust.

Instructions for use

1. Informing the stakeholders within and outside of the organization

This Code of ethics was created as a basis by the Civic Incubator project consortium that should be formed by all the informal groups until it totally fits with their standards. Therefore it must be distributed first to everyone that is involved with the organisation – board members, volunteers, sponsors, donors, suppliers, members, and the general community – so that all are aware of the set of standards by which your group operates.

The Code of Conduct governs the internal workings of the affiliated organisation and its external relations outside the organisation. The organisation makes the Code binding on its members; and takes care not to establish or maintain a relationship with any party, e.g. trustee, volunteer, fundraiser, donor, or supplier whose activities do not comply with the Code's core standards and efforts to operate properly.

In addition to the core values, principles and standards laid down in the code of ethics, the guiding questions under each evaluation sections will help informal groups to position themselves in relation to the given principle, to see how internalized the value is in the organization's operations, and to what extent they are able to represent it in both their internal and external activities.

2. Educating the stakeholders

The new Code will be useless unless everyone knows what it is, how it works and their roles in it. Training is the key to managing or avoiding negative responses and should be an integral part of both the implementation and ongoing maintenance of any aspect of an ethics program.

The group shall ensure that its members and volunteers are familiar with the contents of the Code of Ethics by conducting a briefing on the Code at least annually and for new members and volunteers.

3. Reviewing

After accepting the Code the board needs to review its existing policies and operations to ensure that all activities are entirely consistent with the redefined principles that will now guide the organisation.

If the members of the organization want to see a change in the Code, they need to make their suggestions to the responsible person within the group and the board make decisions about the change at their yearly review meeting.

4. Set up an ethics committee/finding a responsible person

It is necessary to find group members as responsible ones, whose purpose will be to provide an ongoing review of the organisation's ethics policies. In fulfilling this purpose, a committee or a responsible person may be responsible for conducting or directing ethics audits, providing interpretation of the code to the group and the board and acting as a review body when problems occur.

If the report has been made against the responsible person the investigation shall be conducted by the organisation's first person, or, if the latter is involved, by the person designated by the founder or maybe external expert.

5. Reporting violations of the Code of Ethics and protecting whistleblowers

Who must report: to enforce the rules of the Code of Ethics, members and volunteers of the group organization must report violations of the Code to the organisation's responsible person. Failure to report is a violation of the Code.

Those who may report: those who have a legitimate interest in making a report or in remedying the conduct that is the subject of the report, such as those who have a membership in the organization.

A notification may be made anonymously.

A bona fide whistleblower shall not suffer any detriment on the part of the organisation for making the report. Bad faith reporting will be dealt with by the organisation in accordance with the relevant legislation.

The investigation of a report may be waived if:

- it is identical in content to the previous one,
- it is made repeatedly by the same notifier,
- six months have elapsed since the person became aware of the act or omission complained of, and
- It is made without identification.

The notification shall be investigated in accordance with the Rules of Investigation (Annex I).

The making of a notification shall not restrict the right of the notifier to make a simultaneous notification to the authorities.

Principles

Every organization and group will reach a point during its operation when the members realize their main values and principles should be settled, if they want to create a clear basis for the newcomers in the organization. The 5 consortium partners in the Civic Incubator project from 5 different countries and 5 different type of civic organizations decided to set out the following 5 basic principles of professional ethics and norms of conduct for members of civic organizations, informal groups or anyone who are working for social change.

The 5 principles:

1. Responsibility
2. Creativity
3. Respect of fundamental rights
4. Trust
5. Commitment to community and common good

1. Responsibility

Definition

Responsibility is a state or fact having a duty to deal with something or someone, or of being accountable for something.

What does it mean in the civic arena?

The structure of civic organizations and informal groups are often very flat because of the democratic operation, which often leads to undefined responsibilities and roles.

Since civic groups usually work with other members of the society, or their activities have influence on others, they usually take the responsibility of others as well, who are mainly people without power or marginalized people.

Standards

Responsibly maintaining itself, a CSO should conduct its activities for the sake of others, whether for the public at large or a particular segment of the public.

The members of a CSO, informal group should take ownership of their actions and their impact on others. If mistakes happen, they should acknowledge them and work to fix them.

The informal group avoid shifting blame or hiding important information. Responsibility means being fair, transparent, and dependable.

Sharing the responsibility is a way of not giving too much load on the leaders.

Guiding questions:

1. Are you defining the roles and responsibilities before your events?
2. How does your organization demonstrate a responsible attitude toward the environment they are working in?

Does the organization recognize that the way it conducts itself and its activities reflect on the public's perception of CSOs and that it shares responsibility for the public's trust of CSOs?

2. Creativity

Definition

Creativity is defined as the tendency to generate or recognize ideas, alternatives, or possibilities that may be useful in solving problems, communicating with others, and entertaining ourselves and others.

What does it mean in the civic arena?

Creativity in civic life means using imagination, innovation, and collaboration to improve the way communities live and work together. It's about re-thinking challenges, designing new solutions, and finding fresh approaches to participation, dialogue, and problem-solving. Creativity brings people together across differences, sparking initiatives that make public spaces, institutions, and relationships more responsive, fair, and vibrant.

Standards

Creativity begins with listening to each other. If a group stays open to the member's ideas, that encourages them to be creative and innovative in their approaches. There are no bad or dismissed ideas, only ideas that should be saved for later times. Creativity comes in many forms (words, actions, art, problem-solving) and evaluation and co-creation enhance it.

Creativity doesn't meet with age or taste, creativity is the approach that connects the old and new, and the subjective perceptions.

Guiding questions:

1. Do we make space for everyone to share their ideas, even if they're unusual or unexpected?
2. Do our activities feel fresh, engaging, and fun, or have we fallen into routines that limit new ideas?
3. Do members feel safe to express themselves without fear of judgment?

3. Respect of fundamental rights

Definition

Respect for fundamental rights means treating individuals as entitled to universal legal guarantees of human dignity, which include rights like equality, freedom of speech, and fair trial, without discrimination. It requires governments and institutions to acknowledge, protect, and uphold these rights as core obligations, rather than mere considerations, ensuring people can reach their full potential.

What does it mean in the civic arena?

In civic life, respecting fundamental rights means upholding the basic freedoms and protections that allow people to live with dignity and equality. In the civic arena, it also means holding institutions, communities, and groups accountable to these principles, ensuring that no one is excluded from public life or denied their rightful place in society.

Standards

An informal group and CSO should not violate any person's fundamental human rights, with which each person is endowed. They should protect and even volume up the importance of these rights and freedoms. No toleration is accepted by the members of CSOs towards those who are not respecting the fundamental rights, non-discrimination practices should be learned. .

Guiding questions:

1. Do all members feel welcomed and valued in the group?
2. Do members feel safe sharing their thoughts and experiences?
3. Do we actively stand up for others' rights when needed?
4. Do we respect the privacy of personal information shared in confidence?

4. Trust

Definition

Trust is the confidence that group members can rely on each other to act with honesty, integrity, and consistency. It means believing that others will respect agreements, support one another, and communicate openly. Trust forms the foundation for collaboration, healthy relationships, and effective group action.

What does it mean in the civic arena?

In civic life, trust is the confidence that individuals, organizations, and institutions will act fairly, transparently, and in the community's best interest. It allows citizens to participate in public life, collaborate across groups, and rely on public institutions to

uphold laws, rights, and ethical standards. Without trust, civic engagement falters, and social cohesion is weakened.

Standards

All the resources (financial, data, human, knowledge) are handled in a very intimate way, with true care. The members of the group are following the commitments and agreements made among each other, and they are consistent in their mission, values and activities. Trust within the group, in the informal group's community, among their partners and between them and the donors are the most important to be kept.

Guiding questions:

1. Are commitments and agreements consistently honored in the group?
2. Can I count on group members to keep their promises?
3. Are you totally honest with your donors and accountable in your finances?

5. Commitment to community and common good

Definition

Commitment to community and the common good means putting the well-being of the group, community, or society above purely personal interests. It involves acting responsibly, cooperating, and contributing to initiatives that benefit others, foster solidarity, and strengthen collective life. Members recognize that their actions affect not only themselves but the wider group and its environment.

What does it mean in the civic arena?

This principle encourages civic engagement, volunteering, participation in public initiatives, and decisions that promote fairness, inclusion, and shared well-being. Commitment to the common good fosters stronger communities, social cohesion, and responsible citizenship.

Standards

During the activities of CSOs and informal groups the members include diverse voices and work to ensure benefits reach all members. The consideration of long-term impacts on the group and community are more important than the personal advancement of each individual. Mapping the interests of the group members and the community are essential and the decision about the group's focus should be made democratically and in a participative way.

Guiding questions:

1. Do we consider how our actions affect others in the group and the wider community?
2. Are we aware of opportunities to support others in need?

3. Are we involved stakeholders into decision making?
4. Are we assessing the needs of the target group sometimes?
5. Do we make decisions with long-term benefits for the community in mind?

Additional Ethical Standards like:

1. Non-Discrimination and Inclusion

The group does not tolerate discrimination based on gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, age, race, ethnicity, religion, social or economic background, or migration status.

2. Safeguarding and “Do No Harm”

We maintain zero tolerance for abuse, harassment, or exploitation. Activities with children or vulnerable adults follow safeguarding rules: parental consent, safe spaces, two adults present, privacy for images/voices, and mandatory reporting of risks.

3. Data Protection (GDPR)

We collect and store only necessary data, keep it secure, limit access, and delete it when no longer needed. Individuals have the right to access, correct, or delete their personal data. Consent is required for photos, interviews, or research.

4. Environmental Responsibility

The group promotes eco-friendly practices, such as recycling, responsible sourcing, reducing waste in events, and encouraging sustainable transport.

Annex I

Rules of Investigation

1. Confidentiality during the investigation

The identity of the non-anonymous whistleblower must not be disclosed to anyone other than the investigators of the whistleblower's report.

The investigator investigating the report shall keep confidential information about the content of the report and the persons involved in the report until the investigation is closed or until formal charges are initiated as a result of the investigation and shall not share it with any other member of the organisation, except for the purpose of informing the person involved in the report.

2. Rules for processing the investigation

The organization is obliged to investigate the facts contained in the notification within the shortest time possible under the circumstances. 30 days are allowed for the investigation of the notification from the date of its receipt, which time limit, except for notifications made by an anonymous or unidentified whistleblower, may be waived only in particularly justified cases, with simultaneous information of the whistleblower. The duration of the examination shall not exceed 3 months.

The responsible person or committee examines the notification on the basis of the hearing of the data subjects and other evidence and reaches its conclusions by considering all the evidence in good faith. The results of the investigation and the action taken shall be communicated to the whistleblower.

In accordance with the requirement of a fair hearing, the person concerned by the notification shall be given the opportunity to express his or her views on the notification, including through his or her legal representative, and to provide evidence in support of those views.

Where the conduct complained of is the subject of an investigation leading to the initiation of criminal proceedings is justified, you should take steps to report it.

If the conduct in the report is found not to be a criminal offence, but violates the rules of conduct laid down by the group/ organisation, the group leader may take action against the member in accordance with the rules.

If the investigation reveals that the report is unfounded or that no further action is necessary, the data relating to the report shall be deleted within 60 days of the completion of the investigation.