The IXth Edition of the Black Sea NGO Forum

31st of October – 2nd of November 2016

Varna, Bulgaria

- Final Report -
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Day I – 31st October 2016

Official Opening Session and Update on the Implementation of the Strategic Framework for Civil Society Cooperation in the Black Sea Region

Moderator: Ms. Natalia Budescu, The Romanian NGDO Platform – FOND/ Director, The Association for Cross-Border Cooperation „Lower Danube Region”
H.E. Gheorghe Magheru, Adviser to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Romania
Mr. Boris Iarochevitch, Head of Unit Eastern Partnership, Regional Cooperation and OSCE, European External Action Service (EEAS)
H.E. Traian Chebeleu, Deputy Secretary General, Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation – BSEC
Mr. Justin Kilcullen, Co-chair, CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness – CPDE
Ms. Emma Gileva, Regional Coordinator, The Black Sea NGO Network (BSNN)

The Romanian NGDO Platform – FOND organised between the 31st of October and 2nd of November 2016 the 9th edition of the Black Sea NGO Forum, focusing on the implementation of the „Strategic Framework of the Civil Society Cooperation in the Black Sea Region” to foster regional cooperation and promoting an enabling environment for the civil society organisations in the region. This year the forum continued to support the activities of the Black Sea NGO Forum’s Working Groups in the thematic cooperation areas, already established by participants during the previous edition of the event.

The official opening session began with the speech of the president of the Romanian NGDO Platform – FOND, Ms. Natalia Budescu, who highlighted the key moments in the history of the Forum and its strategic development, having managed to bring together in all its editions more than 900 alumni participants. Ms. Budescu also stressed out the importance of the role played by such a regional event in the Black Sea Region. The forum provides a space for actions and initiatives, meant for building long-term and strategic partnerships.

H.E. Ambassador Gheorghe Magheru, Adviser to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Romania, emphasized the role of the Black Sea within the framework of the European Union’s regional initiative – the Black Sea Synergy. When referring to this particular region, H.E. Ambassador Magheru employed the term of „connectography”, as efforts should be made in order to open the Black Sea to major highways, not only in terms of trade, but especially in terms of ideas as to support stability and development. For this to happen, synergies have to be built and all potential regional instruments used.

In addition to the remarks of the previous speakers, Mr. Boris Iarochevitch, Head of the unit Eastern Partnership, Regional Cooperation and OSCE, the European External Action Service, praised the ever-evolving role and contribution of the civil society organisations in the region, which managed successfully to develop active networks in various fields – making also direct references to one of the results of the Forum, Child Pact and its Child
Protection Index. Mr. Iarochevict also noted in this process the high importance of the civil society for the input that it constantly provides, aiming at developing new initiatives.

In his speech, H.E. Ambassador Traian Chebeleu, Deputy Secretary General of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, correlated the annual Black Sea NGO Forum with the activities of the BSEC, encouraging further collaboration and emphasizing the part played by the CSOs’ representatives in the development of the region.

Justin Kilcullen, the Co-Chair of the CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE), made reference to the adoption at the international level of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. The civil society, including the civil society organisations in the Black Sea region, has an important part in the implementation of the SDGs as it represents the change-driving voice of the people who strive to improve the societies they live in.

At the end of the opening session, Ms. Emma Gileva from the Black Sea NGO Network also addressed the audience, highlighting the importance of ecological preservation in the Black Sea Region and the relevance of the CSOs in this regard. For this reason, the Black Sea NGO Forum is perceived as an ideal venue for debate and exchange of ideas, bringing main stakeholders from both the European Union and the Black Sea Region at the same table.

**Plenary Session: Regional trends on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Organisations in the Black Sea Region**

**Moderator: Mr. Ștefan Cibian**, President, Romanian Association for International Cooperation and Development – ARCADIA/ Board Member, The Romanian NGDO Platform

**Presentation of the Follow-up Report on Enabling Environment for Civil Society in the Black Sea Region:**

**Ms. Angela Grămadă**, Researcher, National School of Political and Administrative Studies/President, Experts for Security and Global Affairs Association (ESGA)

**Perspectives and Reactions:**

**Mr. Dimitrios Triantaphyllou**, Director, Center for International and European Studies (CIES), Kadir Has University Istanbul

**Ms. Sanja Bogatinovska**, Junior Policy and Advocacy Officer, Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN)

**Ms. Nino Khukhua**, Executive Director, Local Democracy Agency Georgia

**Ms. Sophia Petriashvili**, Evidence and Knowledge Management Director, World Vision Middle East, Eastern European Region

During the first part of the session, a detailed presentation of the main conclusions of the Follow-up Report of the 2015 Research „Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development in the Black Sea Region: Towards a Regional Strategy for Cooperation” was provided. The current status of the enabling environment for CSOs in the countries from the Black Sea Region (more specifically, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine, Turkey) has been monitored taking into
consideration the three different dimensions: freedom of association, freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of speech.

Face-to-face and online interviews, as well as regular consultation of reports and official documents, were the main instruments used for collecting data for this research. In comparison to the 2015 Report, it was observed how the freedom of association was still very limited in some countries (such as Azerbaijan, Russia and Belarus) and the situation of the freedom of assembly has not much improved either (as violent abuses of law enforcement units and intimidations are still taking place mostly in Armenia, Ukraine, Russia and the Republic of Moldova). In what regards the freedom of speech, it still remained a sensitive issue as limitations of mass media and even proofs of hate-speech have been recorded.

Other important aspects analysed covered also the fiscal and taxing systems, volunteering, the state funding, the public institutions as well as the relationship between the international donors and national active NGOs. All conclusions, as well as further recommendations are included in the Update Report available for consultation on the official Black Sea NGO Forum website.

Concerning the current regional context, some obstacles have been correlated with the lack of common vision and strategies in the region, lack of sufficient public funding, as well as the of strict requirements of international donors and the scarcity of the resources provided for CSOs. In the Black Sea Region, CSOs have to face the constant shrinking of civil space and the rise of non-democratic practices and values, illustrated through the multiple law violations and challenging governmental measures.

To find a solution to these challenges, cooperation should be perceived as the most important mean for achieving sustainable and effective results. Joint efforts need to be made in order to promote and support partnership initiatives.

The situation in one of the countries in the region – more specifically, in Georgia – has been brought up by one of the speakers, drawing attention to its active civil society, its role in the decision-making process and identifying best practices in its relationship with international donors in order to encourage citizens’ participation.

Some positive perspectives have been also underlined, such as building the pillars of the region from the inside out, by establishing a stronger link between the relevant donors and the CSOs’ representatives and maintaining constant communication between these stakeholders.
Plenary Session: Connecting the Forum with other regional initiatives

**Moderator: Mr. Cosmin Bârzan**, Executive Chairman, The Civic Resource Centre/ Board Member, The Romanian NGDO Platform (FOND)

**Mr. Hovsep Khurshudyan**, Steering Committee Member, Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum/ Coordinator, Black Sea NGO Forum Culture & Education Working Group

**Ms. Ksenia Vakhrusheva**, Steering Committee Member, EU-Russia Civil Society Forum/ Environmental Rights Centre BELLONA, St. Petersburg

**Mr. Stavros Kalognomos**, Policy Officer, Conference for Peripheral Maritime Regions

The Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EP CSF) was founded in 2009 and it mainly represents the civic field of the Eastern Partnership. Through its five operating Working Groups, the EP CSF ensures advocacy and civic participation in the field of promotion of democracy and human rights, economic integration, environment and energy, networks and social policies. The fact that the six countries which are part of the EP CSF – more specifically, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine – are also actively included in the Black Sea NGO Forum demonstrates the strong ties between the projects in the region, emphasizing the need of experience-exchange, cooperation and coordination.

Next to be introduced was the **EU-Russia Civil Society Forum**, further highlighting the value of collaboration between the initiatives and the connectivity of Russian CSOs with the European ones. The six Working Groups – that focus on human rights, democratic structures and processes, citizenship education, historical memory, environment and transborder corruption – are engaged in a large diversity of activities, ranging from visa facilitation and liberalisation, fighting trans-border corruption, shaping up solidarity and policy and advocacy.

The **Conference for Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR)** currently reunites 160 regions – organised in six geographical commissions. Its Working Groups are active in the fields of cohesion, energy and climate change, external cooperation, research innovation, transport, fisheries, maritime spatial planning, maritime industries for blue growth and tourism. The wide range of partners with which CPMR has established partnerships and common activities (here including the Black Sea NGO Forum, the European Parliament Intergroup for rivers, islands and coastal areas, the Black Sea Economic Cooperation and Platforma) again illustrates the importance of exchange and coordination of the initiatives in the region for achieving sustainable development.
**Parallel Sessions: Thematic Workshops (I):**

**Workshop 1: Local Communities Involvement in Addressing Environmental Problems – Emerging Patterns and Regional Issues**

**Moderator:** *Mr. Aleksandar Shivarov*, Black Sea NGO Network, Bulgaria  
*Ms. Mihaela Cândea*, Mare Nostrum, Romania  
*Ms. Tatiana Tribrat*, Environmental Watch on Northern Caucasus, Russia  
*Mr. Oleg Rubel*, Black Sea/ Odessa Branch of the Ukrainian Environmental Academy of Science, Ukraine

As regards tackling the ecological concerns in the Black Sea Region, the speakers put a special emphasis on the fact that civil society organisations from the region should have a single voice and should act like an unitary body, with a shared vision and strategies. Despite the need of capacity-building and the presence of language barriers, the NGO sector has managed to engage on some issues, proving itself to be successful in its initiatives of preserving the marine life in the Black Sea by combating the numerous violations taking place in the region.

In the last part of the workshop, the discussions emphasized the importance of the 1992 Convention on the Protection of the Black Sea Against Pollution (also referred to as the Bucharest Convention), and the great necessity of reformulating it, in close collaboration with local authorities and the European Union, whose programmes, resources and expertise are acting as main instruments that support the improvement of the environmental state of the Black Sea.

**Workshop 2: A tool for Defending Children’s Rights in our Region: The Child Protection Index**

*Ms. Mirela Oprea*, ChildPact Secretary General, ChildPact  
*Ms. Mariana Ianachevici*, ChildPact President & President of APSCF Moldova  
*Mr. George Bodganov*, ChildPact Vice-President & Executive Director of NNC Bulgaria

The second parallel workshop aimed at increasing the knowledge regarding the efforts of combating children’s rights abuses in the region, by presenting the results of one of the most active network of NGOs in this field - the Coalition for Child Protection in the Wider Black Sea Area – ChildPact, initiated at the 4th edition of the Black Sea NGO Forum, back in 2011.

The speakers focused their presentation on the results-driven activities of the network implemented in the area with the financial support it receives from international donors – such as UNICEF, the Oak Foundation, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), World Vision or even from the European Union.

One of Child Pact’s biggest successes is represented by the creation of the Child Protection Index, an instrument that reviews the scores from 9 countries (respectively, Albania, Armenia, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Georgia, Kosovo, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Serbia) analyzing specific child protection issues along the five dimensions of government action: creation of law and policy, availability of services at local
level, capacity of the public sector to deliver these services, coordination protocols that link various
governments and actors and lastly, accountability mechanisms to verify governmental actions.

Child Pact’s work includes:

- Changing legislation and practices;
- Participating in working groups at the governmental level;
- Huge voluntary work and commitment;
- Combining resources internally - from members and other sources;
- Communication with the media;
- Supporting members’ initiatives;

Acting at the international level: Eurochild, ChildPact, UNCRC etc.

Workshop 3: Engaging Local Authorities in Civic Space, Climate Change and Participatory budgeting

Facilitator: Ms. Ana-Maria Suciu, Policy and Advocacy Officer, European Network of National Civil Society Associations (ENNA)

Envisioned as an interactive session, based on feedback and brainstorming, the third parallel workshop was organised by the European Network of National Civil Society Association (ENNA), one of the main representative and advocate for cross-sectoral interests of over 80,000 European civil society organisations, acting as an information hub, with a view to build awareness and facilitate dialogue between national and European levels.

Participants were introduced to one of ENNA’s main projects – Local Authorities as Drivers for Development Education and Raising Awareness (LADDER) – and following the given guiding questions, were asked to contribute to the development of a toolkit for local authorities.

The participants were divided into several working groups on: the issue of civic space shrinking, the formation of democratic and accountable institutions and developing climate change and sustainable development policies and practices.
Workshop 4: Follow-up discussions of the Plenary Session on Enabling Environment for CSOs

Facilitator: Mr. Valentin Burada, Program Director, Civil Society Development Foundation

The fourth workshop aimed at providing a space for continuing the debate from the first plenary session on the agenda dedicated to introducing the follow-up report on monitoring the enabling environment for CSOs in the Black Sea region. The main issue approached in this workshop was centered around the question on how to make CSOs more resilient, especially in this difficult and challenging regional context, emphasizing the following regional solutions and recommendations:

- **Enabling environment issues should be presented as stories in order to attract more the attention of the public;**
- **Supporting regional mobility programs for young people;**
- **Focusing on issues such as: volunteering, active citizenship, youth and engaging youth workers, education and culture;**
- **Identifying similar issues to jointly work on at the regional level and engage more think-tanks for research and support;**
- **Establishing monitoring missions and statements concerning specific situations in the countries of the Black Sea region;**
- **Including the Forum’s monitoring component on enabling environment for CSOs in a wider regional advocacy strategy, aiming at raising more visibility on monitoring reports;**
- **Connecting with other regions to share experiences and knowledge on this issue;**
- **Collaborating with international organizations and institutions to bring more pressure and raise more awareness on the enabling environment challenges at the regional and global level;**
- **Connecting with members of the European Parliament from the European Union members states with a specific interest on the Black Sea region.**

Having in mind the presentations from the first plenary concerning the regional trends on enabling environment and following these discussions during the workshop, an initiative was drafted under the form of a **Resolution on the situation that CSOs and civic activists are facing in the Black Sea Region.**
The first session of the second day of the Forum was dedicated to the major donors funding CSOs programs and projects in the Black Sea region. From the start of the discussions, the emphasis was put on the European Union Neighbourhood Policy and the effort of involving CSOs as much as possible in the bilateral consultations, especially on issues connected to financial assistance. As the multiannual financial framework of the European Commission is coming to an end in 2020, the progress of the assistance provided so far must be tracked and assessed in the midterm review. New priority areas have to be identified and new action plans have to be pursued. The European External Action Service (EEAS) coordinates its activity in consultation with local governments and assistance programs are based political priorities. Up until now, € 150 million have been allocated to the 20 established priority areas. The civil society organisations should actively engage in monitoring the reforming process and the results achieved.

The Black Sea Basin Joint Operational Programme is another relevant funding opportunity in the region, aiming to promote business and entrepreneurship within Black Sea Basin and to promote coordination of environmental protection and joint reduction of marine litter. Interested applicants should pay attention to some given set of requirements regarding their location (the applicant should belong in one of the countries included in the programme area), their legal status (the applicants should represent the nongovernmental sector, local public authorities, national authorities etc.) and most importantly, their experience. The Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation, which is available for the wider Black Sea Region, has as main mission to support the involvement of CSOs in the process of positive development in their own countries. The Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation is perceived as a „flexible grant-maker” and at the same time, one of the smallest donors in the area (covering projects up to $ 40,000).

The European Endowment for Democracy was presented as a demand-driven organisation which supports freedom of expression and aims at building capacity of political actors, at increasing citizens’ political participation, at supporting pro-democracy groups in fragile environments and at providing emergency support in times of crisis. The eligibility criteria is not limited to the status of an organisation, and for this reason, pro-democratic movements and actors, social movements, CSOs, as well as emerging leaders, independent media and journalists can have access to the funds as long as they demonstrate their commitment to democratic values, their respect for human rights and nonviolence.
Plenary Session: „Picking up from where we left” – Updates from the Black Sea NGO Forum Working Groups

Facilitator: Mr. Ken Philips, International Consultant, Organisation Futures  
Ms. Patricia Couti, Vice-President, National Youth Council Romania/ Coordinator of BSNGOF Youth Working Group  
Ms. Gayane Mkrtchyan, Program Manager, Eurasia Partnership Foundation Armenia/ Coordinator of BSNGOF Youthbank Working Group  
Ms. Olivia Baciu, Board Member, European NGO Confederation for Development and Relief – CONCORD, FOND Representative/ Coordinator of BSNGOF Anti-corruption Working Group  
Mr. Hovsep Khurshudyan, Steering Committee Meeting / President, Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum/ "Free Citizen" Civic Initiatives Support Center / Coordinator of BSNGOF Education and Culture Working Group  
Ms. Mariia Symonova, Coordinator "MITLA" Agency Of Changes Ukraine/ Coordinator of BSNGOF Civic Engagement Working Group

The second session of the day aimed at presenting the results of the five regional thematic meetings of the Working Groups established at the 2015 edition of the Black Sea NGO Forum. The regional meetings were organized as part of the Follow-up Activity Plan of the Forum and financially supported by the European Commission. Also, this session provided a good opportunity for the new participants to learn more on how to get involved in the Forum’s Working Groups.

The regional thematic meeting of the Youth Working Group (including National Youth Councils from the Black Sea region) was the first to be organised, in Tbilisi (Georgia) on the 12th of September 2016. Aiming to bring together both young organisations and local authorities, the Youth WG has focused in an initial stage on understanding the context of each participants’ countries and on main policy areas on which they can cooperate. As a result of their meeting, the Working Group members have identified the priority areas for joint work and have already agreed on several project ideas.

The YouthBank Working Group was the second to introduce the results of their meeting which took place on the 15th-16th of October 2016, in Yerevan (Armenia). The interest of the members in collaborating at the regional level was already present since 2013, but only at the Forum in 2015 they managed to come together and decide upon a common strategy. The reason behind the success and efficiency of their Working Group lays in adding value to the people in the region in terms of their capacity in this field.

The next Working Group meeting on Anti-corruption, whose members met on the 13th of October 2016 in Chisinau (Republic of Moldova), brought together practitioners from the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine, Turkey, Romania, Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia and Albania, having the goal of sharing best practices and lessons learnt on the facilitation process targeting the prevention of corruption in the local municipalities.

The Education and Culture Working Group organized their first meeting on the 11th of October 2016, in Kyiv (Ukraine) and it was centered around the subject of the public-private partnerships with the
field of culture. Following the introduction of the national contexts in the region on this issues and the facilitated discussions, various project ideas have been identified.

The last regional thematic meeting to be presented during this session, was organised by the Civic Engagement Working Group on the 17th of September 2016. Its aim was to develop a strategy for the proactive participation and the empowerment of the civil society organisations in the region and for promoting the much broader concept of “civic education” as the the basis of civic engagement.

“How can we work together for a common goal?”
– Interactive Session for the Black Sea NGO Forum Working Groups

Facilitator: Mr. Ken Philips, International Consultant, Organisation Futures

At the beginning of the interactive session, the new participants were asked to express their interest in joining one of the Working Groups (WG) that were created during the 2015 Edition of the Black Sea NGO Forum. According to their interests, the participants gathered in the 8 Thematic Working Groups: Anti-corruption, Civic Engagement, Education and Culture, Human Rights and Freedoms, Knowledge Networks, Sustainable Development, Youth and lastly, YouthBank. During the other two interactive sessions, the WG members were tasked with identifying the main priorities of their group, coordination and follow-up activities planned for 2017. A specific objective for the next year, as well as a list of step-by-step activities were also to be handed in, along with the names of key persons in each group, responsible with the coordination of the group.

Anti-corruption Working Group

The Anti-corruption Working Group members have set as the main objective for the next year the creation of a platform serving for exchanging knowledge, experiences, information and for exploring opportunities on anti-corruption issues. As follow-up activities, they are aiming to develop campaigns in the light of advocating for anti-corruption efforts.

Civic Engagement Working Group

As their 2017 objective, the members of the Civic Engagement WG have decided upon the strengthening of civic participation and volunteering in Black Sea region through the continuation of the dialogue between the CSO actors in the Black Sea region, the consolidation of engagement tools with decision makers and the sharing of experience of civic engagement/civic initiatives.

Education and Culture Working Group

The members of the third WG that was also active throughout the year, the Education and Culture WG, has set as an objective the expansion of its membership, in order to ensure the engagement of all countries from the Black Sea Region and the visibility of their activities. Moreover, they have agreed upon the organisation of regional meetings, that would be held both face-to-face and in the online sphere.
Human Rights and Freedoms Working Group

The Human Rights and Freedoms WG seeks to enable civic space and to raise awareness in the region concerning human rights violations and abuses. The members have planned for 2017 to identify and make contact with relevant stakeholders and decision makers at national, regional and international level, aiming to establish a network of networks that would be active in the Black Sea Region.

Knowledge Networks Working Group

The members of the Knowledge Networks WG have planned for 2017 to promote knowledge and experience sharing and, in this respect, it was proposed the creation of a constantly-updated database of experts and researchers, aiming to raise awareness about the activities of the Forum in the region and to coordinate various initiatives.

Sustainable Development Working Group

The targets for 2017 of the Sustainable Development WG include sharing of best practices, challenges and expertise within and outside the network, as well as of the consolidation and expansion of the network. The members will actively pursue these objectives by designing an online platform for information sharing and visibility, by preparing monthly updates and reporting and by organizing a regional meeting.

Youth Working Group

The members of the Youth WG seek to establish and consolidate solidarity within the region and create a guideline/toolkit that would be disseminated in all participating countries. Face-to-face meetings, along with a regional conference have also been planned for 2017.

YouthBank Working Group

Aiming to support and promote their activities, the members of the Youthbank WG proposed in an initial phase to identify the main stakeholders and donors in the Region and to continue their activities started in 2016, including to organise another regional thematic meeting.
The last day of the Forum centered around the discussions about the trends at both European and international level concerning sustainable development, underlining the strong need for cohesion and coordination. As the trend of shrinking CSO space is growing around the globe CPDE has been working intensively over the past years towards advocating for the global civil society organizations’ priorities on the implementation of the key principles of development effectiveness, an enabling environment for CSOs as well as for an inclusive 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

A large part of the discussions has also targeted the organisation of the second High Level Meeting by the Global Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation, at the end of November and beginning of December 2016, in Nairobi (Kenya) that will bring together more than 400 representatives from CSOs, foundations, as well as the private sector from both donor and recipient countries. Thus, the nongovernmental sector will have the opportunity to bring their own perspective and priorities at the negotiation table and as the outcome document (realised with the input of all participating stakeholders) will represent the common agreement on the future ways to act on development effectiveness. The importance of monitoring processes and results have been also stressed out during the session. In this respect, the annual AidWatch Report, issued by the European NGO Confederation for Relief and Development – CONCORD, was presented as a successful example.

The last part of the session gave participants food for thought regarding the sustainability of their own day-to-day actions. The impact of small acts – such as donating food remaining from events, banning in-door smoking, or collecting and recycling water bottles – is sometimes underrated and by firmly taking action, each one of us can contribute to the implementation of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
Official Closing Session

In the closing session, the Black Sea NGO Forum team had the opportunity to kindly thank all the speakers on the agenda, as well as the participants, who actively engaged in the debates that emerged. Seeking directly to analyse the impact of the last few days, participants were asked by the organisers to share their thoughts and opinions. Newcomers, as well as participants with multiple attendances at the Forum, were encouraged to briefly describe their experience at the Forum.

The conclusions emphasized the prominent role that the Forum has acquired over the years, supporting the role of the nongovernmental sector to become a legitimate actor in the Black Sea Region and to achieve its strategic objectives for regional cooperation.

Thank you for offering me the opportunity to take part in the event! The Black Sea NGO Forum is amazing because it gives you the opportunity to network, to find people with whom you can exchange your views.

I have attended the Forum 4 times already. I am really happy to be involved in this wonderful event. Thank you for organising it! I took from the Forum new ideas for my organisation, for my activity and for my team. This has been really useful for me!