**An Evolutionary Path to Building the Croatian National Evaluation Society**

Ten years of voluntary cooperation within the Croatian Evaluators Network (CEN) has proven its relevance to building national evaluation capacities and resulted in the formal establishment of the *Croatian Evaluation Society* in March 2024. The journey from informal networking to establishing a formal institution required patience and strategic engagement in raising awareness among experts and policy makers. The formation of CEN was a voluntary process driven by evaluation experts active in the public, academic, private and civil society sector interested in knowledge sharing and exchange of experiences. An important contributing role was the fact that the International Organisation for Cooperation in Evaluation (IOCE) supports also informal voluntary organisations in evaluation (VOPE). Another key factor for raising general interest in programme and project evaluation was Croatia’s accession to the European Union (EU) in 2013. In addition, the national strategic planning and management system formalised by law in 2017 includes obligatory evaluation of strategic planning acts. Based on this law a coherent planning system is established linking national strategic development objectives with EU development policy and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

The culture of evaluation in Croatia is poorly developed, and the evaluator community is still developing. Main objectives include awareness raising about the importance of public policy evaluation and its impact on society, and the contribution of evaluation education to better policies. A crucial precondition for developing national evaluation capacities is the existence of political will and support of political leaders. Since 2015 CEN actively participates in the work of the Western Balkan Evaluation Network (WBEN), an informal coordination of evaluation societies in the region. A key impetus for formalization of a national evaluation organization came through the participation of Croatian representatives in the specialized international program for the development of evaluator communities "VOPE Leadership Boot Camp", organized by IOCE in 2022. Acting through a formal, independent professional organization of evaluators, a whole range of new possibilities opens-up when talking about the development of national evaluation culture.

An initial task for the newly established evaluation societies is raising awareness about the importance of building national evaluation systems by organizing public lectures, seminars and conferences on the importance of evaluation and stimulating public interest. Further tasks include establishing communication with policy makers to highlight the importance of evaluation and its results and to find ways to effectively integrate evaluation into the decision-making process. Another task is directly demonstrating the benefits of evaluations by conducting public policy evaluation pilot projects that can provide concrete examples of useful evaluation results. Cooperation with research institutions, universities and the academic community can help strengthen the capacity for public policy evaluation, that is, such partnerships can provide the expertise, resources and credibility needed to perform quality evaluation studies. Another important task is strengthening transparency and accountability by promoting transparency in policy processes, including open publication of evaluation results, can help build trust in evaluation studies.