

# **Future Search: Partnership Consultation**

April 15-17, 2011

## ***Meeting Report***

### **Summary**

For three days, 35 participants from 21 Belarusian organizations and 4 external groups met with Pact in Chernihiv, Ukraine for a Future Search event. This was the second Future Search meeting Pact organized, the first was held in July 2006 in Kyiv, Ukraine.

The results of the second meeting indicate that a new focus for Pact's next programming cycle might be to prioritize the mainstreaming of a new model of CSO effectiveness in Belarus.

### **Methodology and Process**

Future Search is the name for a 3-day participatory planning meeting that enables people to cooperate in complex situations. The participants through joint action develop a desired future for a community, organization, or issue from their own experience. Future Search as an inclusive method for people to collaborate despite differences of culture, class, gender, age, ethnicity, language, and education.

The agenda included significant time for personal interaction among participants, as well as a participatory venue to discuss key events that occurred in the past 5 years (timeline), trends and current situation in Belarus (mind-map), discovering the meaning and purpose of Belarusian civil society, and examining the linkages and relationships between participants through an ONA analysis. The agenda item for discussing the future was not completed, due to time and frustration by the group. Instead, time for 'open space' was given to what participants most wanted to talk about, which were then turned into areas for priority attention for work.

### **Participants**

Future Search was attended by a quite diverse group of participants: 23 Belarusian participants represented 21 Belarusian NGOs and the following sub-sectoral groups: youth, women, human rights defenders, capacity builders, think tank, EU relations, regional development, disabled, entrepreneurs.

In addition 18 more Belarusian participants were also invited to Future Search but for various reasons they could not participate, specifically representatives of environmental, culture and media sub-sectors. By gender participants were 17 female and 18 male. At the meeting there were presented 15 national organizations, three national networks, and three regional organizations.

### **Observations**

Significant trends in the Belarus civil society could be clearly observed by the participants from 5 years ago. This shows that the capacity of the sector is growing and there are new levels of sophistication in the tools, approaches, values and practices. The discussion reflected more civility, engagement and tolerance for diversity of opinion than in the past. This was not necessarily uniform, but an increase was present.

Relatedly, there is a clear shift in CSO tactics from protest to dialogue. Not only was this a new skill heard from several groups, but they also identified the recognition of public value in such dialogues as a trend. Interestingly, the intensity of conversations during small group discussion, over meals and at breaks also confirmed their interest in dialogue.

At different stages the participants returned to the debate about values and moral purpose of the third sector. It occurred perhaps due to the dramatic events in Belarus on December 19, 2010 (crackdown after the presidential election) and April 11, 2011 (blast in the Minsk metro with dozens of victims).

Despite these encouraging trends, old ways of thinking are still an obstacle. Political discussions and ambition still dominates interaction and discourse, *as well as the attention to Pact and other donors*. These voices are the loudest and tend to form the stereotype, or a current model of a CSO. Also, there is the lack of vision for future of Belarus, both the country and the third sector. The familiar stance toward circumstances is to be reactive to events as they occur, rather than proactively anticipating and even directing the future. The lack of these learned skills not only leaves civil society vulnerable to changes, but without an inspiring vision within which to motivate and lead the population.

Throughout the meeting, clear undercurrents of group dynamics could be observed. The facilitators found four streams of thinking to be generally present:

1. Discomfort with discussing new questions and using new patterns of thinking. In exercises such as the trends mapping, there was a 'gravitational pull' toward discussing the problems and oppression of the past and present. Old politically loaded words and the desire for 'concreteness' were the results of fundamental discussions regarding of values and meaning.
2. Wanting to break from the 'fight Lukashenko' mindset, yet were still focusing primarily on anti-state mindset, or a sectoral strategy.
3. Excitement and energy from the new questions and new patterns of thinking. This quieter, yet significant minority were frustrated by the meaningful discourse and a focus on the 'same old' debates and differences. They were able to identify insightful trends and were interested in learning new ideas and approaches.
4. 'Most improved' thinking that experienced an epiphany that they do not work with their target groups and that this is a problem. This was the group that experienced significant cracks in their 'theory of change', and which are now searching for alternatives and could be open to discussions of a 'new paradigm'.

## **Reflection**

While the meeting did accomplish its stated objectives and outputs, it fell short of some of its aim for stimulating bold and creative thinking for what the coming programming cycle could accomplish. There were several influences affecting these dynamics, some were within the control of Pact and can serve as 'lessons learned' while others were not.

First, participants came with varying expectations. There was misunderstanding (and even controversy) on what was the 'strategy' being developed – Pact's or the Belarusian CSOs? Some came expecting to develop a sectoral strategy, rather than giving input into new thinking for Pact. Also, some participants

came prepared to influence the group and the outcome in a very specific direction toward the sectoral strategy they themselves were developing. The word 'strategy' itself used in the invitation letter and agenda triggered associations with official positions and plans as well as policy documents already developed by some actors within the third sector. While the facilitation team had replaced the word *strategy* with *ideas and directions* during the workshop, the expectations were already set.

Second, in the first Future Search, Pact was new to Belarus and was introducing itself and its approach in a fresh way. Five years later, the organizations have a history with one another as a result of the donor/grantee relationship over the period. Therefore, there was both good will and issues that needed resolving. If the first Future Search focused on the wedding, this one was about the marriage.

Third, there were key organizations and sub-sectoral representatives that were missing from the meeting and whose voices were missing. They included environment, culture, public opinion, trade union, media, religious groups, and representatives from outside of Minsk. These groups have been invited but had declined the invitation mainly because of their extreme involvement in their CSOs activity. However, personal follow-up with those persons from a senior staff member could have changed their decision not to come.

Lastly, translation and interpretation were a particular challenge in this meeting. Much was missed through the translator, making instructions and explanations vague and incomplete at times. However, beyond that, formulating ideas for the meeting in English and then translating them was a challenge, both in time and clarity. This added to the confusion already created from objectives and expectations.

The key lessons to be learned are 1) the importance of formulating clear objectives and communicating information on the approach that sets the right expectations before the meeting; 2) incorporating partnership enhancement activities in the agenda; 3) better integrating meeting program and logistics so that they move toward a shared vision and outcome; and 4) using meeting concepts that do not have to be translated.

### **Opportunities and Implications**

While the choice of Future Search methodology for the event may not have been optimal in hindsight, it did serve as a very important tool in stimulating – even provoking – a process which surfaced key trends and influences that have implications for the next cycle of programming in Belarus. While the feeling at the end of the event was that there was no 'breakthrough moment', there is evidence that in fact there was. While a 'new paradigm' did not emerge, there was a realization verbalized that the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector is not meeting the needs of target groups or other CSOs. They are focused on meeting their own needs and those of the donors (i.e., proposal and report writing). The breakthrough was in admitting they have misplaced priorities and want to develop to the next level of effectiveness.

The challenge is that there is not yet a clear vision of this desired better future, either for their country or their new level of effectiveness. There is also no clear understanding of how to get there. This accounted for much of the meeting disappointment articulated by participants at the end of the event – they realized their dissatisfaction with their current situation but had no new understanding of what they do want (the *to what* part of the change equation, as they already know the *from what*).

This provides Pact with an opportunity, as there is now a desire to change, to make assistance more effective. Pact is in a position to facilitate the emergence of the new CSO model or paradigm that is *of*

and *for* Belarusian society. Civil society is currently marginalized in Belarus, as most people do not see the value and relevance of the CSOs. Therefore, the next phase of sectoral development is to establish roots of the sector within the society by building a constituency that supports and participates in its work. This means developing a cadre of CSOs that know how to engage communities and constituents to better their lives and develop their country.

This is very consistent with the ongoing focus of the Organizational Development Support Program to develop the organizational capacity of CSOs. External assistance can support the direction by helping to build the capacity for authentic dialogue including the development of a clear understanding of the purpose, outcomes and conditions for a dialogue to occur, rather than using the term to describe tactics as opposed to actual engagement. External assistance from donors would also be invaluable to build the capacity within the third sector for developing competencies in key community engagement methods and approaches.

While the process has not yet come close to reaching the ‘tipping point’ to a new model of a local CSO, evidence is on the way. Some ‘contours’ of this new vision can be identified from the meeting:

- Emerging understanding of the role of sectoral diversity, as evidenced by both the disagreement between those CSOs who engage in a conflict, and those who are not interested in engaging in a conflict because of its lack of importance.
- Resistance of the third sector to attempts of individual actors to implement their political ambitions at the expense of the image of the entire sector, as well as resistance to attempts to build a rigid vertical within the sector (similar to the state model).
- New priority on participatory dialogue and real conversation about issues that really matter, without rehashing the past/problems. It was observed at the end of the meeting that some participants were disappointed about not having gotten past the usual conversations, which made the meeting a missed opportunity.
- New emphasis on people and target groups as the focus and ensuring that constituencies both benefit from and participate in CSO activities.

Equally as important, is an opportunity for Pact to play the role of highlighting, supporting and magnifying the organizations looking for these new ways of thinking and working. These *cultural creatives* are the new generation of organizations currently at the margins of the sector. International supporters would do well to give their attention and support to these organizations to improve and set the standard of CSO effectiveness, rather than focusing on changing the mindsets of those who see no need for change.

### **Possible New Programming Priorities**

Program support to a natural and continuous evolution of the Belarus third sector is a multi-decade long process. Good program support requires both an eye on the long-term goal, while also understanding the next steps toward the goal that is possible in the next 3-5 years.

According to David Korten in his book *Getting to the 21st Century – voluntary action and the global agenda*, the four generations of development are 1) relief and welfare; 2) community development; 3) sustainable systems; and 4) people’s movements. Since much of the third sector and the Belarus’ society

are in the first generation, the next step would be community self-help, where the NGO engages the community in identifying and pursuing their own goals. This community engagement set of skills and perspectives is indeed the next step for both the sector and society in order to develop the credibility and reputation of the sector as one that represents benefits and engages the needs and aspirations of people. Citizenship is really more reflective of the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation of development. Without the critical foundation built in the 2<sup>nd</sup>, results for a citizenship focus might be frustrating and disappointing. For more on this topic, see a brief description at <http://www.srds.co.uk/slr/slrc004.htm> or read more in the book.

Additionally, the introduction of systems thinking and principles may be useful in understanding Belarus, and civil society. Some articles on the topic that may be helpful include [\*Interpreting Worldviews and Theories of Change on Capacity Development of Social Change Organizations\*](#) by Alfredo Ortiz, *Thinking in Systems* by Donella Meadows.

Based on the outcomes of the Future Search meeting outlined above, Pact's strategic goal for the coming term could focus on empowering and mainstreaming this new model of CSO effectiveness so that it has a greater voice and influence in sector and society. This new model is one in which CSOs work with their constituents, and in which they work with and mentor younger/weaker CSOs.

Possible strategic directions for Pact and other international implementers and donors to assist the third sector include support to:

#### **1. Building sectoral cohesion**

Participants voiced the call for the sector to stop creating hierarchies but to instead move toward genuine partnership; from domination to pluralism.

#### **2. Clarifying sectoral values and identity**

Participants at the meeting expressed both resistance and eagerness to tackle the conversation about sectoral 'meaning' and purpose. In the closing session they prioritized the need to visualize new goals, and to define who they are as a sector, providing complementary value to government, not in opposition or subservience to it. The third sector also wants to define its role and meaning in relation with the political opposition as a 'democratic ghetto'. They also recognized the need to remain transparent and open to Belarusian society.

#### **3. Building a constituency base**

In the face of realizing that the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector does not meet the needs of target groups, there is an opportunity to help them do so. This will root the sector within the society so that it can play its role in balancing the other two sectors, rather than continuing to focus on survival with the support of external donors. As CSOs gain credibility and relevance in the society through the value and transparency they offer, people will be attracted to their work and the values they promote, a key ingredient for pluralistic democracy.

#### **4. Professionalize CSO skills and approaches**

Participants expressed interest in learning how they can better meet the real needs of target groups, develop skills by adopting lessons learned and best practices of others, and being open to connections and relationships with new stakeholder and peer groups. As the sector moves toward engaging new stakeholders (e.g., civil servants) they voiced the need for developing genuine processes and adopting new methods of work (e.g., community mobilization).

The above ideas and observations are offered by the facilitation team to help spark creative thinking and discussion among international implementer and Belarusian CSOs as they develop their future programs.

---END---