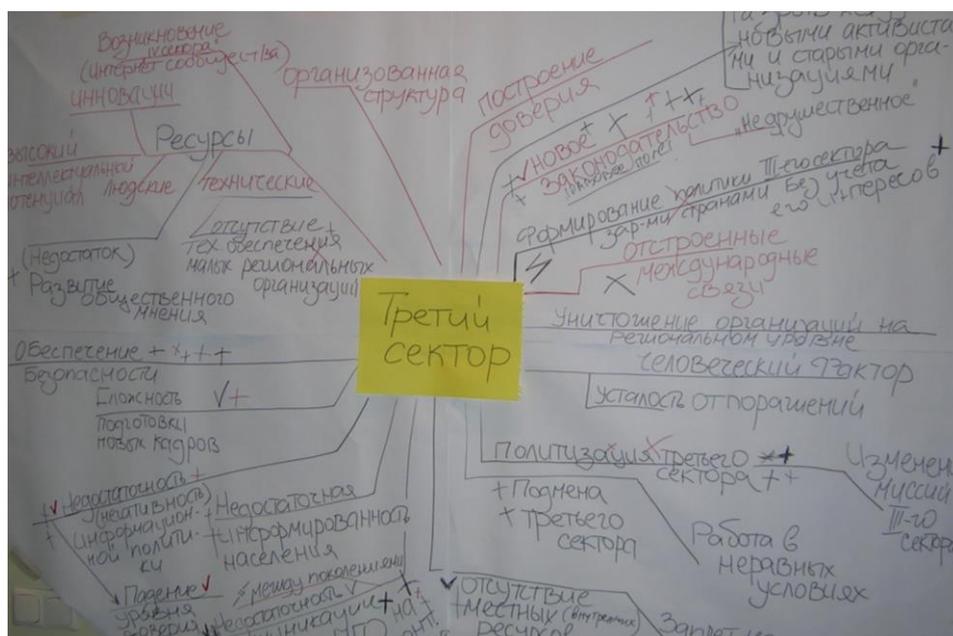


Grasping Our Potential:

A Forum for Civil Society Leaders in Belarus

July 21 - 23, 2006

Kyiv, Ukraine



Foreword

“Are we fighting Lukashenka or are we building a new country?”

- Workshop Participant

The third sector in Belarus has a significant role to play in helping the country meet the needs of its citizens. Demands for effective, efficient and sustainable organizations are only increasing. Therefore, the ability of CSOs to fulfill their role and adapt to the rapidly changing environment is paramount.

Pact brought together a multi-sectoral group of CSO leaders to analyze the new challenges of Belarusian civil society, strategize their collaborative efforts and plan for their success. Responding to Pact’s invitation and meeting from July 21 to 23 outside Kyiv, Ukraine were CSO leaders committed to strengthening effectiveness of their sector. Pact chose participatory change methodologies, such as *Future Search* and *Appreciative Inquiry* for the meeting because of their emphasis on finding sustainable action on common ground among diverse yet committed stakeholders.

Top Trends Facing Belarusian CSOs

- Legal framework
- Security
- Lack of communication among CSOs
- Politicization of CSOs
- Insufficient or negative media portrayal

The goal of the Pact led program is to promote increased, well-informed citizen participation in civic and community-based initiatives nationwide. The program supports key civil society actors seeking to create political space in Belarus and to prepare others to make effective use of this space when it opens.

This report serves as an internal record of the workshop, including its methodology, discussion, results, key findings and conclusions.

Key Findings and Conclusions

The following are a summary of the key findings and conclusions that were drawn from the meeting proceedings.

Findings

- The Future Search Workshop organized by Pact was a facilitated participatory assessment and joint planning session with Belarusian CSO leaders to formulate a capacity strengthening program for their benefit through the Pact program.
- The selection of participants brought together representatives from cross-sectoral groups (e.g., political, economic, social, environmental, women’s, youth and senior) of civil society. This helped to widen the perspective on third sector development in

Belarus. It also brought fresh ideas and new dynamics to the discussion of the needs of CSOs and how to address them.

- The words *revolution* and *change* enlarged the Belarusian context by reframing it to a global civil society perspective. This helped shift the perception of participants and enabled them to think more creatively - beyond fighting a political battle to contributing to the formation of a strong democratic country. No doubt the key contribution from participants was the new focus from “fighting Lukashenka” to building a new country and seeking alternatives to their current situation.
- Despite difficulties, according to the civil society leaders, the third sector in Belarus does exist. Intellectuals are denied significant access to politics and business and therefore concentrate in the third sector. Unfortunately, this concentration has not been used effectively to setting up new vision for the country. Nevertheless, public trust of CSOs and political parties has decreased as people’s perception of the third sector often reflects petty fights over funding rather than the activities they are offering.
- While organizers have become increasingly active over the past year, as demonstrated by spring gatherings on October Square to protest election outcomes, there are no established connections among old and new civic initiatives. CSO inefficiency is often attributed to poor management and many people are not willing to actively participate in coalitions formed between CSOs and political parties.
- Personal ambitions and aspirations of CSO leaders and the extremely unfavorable legislation make civil society leadership more the results of dynamic individuals at this stage than established organizations.

CSO Priority Growth Areas
1. Strategy
2. Human resources and networking
3. Finances
4. Communication
5. Security
6. Partnership / local government engagement
7. Marketing / needs assessment

Conclusions:

- Building up the third sector in Belarus requires strong, civic leadership and active CSOs to engage those actors willing to contribute to the alternative Belarus in their own field of focus, be it political, social, cultural, economic, or demographic.
- Visible public policy advocacy is needed in civil society projects and initiatives to realize an alternative civic vision and build a new Belarus.
- Personal and information security is paramount for the organizations to survive into a forthcoming era. Increasing the flow of information and coordination among CSOs through secure mechanisms and enabling and encouraging CSO activists to use them should be added to capacity building programs.

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