

# 2015

## Future Search

Working Meeting Report

June 4-6, 2015, Vilnius

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**vision**

**future**

**strategies**



**trends**



**results**



The report contains key conclusions and observations and describes the process of the Future Search Working Meeting of the representatives of Belarus's civil society. The meeting took place from June 4 - 6, 2015 in Vilnius, Lithuania within the framework of the Belarus Reforms and Media Strengthening project (BRAMA), implemented by Pact.

Since 2006, Pact has been utilizing Future Search methodology to help identify its strategic priorities as it relates to Belarus' civil society development. The third Future Search working meeting took place in 2015, structured accordingly to the two previous formats. This report is based on the analysis of discussions among the meeting's 39 participants representing the following civil society sectors: think tanks, advocacy, civic education, youth, community development, culture, environment, capacity building, business associations, human rights and social service provision.

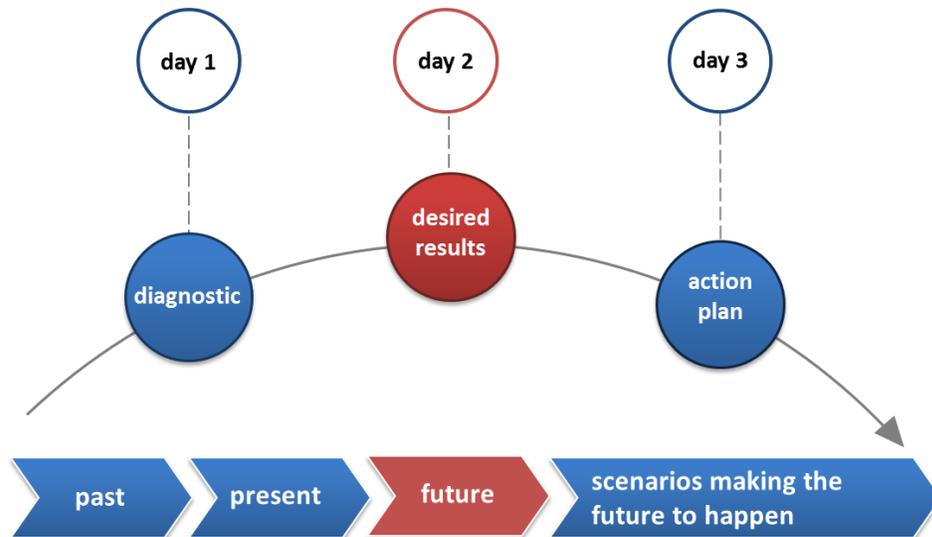
The structure of the report begins with a brief introduction to the Future Search methodology, and then it presents key conclusions and recommendations based on the analysis of the past and key lessons learned in relation to civil society efforts in 2011-2015 and trends in civil society organizations' (CSOs) development in Belarus. The observations and comparative analyses are extracted from the materials of three Future Search events, 2006, 2011, and 2015, and summarizes the content of group discussions at the 2015 working meeting. Conclusions and recommendations correspond to the outcomes of all three meetings, from peer review of meeting participants, and Pact's decade-long engagement with civil society of Belarus.

The report is intended for wide dissemination both in Belarus and among international implementers as to engage the maximum number of stakeholders in the discussion. The information contained herein is meant for consideration and use by any agents interested in the development of civil society in Belarus in the course of elaborating their own programs, approaches and/or plans.

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## Future Search Methodology

Future Search is the name of a three-day participatory planning meeting enabling participants to address complex situations and elaborate coordinated approaches and solutions to changing environment and potential challenges in Belarus. This technique is applied in order to structure group work and engage stakeholders allowing them to formulate a desirable future and/or realistic results for a community/organization. The Future Search methodology has been utilized by Pact to design its programs and strategies in Belarus in [2006](#) and [2011](#).



The purpose of the 2015 working meeting was to forge a feasible vision of Belarusian civil society’s future and possible development scenarios, including expected results as well as CSO interventions until 2020. Two external facilitators with Future Search experience in Ukraine were invited as event moderators, which ensured their neutrality and non-biased facilitation of group discussions.

The diverse composition of participants permitted a balanced and rather broad representation of various civil society sectors. The presence of the new organizations and leaders who have gained their reputation during the last couple of years testified to the renewability, progress and expansion of the third sector. Nonetheless, at times the participants’ views seemed to lack polarity and obvious collision in the course of debate.

An open detailed photo report of the working meeting can be accessed [here](#).

- Despite the post-2010 crackdown on Belarusian civil society and wave of repressions, the period of 2011-2015 has seen certain improvements. Among them includes the change of the sector's structure and the emergence of new trends of engaging new target groups and stakeholders. CSOs interpret the level of achievements differently with a dose of obvious skepticism. However, the overarching feeling of crisis and hopelessness within civil society organizations, which was observed in 2011, is no longer there.
- Major challenges which defined the sector in the past remain serious. These challenges include lack of trust towards civil society and within the civil society itself; low level of outreach and engagement of the population in CSO activities; sector's (political) polarization and slow overall progress; dwindling resources and adverse legal environment.
- The issue of trust remains the core challenge of Belarus' civil society development. On the one hand, the low level of trust towards CSOs amongst the citizenry results in weak civic activeness and participation in CSO initiatives. In fact, despite the [growing CSOs' visibility inside society](#), the level of citizens' engagement remains almost invariable. On the other hand, the lack of mutual trust among civil society organizations has adverse impact on opportunities and on the efficiency of joint actions in addressing social issues and promoting public interests. Examples of successful joint work do exist, but the overall level of interaction among CSOs remains too low. At the same time, there is a new demand for knowledge (data) about the sector among CSOs, which implies a higher degree of communication, openness and cooperation inside civil society.
- CSOs manifest the need for a more open, transparent and inclusive work, as well as positive mutual linkages amongst each other. This approach is becoming the vector of the overall advancement of civil society, which is necessary, inter alia, for accessing local and international resources. Even single attempts by CSOs to become more public by increasing their presence in the media, mainstreaming of online communication tools, and holding more events open to the public, lead to the notable increase of CSOs' recognition among the population. This is the first, but nevertheless, important and necessary step towards gaining people's trust and boosting their civic participation. Existing legal, institutional and cultural restrictions and self-censorship are yet to be overcome in order to achieve the principles of transparency and openness.
- In spite of the impression of an advanced dialogue culture emerging inside Belarus' civil society (compared to 2011), civil society organizations still find it difficult to agree even on issues of no principal significance. Much resources is spent on clarifying positions and terminology, which also testifies to a low degree of inter-sectorial trust and can affect efficiency of joint actions. Simultaneously, CSOs express the need for dialogue platforms and an organizing force capable of supporting such platforms.
- Against the background of distrust inside civil society and adverse legal environment, the overall contraction of democratic practices is observed. With the changing structure of the sector, new horizontal-type forms of citizens' self-organization have become increasingly noticeable: self-organized informal groups, professional, local and online communities. They adhere to inclusive principles and seem to intuitively

master democratic practices and procedures in the course of their interventions. Meanwhile, more and more mature CSOs – long-standing sector operators enjoying established stable links with the donor community – limit their activities to those directly dependent on grant support. Moreover, they do this without fully involving target groups and communities in such efforts, bearing no responsibility before them, and gaining features of commercial implementers with their donors as key “customers”. Truly democratic systems and practices of CSO management are rather an exception to the rule – many civil society organizations do not consider this as their development priority. This fact coupled with the overall insufficient CSO publicity and lack of trust towards the sector weakens civil society’s capacity to promote democratic social processes and changes in the country.

- The issues of attitude towards the state, namely interaction with it per se and the forms of such interaction cause ambivalent reactions among CSOs. Some view the government (especially local authorities) as a partner or, at least, a stakeholder whose engagement is a necessary factor of fostering social change. Others continue seeing it as an “enemy” or the “evil necessity”, while real interaction is either impossible or immoral. In terms of development, such a situation implies the risk of civil society’s polarization, pinning labels and does not promote collaboration among CSOs towards positive change. Emergence of organizations which were established under the auspices of the state, and which compete for resources, i.e. human, financial, etc. can become another factor of civil society’s polarization.
- CSOs are better at articulating their understanding of the need to actively utilize local resources and diversify their support base. Advancement of corporate social responsibility (CSR), state social contracting systems, social entrepreneurship and crowdfunding platforms has opened CSOs’ access to local resources. Compared to 2011, the number of cases of attracting financial means from businesses and citizens has significantly grown. Nevertheless, the volume of local resources available to Belarusian CSOs in the foreseeable future will be insufficient to replace international technical assistance programs. Even in the presence of necessary local funding, certain CSOs will undoubtedly find it difficult to tap into it either due to their established image, legal and/or organizational status or area of work.
- CSOs’ main priorities for the next five years are focused on key external and internal challenges. Thus, preservation of Belarus’ independence and further upturn of demand for national identity and Belarusian and European values should become the answer to the geopolitical situation in the region. Improvement of the legal environment, including regulation of CSO activities and funding, represents an obvious (and long standing) necessary step on the way of ensuring tangible progress and sustainability of the civil society. Institutional capacity building, promotion of democratic management principles and enhancing transparency and accountability of CSOs would help guarantee trust and active participation of citizens in achieving positive change.

The following key recommendations are offered to international donors and implementers of international technical assistance programs promoting the development of civil society in Belarus<sup>1</sup>:

- The analysis of key events within Belarus' civil society during the past five years show that key achievements and positive changes took place due to efforts of those organizations, initiatives and individuals who work inside the country. Due to objective reasons, a number of organizations and activists were compelled to work for the benefit of Belarus from abroad, and their support in the future should not be questioned. Yet, public work inside Belarus should become the focus of international aid and – with the account of security issues – reasonable effort should be made to re-integrate the emigrated organizations and/or their activities back to Belarus.
- Based on continual assessment of the internal situation and under condition of safety and security considerations, international donors and implementers should mainstream their efforts to legalize and localize funding, as well as their physical presence inside the country. Interventions aimed at supporting initiatives to de-bureaucratize Belarus' legislation on international technical assistance and foreign aid may present an important new opportunity.
- Efforts to support initiatives directed at changing the legal framework of regulating CSO activities also appear to be an important area for donor assistance. Based on past experience, priorities should be shifted from consulting CSOs on advocacy and legal issues to more effective initiatives on advocating specific modifications in the legislation promoted in a systemic, coordinated and purposeful manner by stable coalitions and/or networks of organizations in Belarus.
- Implementing activities for the benefit and with participation of target groups is an integral priority of civil society and one of the tools of shifting from paternalistic to inclusive society. International aid programs should focus on supporting initiatives in mobilizing and engaging the population, by encouraging CSOs to: a) articulate and communicate their own missions; b) define own target group and assess its needs; c) engage in open and transparent programmatic activities and create mechanisms of accountability to the target group and the society at large.
- Encouragement, promotion of openness, inclusivity and transparency of CSOs' daily activities and constructive intra-/inter-sectoral dialogue is necessary to overcome polarization and hostility. Better openness, transparency and visibility for society can be achieved by CSOs adapting corresponding internal practices and, likewise, by animating their engagement with the media.

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<sup>1</sup> This report was drafted before the scheduled elections of the President of Belarus (October 11, 2015). The recommendations were formulated based on the situation as of summer 2015.

- Building more trusting relationships between donors and aid recipients should be encouraged, simultaneously keeping in mind that this implies mutual accountability (vis-a-vis contractual obligations) and utilizing mechanisms to prevent conflicts of interests.
- There should be greater focus on regular intra- and inter-sectoral dialogue platforms inside the country. Such platforms would encourage active and relevant communication by sharing experiences, collaborative efforts, as well as would create the civil society's "added value".
- Civic platforms could become more effective if they support initiatives that generate new knowledge on specific sectors and on civil society as a whole. Sectoral analyses, indexes, ratings and other forms of reliable data generation on Belarus' civil society will allow CSOs to manage their own development. To this end, it appears expedient to further strengthen linkages between independent research centers and other CSOs .
- Capacity building and organizational development programs remain relevant. However, as practice shows there is a need to review and, perhaps, re-think approaches to their implementation. Currently, the role of donors and (local) consultants in the field of CSO capacity building/organizational development seems disproportionately high. In certain cases, the process itself is focused on building CSOs capacity to administer grants in compliance with their donor requirements. The lack of larger scale research yielding data and information – which could be referenced within corresponding analyses – makes it virtually impossible to estimate the level of organizational development of Belarus's civil society and efficiency of target programs. Striving towards their self-development should be the main incentive for CSOs organizational development. Such progress does not require significant financial investment and should be attainable for skillful management and staff. Capacity building should be tied to the efficiency of CSOs and their ability to better meet the needs of respective target groups and fulfill their missions, i.e. improving the quality of work and outreach. The Organizational Performance Index (OPI) tool can be used to assess the impact of organizational development programs on the performance of CSOs.
- Focus on introducing democratic principles and practices within CSO activities and structures should be an integral component of donor-assisted projects, as well as of capacity building programs. It is also clear that these measures will not suffice without the conscious demand on the side of CSOs and their commitment to becoming democratic civic institutions.

The analysis of key events within the civil society in Belarus in 2011-2015 suggests that during this period of time old challenges, types of activities and approaches to civic work coexisted with new developments. These developments, described in more detail below, may be considered to have given new quality and scale to Belarusian civil society. During the last five years, Belarussian civil society has been developing in an environment of lingering adverse legal environment, politically motivated persecution, pressure on political and civic activists by authorities, and under the influence of geopolitical turmoil in the region. The three greatest challenges continue to be the lack of trust within civil society, between civil society and the population, and between civil society and government. This served as an additional factor limiting opportunities for networking, enhancing intra- and inter-sectoral linkages and outreaching to the population.

The development of Belarus' civil society from 2011 to 2015 was marked by the emergence of several new phenomena, although yet noticeable or diffused. To name a few: higher recognition of CSOs among the population, emergence of successful practices and cases of interaction with the state, advancement of CSR, development of crowdsourcing and crowdfunding platforms, improved engagement with previously unengaged target groups ( e.g. the elderly), establishment of open creative platforms, and mass public activities to encourage citizens' participation and opening civic space.

A deeper analysis of more extensive data could potentially confirm the assumption that in the past five years there have been certain signs that Belarusian civil society transited to a new level. This new level is characterized by increased CSO engagement with a wider range of stakeholders and focus on ensuring direct citizens' participation via inclusive public platforms.

From the standpoint of overall quantitative and qualitative changes inside civil society, the last five years demonstrated the advent of various new organizations and initiatives, a certain expansion of direct contacts with the population and mobilization of citizenry aiming to addressing local issues (although in general the population coverage by CSOs remains rather insignificant); the emergence of new areas of engagement like urban planning), and a stronger role of social media and online tools within the framework of CSO communications. Social entrepreneurship and the demand for capacity building services has been gaining relevance among CSOs. The number of programs offering such services has been, likewise, increasing although it is still difficult to qualify and assess their outcomes. Currently, the practice of rendering capacity building services based on market mechanisms (in particular, via the Capacity Building Marketplace) did not gain wide acceptance, partly due to management challenges on the ground

In the context of steadily adverse legal environment, there continues to be politically motivated prosecutions, pressure imposed on public activists and political opposition by the authorities. These are illustrated well by [refusals to register CSOs](#), [fines imposed on reporters of independent mass media](#), expulsion from the country of a human rights activist [Elena Tonkacheva](#), complicated bureaucratic and rigid procedures of [CSOs state registration](#) and difficulties of registering international technical assistance programs and foreign aid. These factors were the reasons of establishing and/or registering Belarusian CSOs abroad and emigration of civil lead-

ers. Meanwhile, a recent overall recession of repression is observed. In August 2015, the last six political prisoners, including a former presidential candidate Mikalai Statkevich, were [released](#). Also, certain initiatives to de-bureaucratize the legal framework regulating international technical and foreign aid have taken place based on the request of the Council of Ministers. That led to the adoption of the relevant [Resolution](#) in July 2015 of the Council of Ministers that introduces a coordination council of state agencies, public associations and donors, which reduces the number and the terms of review of paperwork to register such assistance, etc. However, these examples cannot be considered a systemic improvement of the legal environment for civil society since the government's control over CSO activities remains strong.

Despite the ongoing pressure, there is a growing understanding within the civil society of the potential of interacting with the state. In 2015, multiple CSOs managed to utilize opportunities for a productive communication with government authorities and public agencies within the framework of addressing social issues and responding to population's needs. In particular, the themes and niches where interaction with the state has become more open and safe include the social sphere, culture, CSR, urban planning, environment, and economic initiatives. Within these areas, there have been regular contacts between CSOs and the state, both willing to exert constructive influence over existing policies.

In the course of discussing the lessons learned, the Future Search participants repeatedly referred to the increased relevance of the concept of "trust" with civil society. Various research focusing on this issue executed in Belarus at different times and by different agencies share a similar conclusion. For example, based on the [IISEPS 2002](#) and [SATIO 2014](#) surveys, Belarusians are rather suspicious and largely tend not to trust anybody. Along with infrastructural restrictions (small number of venues, platforms, forums, etc.), the mistrust present inside civil society curbs the likelihood of networking, intra- and inter-sectorial linkages, and better outreach to the population. The lack of trust towards civil society organizations among the people of the country can be a result of their low engagement in CSO activities i.e. citizens may possess theoretical knowledge of the civil society work but lack experience of direct personal participation.

The conflict in Ukraine was one of the key events recently that influenced the progress of civil society in Belarus. On the one hand, the Belarus government has exploited the situation looking for new common grounds with the West, and on the other, the conflict has fostered polarization of the Belarusians. It has affected their engagement and political expectations and forces CSOs to design new programs (media literacy, refugee issues, national/cultural identity).

During the working meeting, participants identified several trends with ongoing or potential impact on the development of civil society in Belarus. Although some of them are rather a description of the current reality or existing challenges, the most important points of this discussion are presented below.



### Changes in the sector structure

#### a) New forms of civil self-organization

The change in the sector's structure is perhaps the most important trend in Belarus' civil society. Along with traditional membership-based pro-democratic organizations, service organizations and public associations, [novel forms of citizens' self-organization](#) and civil engagement such as non-institutionalized, self-organized informal groups and professional, local and online communities, are gaining ground. Their distinctive feature is their pragmatic orientation on satisfying own interests and self-fulfillment. Possibly, due to the reason of such groups focusing on themselves as opposed to generating certain public benefits, their operation proves that donor financial support of civil initiatives is not always necessary. Simultaneously, such groups often initiate resolution of wider-scale urgent socially significant issues, like improving local infrastructure, generating opportunities for public discussion and dialogue with the state, influencing public opinion, ensuring civil participation, encouraging volunteer work and patronage, etc.

#### b) Formalization of CSOs as establishments<sup>2</sup> and entities registered abroad

Restrictive legislation and legal practices bring about a continual tendency of Belarusian CSOs registering abroad and "establishmentization" of civil society. The term "establishmentization" refers to a situation when the growing number of CSOs is registered as non-commercial in the form of establishments, which are owned and controlled exclusively by the founders. The founders are accountable only to themselves and may lack motivation, commitment and mechanisms to develop democratic governance systems. There is also a risk that such legal form as establishment may further increase the gap between the CSO and its target groups.

#### c) Overwhelming "CSO-crazy"

Membership-based organizations cease to be the sole, traditional, and popular form of civil platforms. Instead of being incorporated in and working on behalf of a specific organization, active citizens oftentimes prefer to actualize their initiatives as part of various self-organized groups. The reasons for that range from: the availability of various forms and platforms for civil engagement, and the lack of trust towards CSOs, and the bureaucratization of traditional CSOs. The process of the establishment of "CSO-crazy" is becoming increasingly noticeable within the civil sector. It manifests itself in the growing number of professionalized service organizations, with vertical organizational structures. Often times with long term expertise based on serving donors, while frequently lacking a defined target group and obvious demand for their product within society.

<sup>2</sup> Note: An "establishment" is one of legal forms of CSO registration in Belarus, which does not require membership or other forms of citizens' affiliation. An establishment can be founded by a single person.



## Adaptability of CSOs becomes the key sector development factor

Civil society thematic sectors are undergoing manifested changes in its approaches and principles of interacting with stakeholders and partners. They have introduced new forms and methods of work as well as focus shift.

The major factors behind the changes within the civil society include:

- change of the overall sector structure, appearance of new actors and changing alignment of forces inside and outside the sector;
- decreasing available resources due to the budget cuts, declining interest among international donors;
- preservation of adverse legal conditions for civil society; and
- changing local, regional and global contexts.

Various sectors develop differently with a varying degree of intensity and depth. Some act as innovators and trendsetters as to practical application of novel ideas. They demonstrate their ability to expand the pool of their supporters who adopt their interventions from a range of sources. Other organizations continue to carry out the same activities over many years with outcomes that are poorly investigated and unknown.

The cultural sector has accumulated innovations, techniques and individuals who have contributed to the increasing social demand for national identity. The human rights sector has shown a shift towards economic and social rights demanded by the society. The environmental sector demonstrates enhanced networking, including joint campaigns. In the recent years, the quantity and visibility of organizations engaged in animal protection has increased. Impressive youth programs are hard to find, yet the startup movement, on the contrary, is on the rise. The civic education sector may potentially develop due to the crisis of formal education and Belarus' accession to the Bologna system. Simultaneously, the sector's minimal outreach capacity undermines the influence and potential of civic education programs on the population. It should be noted, that the issue of poor outreach to constituencies is relevant for civil society in general. Its underlying causes may include the vertical structure, and closed character of many CSOs and CSO focus on competing for donor resources. This implies competition among CSOs and is curbing the expansion of horizontal linkages, cooperation and improvement of coverage. The crisis in the gender sector is associated with the low interest of the state and donors, although the question about the reasons of such reduced interest of key stakeholders towards the theme remains open.

The overall status of the civil society sector, stagnation and/or regress, depend on the ability of respective CSOs to adapt to changes and self-transform. The objectives for CSOs to adapt n activities within today's new environment include:

- increasing openness and transparency in interactions with society;
- building up trust towards CSOs;
- strengthening local support;
- enhancing linkages with all stakeholders and agents; and
- giving greater focus on the needs of target groups, society as a whole, and national development priorities.



## Polarization of civil society

There are regular discussions within civil society of the joint vision and coordinated role of CSOs within the Belarusian society, including the issues of CSO consolidation, CSO functions and principles of interaction with the population and the state. The opinions voiced during such discussions, including within the National Platform of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, speak for the existence of a number of opposing “camps” inside civil society. There are the self-declared pro-democratic and assumed pro-state organizations, so-called expert national-level organizations and underdeveloped local (grassroots) initiatives, social and politicized activists, young/innovative and conservative “old-school” organizations, and the “friends” and “foes”. Such delimitation might be caused by the long on-going stereotypes, mistrust and competition among CSOs. Considering that Belarusian society is rather polarized, for example, is based on either strong [pro-European or pro-Russian bias](#), civil society polarization reflects this tendency, which, in turn, significantly influences the ability of the sector to hold a constructive dialogue, consolidate, and progress.

The ongoing economic crisis in Belarus forces the government to consider CSOs as tools to attract foreign financial assistance into the country. This leads to liberalization of legislation regulating foreign aid, and at the same time, the state pushes CSOs away from foreign resources by a) implementing direct contacts with large international donors/aid implementers at ministerial and department levels; b) selective inclusion of loyal CSOs in joint international projects implemented with state participation and by that demonstrating “civil engagement” to foreign partners; and c) establishing agents similar to CSOs to channel foreign aid money. This practice creates the threat of a growing perception of the state not as a key stakeholder, but rather a competitor for donor resources, and may promote further polarization of the civil society. Pinning labels and segregation into camps of “our guys” versus “your guys” are being avoided. Strategically, this trend will reduce the efficiency and sustainability of the civil society and cast doubt on the value system.



## Demand for capacity building services

The last couple of years demonstrated an [increasing demand](#) for organizational development services. The question remains whether this is dictated by internal development needs of CSOs, inspired by donors, fostered by the progress of capacity building programs and/or the level of CSO development, sufficiency of target resources, CSO commitment to its own organizational development, attitude towards and the role of foreign donors in capacity building, timeframe of assessing programs’ performance. In Belarus, there are no openly accessible and complete datasets that would allow to evaluate the performance of CSO development and capacity building programs. Several meeting participants expressed the opinion that the annual [CSO Sustainability Index](#) produced at USAID’s request can be fully considered a valid source of such data. Being one of few (if not the only) available tool allowing to track progress in the development of Belarus’s civil society during the last 15 years it, unfortunately, does not investigate all possible dimensions and processes within civil society. Further the Index is not solely intended to assess the level of CSO organizational development.



### Increasing relevance of and demand for research focusing on sector development

The civil society of Belarus is neither homogeneous nor monolithic. It consists of several more or less specific thematic areas of varying level of development. Investigation and comprehension of the processes taking place inside these areas, identification of respective current challenges and development prospects require a targeted approach and a relevant methodology. However, they all share a problem characterizing both individual sectors and the civil society as a whole – lack of self-awareness.

There is still no systemic linkage between the “thinkers” and the “doers”, i.e. no regular interaction between think tanks and other civil society agents directly contacting the people. The question of who is supposed to initiate such interactions remains unaddressed. Currently, the mutual interest of key sector actors in a deeper investigation of pertinent issues and context in which they operate<sup>3</sup> is growing. Although only [single CSOs](#) have tried to resolve sector development issues in an integrated manner. Better interaction between “thinkers” and “doers” would allow to more precisely identify development trends of individual civil sector areas as well as evaluate their performance against the context of national development needs.



### Reducing international donor funding available to Belarusian CSOs

The resources of international donors and the volume of foreign technical aid in the development sector targeting Belarus [have been shrinking](#). This may be caused by the insufficient progress demonstrated both by the state and civil society, steadiness of the Belarusian political and government system as well as inability of political opposition and CSOs to democratize the society, and re-direction of resources to Ukraine.

Among other things, the situation leads to the increasing role of local resources, i.e. not only local-based financial means but also intellectual, technical and human resources available to the population and stakeholders. The relevance of utilizing local resources has been also growing thanks to the development of crowdsourcing and crowdfunding platforms, the strengthening the role of business in funding social projects, and the use of state contracting mechanisms. However, attraction of local resources is not possible and/or desirable for all CSOs. For example, it is difficult for human rights organizations to absorb local budget means and remain independent. Besides, the critical condition of the national economy may constrain opportunities of attracting local funding.

In any case, complete re-orientation of CSOs towards local resources is difficult to expect. Diversification of sources and reinforcing mutually advantageous partnerships with key stakeholders and organizations will remain, perhaps, the most effective approach of mobilizing financial resources.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, studies of [CSR](#) sector; [youth policy](#) or [environmental](#) issues



### **Decreasing overall level of civil society repression and increasing openness of the state to dialogue**

Although the legal climate in which Belarusian CSOs operate remains unfavorable and does not demonstrate any systemic improvements, the civil society's capacity to advocate and foster modification of legislation remains rather weak (one of the weakest components of the [CSO Sustainability Index](#)). Meanwhile, several positive changes in the national and local-level legal framework, including thanks to the efforts of CSOs, is observed. For example, public authorities demonstrate a rather high degree of openness to the society's participation in the process of drafting new and/or modifying existing legislation. In particular, the national Ministry of Economy initiated a series of public consultations with the representatives of the citizenry and CSOs while drafting the [2030 National Sustainable Social and Economic Development Strategy of Belarus](#), the [Government Action Program](#), and the [Presidential Directive of the RB on Stimulation of Entrepreneurship](#). Similar events were also held by the Department on Humanitarian Work of the Administration of the President of Belarus in the course of enhancing legal framework regulating [foreign aid](#).

However, even though the state may be opening up to the public's participation in the legal reform, not all CSOs can always really seize the opportunity to influence the process. The reasons for that may include a) low advocacy capacity and lack of motivation; b) weak institutional links with government agencies and decision-makers; and c) the stereotype of "complete impossibility" of improving the legal environment which, to some extent, is confirmed by the long history of the absence of positive changes in the legislation regulating the work of CSOs.



### **Increasing CSO visibility among the population**

The recent years have seen a significant increase of social awareness of CSO activities and, respectively, growing visibility of civil society organizations among the population. For example, according to the 2014 poll carried out by the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IISEPS) the share of Belarusian citizens informed of CSO activities increased from 25% (2012) to 52% (2014). This can be explained by the growing presence of civil society agents in the Internet, greater intensive use of communication tools, increasing number of public events with mass citizenry participation, and widening support of charity assistance by the general public, including the development of crowdsourcing and crowdfunding platforms.

Despite the improving visibility of CSOs among the population, the trust towards them remains low as before, and the involvement of citizens in social work has not significantly increased.

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