

Community Poll Memo – Komarovo

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By: Pact

Purpose

The primary purpose of this community poll is to examine the results of community-based organizations' activities from the point of view of the community, particularly those forming local opinions and making decisions.

Pact's ambition for the community polls is to provide easy to use feedback directly from a local community in order to better understand community-development work (supply) needs and challenges. A local research company [SATIO](#) was contracted to carry out the first community polls.

The village of Komarovo was chosen for this study based on the fact that in the past it [has been a well-cited case](#) of a [community development success story](#). Publishing this memorandum, Pact wishes to share its findings with relevant stakeholders in order to contribute to community development in Belarus.

Methodology

Community polls were developed based on the so-called Community Feedback Survey, a series of personal, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with local opinion-makers of a particular geographic community. The specificity of the study is its focus on the local opinion-makers as a mirror of the local community, thus adding the voices of the demand side to the community development debate. Assessing their role should make easier exploring local solutions and approaches to community development.

The key element of the community poll is the sample. Local opinion makers interviewed in the village of Komarovo include 11 people: the chairperson of the local council, the head of the agricultural college, a specialist from the agricultural college, the head of the palace of culture, a businessman, librarian, postman, doctor, several pensioners, and active citizens.

The following analysis listed below, comprised of findings and recommendations, is based on the report provided by SATIO and Pact's observations.

Findings

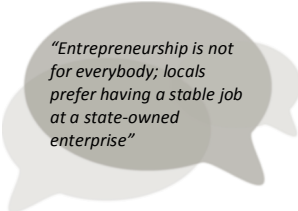
- **A number of demonstration sites of improved local infrastructure are available in Komarovo**

There are some vivid examples of community development initiatives implemented in Komarovo aimed at creating new local infrastructure, developing rural tourism destinations, and promoting area beautification and improvement activities. Some of them may serve as model initiatives for the country. In particular, the [Center of Rural Entrepreneurship](#) was established in Komarovo to promote sustainable development and support rural tourism. Under the aegis of the Center, a series of projects were implemented including a) installation of alternative power sources (a mini-hydroelectric power plant and solar panel) for street lighting in the village and one of the administrative buildings b) reconstruction of old earl's buildings - opening a bakery and a bakeshop c) restoration of old earl's park and others. All these facilities function as non-profit or business projects contributing to the improvement of the quality of life of Komarovo residents. Most of these projects were possible thanks to support provided by international donors (UNDP, Global Environmental Facility, German Government Support Program to Belarus, US Embassy, etc.) and the prominent activism of local activist Eduard Voitekhovich – a former director of agricultural lyceum and current head of the Center of Rural Entrepreneurship.

- **Local development initiatives are impressive, but are hardly relevant to residents' real needs and aspirations**

Dissonance is observed between local activists' perception of community needs, local realities and development priorities, and the community's own understanding of their needs and capabilities. While community needs reside mostly on the macro-level, neither local activists nor the local government have been able to offer such development avenues for local residents. Most respondents reported that members of their community are concerned with the

current state of affairs and development perspectives of Komarovo village. The problems they see as the most crucial for locals are the following: limited job opportunities, underdeveloped social infrastructure, an ageing local population, and the insufficient role of state authorities in addressing socio-economic problems and promoting the village's development. Despite favorable factors for running private entrepreneurial activities in Komarovo (e.g. in the field of




"Entrepreneurship is not for everybody; locals prefer having a stable job at a state-owned enterprise"

rural tourism), this idea is perceived by local residents as neither a solution to the complex socio-economic problems nor a development priority – to make Komarovo an attractive touristic destination. Only a few Komarovo residents are involved in the rural tourism business.

Meanwhile, the work of the local Center of Rural Entrepreneurship has neither boosted entrepreneurial activity in Komarovo nor created impetus for residents' self-organization and independent activism in the social or entrepreneurial sphere.

- **The community development process happens without the collective action or active participation of local residents**

There are local activists in Komarovo who are considered by local opinion makers to be drivers of the community development process. However, respondents of the study admitted that despite individual initiative and leadership performed by activists, a vast majority of community development initiatives were implemented without active participation of local residents and basically without contribution of local resources. After years of development work and a number of project implementations, residents generally remain passive, demonstrating a low level of interest in collective action and, as a rule, do not initiate independent actions to address local issues.



"Community activists work for people, but not with them"

Factors Affecting Common Action and Public Participation¹

- **Lack of participatory practices applied locally**


People who may have common interests are not brought together to ensure the community development process is participatory and inclusive when defining problems, development priorities, and solutions. Thus, even when the experience of implementing random community development initiatives is in place, a lack of broad local support does not create the impetus for people's self-organization.

- **Local activists' individual ambitions substitute the community's shared vision of future**

While some local activists claim to have their own understanding of development priorities and a vision of how the community should evolve, there is no evidence that purposeful attempts were undertaken to ask average residents their opinions and engage them in a broad discussion as equal stakeholders. Thereby, many local residents (while being side observers of activist-generated initiatives) do not see their role in community development work at present or in future.

- **Weak authority of state officials and little trust of local activists**

While the authority of local state officials and their capacity to address local issues is assessed by the respondents as weak, it is reported that activists representing non-governmental institutions are not fully trusted by the community and are treated with suspicion. According to survey respondents, a few community-based organizations existent in the village are often seen as a family business of their founders. Thereby, when there is no real community ownership of these organizations, it is quite difficult for




"People do not trust thinking all these projects are his personal interest, while community is only the cover"

¹ Common action and active participation of residents are seen as necessary attributions and the most crucial factors in any [community development work worldwide](#). There is no evidence to justify that these universal principles are not applicable to Belarusian society. However, Pact's own conclusion made after 5 years of observations of the activities of NGOs and CBOs enrolled in operations of Pact-established [Community Development Fund](#) suggests that in Belarus 'community development work without citizens' engagement' is quite a common shortcoming (with rare exceptions) of community development work in Belarus. The approach's most distinctive characteristic is that local activists may perpetuate citizens' passiveness, by playing a solo role in the development process without mobilizing and empowering the communities. The following factors are the key to explaining the low level of residents' participation and lack of collective action in respect to the community development process in a particular community (although this explanation could be valid for any other similar local community in Belarus).

them to play the role of solid community-based organizations and collect considerable local support.

- **Primary focus on raising grants for community development prevents mobilization of local resources**

It was acknowledged during the interviews that most of the community development projects implemented in Komarovo would not have happened if international donors' grants were not raised by local NGOs. On the one hand, when local NGOs predominantly serve as good fundraising tools for channeling international support for the purpose of local infrastructure improvement, visible changes (e.g. new facilities created) and pilot innovations (e.g. installation of alternative sources of energy) are achieved. On the other hand, after a decade of such donor-oriented practice and a habit of grants seeking, it is hardly possible to expect local NGOs to make a sudden shift to mobilizing scarce community resources. It is also unlikely that residents will start investing in community development as volunteers, active participants, and supporters. This all makes the issue of sustainability of all the positive changes achieved appear questionable.



"The idea was to write grants proposals to secure European donors' funding"

Recommendations²

Respondents share a pessimistic view of the village's near future: the local economy is deteriorating, the population is declining, and local residents are without solutions. Rural tourism and private entrepreneurship are not seen as concrete solutions because local residents have very little interest/faith in entrepreneurial activities. Among key hindrances are lack of skills, capacities, and assets to run a business. Residents prefer to have a stable job at a state-owned enterprise. Most respondents believe the only hope for a better future is tied to the state. They continue to believe it is the government's responsibility to take care of local problems by creating job opportunities and improving local infrastructure.

Civic activists articulated an alternative vision of future prospects. They see the village as a sustainably developed community where residents enjoy high standards of living. Their ideas and plans for the future include: a) creation of *Incubator for Rural Business* - an additional tool for an already existent facility to support small enterprises of rural tourism; b) modernization of the local agricultural vocational college into a unique educational establishment attracting students from all over Belarus and abroad.

The different visions of the community's future are the result of the dissonance between local activists' perception of community needs, local realities and development priorities, and the community's own understanding of their needs and capabilities. State representatives have either no role in articulating future visions or do not take proactive steps in addressing challenges in the community.

- **Agree on vision.** Not having a common vision of community development projects will not likely lead to flourishing communities. To reconcile the optimistic vision of local activists, the pessimistic vision of local residents, and the lack of vision of state representatives, an inclusive debate should be initiated and facilitated by the most proactive actor: the local activists. This requires clear and cogent communications primarily concerning the local activists' ambitions regarding public benefits.
- **Domesticate support.** Cultivating sources of local support is more preferable from a long-term perspective than habituating grants seeking. External resources are a good match for domestic assets and local capacities, yet external resources should not be the primary objective of local civic actors as they may alienate those who have no access to them.
- **Build stakeholders' network.** Involving residents, authorities, and other actors as equal stakeholders in community development not only evokes a feeling of belonging and strengthens local ownership over achieved results, but also enables horizontal networks that lead to self-organization and greater collective action. Building solid networks requires stakeholders' involvement on a regular basis and at each stage of community development work (community mapping, priorities identification, action planning, etc.).

² Results of the community poll in Komarovo village suggest a set of simple case-specific recommendations for local activists and practitioners involved in community development work. Although these recommendations could be applicable for community development interventions of a broader context.

- **Demonstrate real cases.** There is still a lack of successful, visible cases of community development work in Belarus. Therefore, making community development initiatives a demonstrative and cooperative practice (e.g. local infrastructure improvement, local activism, collective actions examples) not only contributes to forming a broader learning space, but also encourages replication and adaptation country-wide.

Community Overview

[Komarovo](#) is a small village in the region of Minsk located in the territory of the [Naroch area](#) – a popular touristic destination famous for its picturesque scenery and lakes. It is 80 km from Minsk and 150 km from Vilnius (Lithuania). The biggest enterprise located in Komarovo is a branch of the Vileyka Vocational College (formerly the Agricultural Lyceum) where approximately 100 village residents work as professional and administrative personnel. A 19th century earl's mansion and a park along with several other historical buildings are located in Komarovo, making it an attractive place for tourists. The total population of Komarovo is about 1000.

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