

# GENERAL BACKGROUNDS FOR CONDUCTING ACTIVITY AIMED AT SUPPORTING CIVIL SOCIETY IN BELARUS AT THE MODERN STAGE

## **I. Previous experience of supporting Civil Society development in Belarus provided by international donors and foreign partners**

Belarusian Civil Society and NGO sector in private have got strong impulse to development thanks to active influence of various international and foreign organizations and institutions. At different phases of its development and growth (1991-2005) independent Belarusian NGO sector was receiving different kinds of support. It is possible to define 3 main periods of Belarusian modern history, when NGO sector was supported by foreign and international partners, structures and institutions in different way with different aims and objectives:

- 1991-1996 – Establishing independent state, development of main elements of democratic society (free economy, political parties, division of power, independent mass-media, citizens' participation etc.). At that time most of assistance received by NGOs in Belarus stimulated institutionalizing non-profit organizations and training them in some basic spheres of NGO life (management, fundraising, public relations etc.). Such programs for Belarus were not numerous and based mainly on transferring know-how from western countries.

- 1996-2001- After referendum of 1996 and liquidation of real division of power in Belarus most of support to NGO sector was aimed at protecting human rights, stimulating independent initiatives and alternative sources of information (for example, independent press), wide range of seminars and trainings for various target groups of civic activists.

- 2001-2005 – After second presidential elections in autumn 2001 it became clear that Civil Society in Belarus is not strong, coordinated, consolidated and experienced enough to suggest appropriate democratic alternative for the whole society. Therefore main focus of priorities of foreign and international players was aimed at stimulating consolidation processes, involvement of wide circles of population into social and social-political activity, networking, development of cross-sector and international cooperation, community development issues etc.

Since year 2004 it is possible to talk about new situation with international NGO cooperation in Eastern Europe. Some countries of the region (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland) entered European Union and got a status of donor countries instead of countries-recipients. That meant that Belarus became one of a few nearest neighbors of EU and level of cooperation activity between EU and Belarus in economical, social-political and cultural fields should be noticeably raised.

## **II. Some remarks about backgrounds of donor's strategy and programs' development**

Recognizing great positive input made by international players at these three time-periods it is also necessary to admit some weak points of their activity that exist permanently in the activity of rather significant number of international and foreign organizations working for supporting development of Civil Society in Belarus.

### **A. Common weak points of donor institutions in developing their strategy of activity in Belarus**

- Decisions about programs of support and development for Belarus are usually made only with using opinion of extremely limited circle of Belarusian politicians and representatives of Belarusian pro-democratic society. Neither state institutions (because of contradiction of aims) nor non-governmental organizations (because of other reasons) do not take part in this programming as significant subjects.

- There is a lack of attention to work with peculiarities of totalitarian thinking during development of programs for Belarus aimed at promotion of European democratic norms. That is why some big important tasks, priorities and activities are often absent in these programs. For example, there are activities aimed at achieving self-determination of various target groups, thorough working out skills of effective communication and other procedures, analytical activity in Belarus etc.

- Problem in setting goals for Civil Society Support Programs. Goals are very often already set in combination with proposing and promoting some particular tools for achieving them (for example, development of Civil Society via partnership development). Democratization changes are supposed to be achieved via transmitting foreign experience but activity situations in Belarus and countries of experience origin differ.

- There is a lack of reflexive focus in programs designed for Belarus. Donors usually give priorities to long-term strategies but activities of NGOs are mostly oriented on rather quick results, changes and effects. The programs proceed from present situation, but without possibility to react to its quick changes, that is why they are late, as a rule. For instance, for Belarusian Civil Society organizations today a long-term support is extremely vital, but in the same time short-term (up to 6 months) project conception subordinated to strategic goals is needed as well (so the project planning should be flexible).

- There is a lack of attention to organizing, holding and evaluating results of needs assessment procedure as well as analytical work is poor at all. In many cases needs assessment of Civil Society infrastructure, organizations and situation of different groups of Belarusian society doesn't take place at all. Sometimes it is replaced by external understanding of what should be done or supported etc. Only during the last 2 years situation started to change for the better.

- Donor institutions very often have slow and low-effective procedure of decision-making about supporting proposed actions, loosing a lot of time. In many cases ideas suggested by Belarusian NGO's are oriented on their quick implementation according to very changeable environment. In the same time Civil Society organizations have to wait for donors' final decision about support up to 1-2 years. Financial dependency from external support led to abstracting project ideas and loosing time, context and effectiveness.

- In programs designed for Belarus there is a lack of systematic approach and coordination of efforts. Most of donor programs don't intent to invest into development of Civil Society structures and institutions within Belarus and prefer financing only some NGO activities. As a result of that most of organizations are not sustainable enough to survive or protect themselves from permanent pressure from authorities' side. Insufficient coordination between international donors or between different international and foreign NGOs permanently working in Belarus in some particular spheres of activity takes place as well.

- There is some inexact understanding of roles and possibilities of different social groups in Belarusian society that leads to making inaccurate priorities in implementation of strategy of democratic development. First of all it concerns youth as one of social groups. There are no special researches about modern situation with youth but available data shows that Belarusian educational system lets efficiently control the majority of young people and influence their mentality. Besides that, the existing power in Belarus starts to provide possibilities for youth to make career in the state system of industry and management. Independent youth organizations do not and won't have in the nearest future appropriate resources to resist this process. Demographic situation in Belarus shows that youth is not dominating group in the society where about 40 per cent are retired people. Young people vote reluctantly and in general have weekly influence on decision-making process in the country. Thus, youth organizations of course should be actively supported to overcome these tendencies but they can not be recognized as the only driving power and intellectual centre of changes. For fostering democratic changes in Belarusian society it is necessary to involve active citizens in the age of 25-45 who represent those social groups which interests are infringed in Belarus today.

- There is also some inexact understanding of situation with regions, communities and local authorities in Belarus. Developing their programs donors are often based on the wrong precondition about

local authorities and existence of sustainable institutions in local communities. As a matter of fact the destruction of local communities has been the main task of Soviet authorities and Communist party since 1917. Destruction and liquidation of local communities and regional connections has lasted up to 1991. Instead of local communities specific structures were built according to so-called production principle. Organizing everyday life of citizens was directly linked to activity of industrial enterprises or bureaucratic structures. In rural areas agro enterprises – collective firms – were much more important than village council (local authorities). Social services of enterprises undertook the functions which are under responsibility of communal and municipal services in any ordinary society. During the period of Belarusian independence 1991-1994 it was not possible to restore local communities, and after 1994 the policy specific for soviet authorities was kept on again. Local authorities, Civil Society institutions and NGOs in regions should be created through implementation of target-oriented programs on rehabilitation or re-establishment of local communities.

- A number of donors make the main focus on regional development and ignore the importance of big cities in Belarus. According to previous experience it is possible to admit that the policy aimed at supporting preferably regional activities and structures of the third sector was not successful enough (insufficient effectiveness of work of a number of local resource centers). The third sector today is almost non-existent in small towns (sized up to 100 thousand population) and in rural areas. In Belarus vitality of organizations of the third sector is much connected to urbanization of life. Thus self-organization of NGOs now is mainly possible in the capital and big cities where they create patterns for all of the country. In regions, rural areas and small towns civic activity is more or less sustainable only under support or in networking with organizations from big Belarusian cities. But still a lot of donors' programs are aimed only on regional support and exclude Minsk and other big cities from their focus basing on opinion that there are enough activities and organizations there.

- There are some out-of-date approaches to development of informational space and stimulating wide dissemination of independent information. It is not efficient enough just to support independent mass-media. Of course a number of professional and popular independent newspapers in Belarus should be supported. But all registered mass-media in Belarus and the process and the system of their distribution are under control of authorities. That is why development of independent system of distribution of outputs and creation of communication sites which by their functions could seriously stimulate public communication and dialogue is of great importance. In such a way priority support nowadays should be given to development of interactive Internet resources, independent publishing activity, new know-how in the sphere of alternative dissemination of information, other innovative ideas in the field of raising effects of providing independent information to Belarusian citizens and competing authorities' efforts in this field.

- Some European programs declaring their aim as development of Civil Society and assistance in democratization of Belarus in reality make significant input into strengthening Belarusian totalitarian system. For instance, registration of international projects according to the rules of Belarusian authorities (mechanisms of registering projects either as international technical assistance or as humanitarian aid) nowadays means building them into the totalitarian program of authorities and using these resources for achieving aims of non-democratic regime.

## **B. Belarusian Civil Society at present: what problems and difficulties foreign donors should take into account in their development programs**

- Belarusian social-political space has become arena for fight of two alternative programs - western (European and American) and Eurasian (supported by Russia). At the same time there is a significant lack of proper Belarusian programs and projects in Belarus.

- Belarusian authorities implement nowadays their own program of development (Totalitarian Belarus) and skillfully use for that program resource of both Russian and European programs and projects.

- Belarusian state at present is a sustaining system which does not recognize pluralism in approaches and opinions and rejects any signs of activity that do not fit its goals, ideas and organizational forms. Currently this system does not see any serious problems inside itself and therefore there is no basis for a dialogue or cooperation with anyone beyond the system.

- There is a myth that there is a Civil Society in Belarus. Indeed there are separate “survived” elements of Civil Society and many of them do not follow (reasoned by lack of knowledge or pressure produced by social-political environment) the main principals of Civil Society.

- Economical basis and infrastructure for supporting NGO activities from inside the country were not developed to some sufficient level because of regular stimulating dependency from external support and strong pressure from authorities.

- That is why Belarusian NGOs involved in international cooperation are very often more providers of ideas and interests of their international donors and partners than providers of their own interests or needs of their social groups and communities.

- Belarusian NGO and other independent organizations and initiatives continue to exist in some kind of “ghetto” inside Belarusian society with lack of wider connections both with state, business organizations and with wide circles of population. This fact is both the reason and the outcome of economic dependence of NGO sector. Understanding that Belarusian authorities try not to let Civil Society organizations leave this “ghetto”, use mass-media for stimulating public dialogue and reach wide circles of citizens.

- It is necessary to mention a lack of communication processes, transparent and open discussions, public dialogue and common agreements between existing in Belarus Civil Society players. This is caused on one hand by infrastructural difficulties in organizing regular communication processes (lack of access to mass media, problems with premises for big meetings etc.), on the other hand – by poor traditions of solidarity in Belarusian society and weak culture of public communication (lack of experience of uniting and communicating in some associations and circles, lack of respect and reference to colleagues’ achievements, undeveloped empathy and complicity of modern Belarusian society etc.).

- The main problems of Belarus on the way to European values, norms and democratic way of life lie in some defects of thinking. There is a lack of ability to divide peculiarities of personality from functions and position of a person in communication. There is also non-recognition of possibility and necessity of co-existing various aims, permanent looking for double sense and/or hidden agenda in relations with others, neglecting norms and procedures etc. Such way of thinking let people survive in totalitarian society but at the same time it doesn’t let establish irretrievably appropriate democratic norms and models of behavior even within pro-democratic part of Belarusian society that often is programming its failures.

- It is also possible to state some emotional crisis and crisis of aims among NGO activists nowadays. Most of them spent a lot of years and efforts on stimulating democratic development in Belarus but understand how still far they are from achieving results significant at all-Belarusian level.

- In spite of that there is a big intellectual potential in these survived Civil Society structures and groups. New generation of good analysts and civil society leaders appeared during last 3-4 years, as well as well-educated managerial staff. These people are opposite to existing anti-democratic power in the country but at the same time critical to some models imposed by non-reflexive donor programs and “old-fashioned” political opposition.

### **III. Suggestions for making changes in modern strategy of supporting Civil Society development and democratization in Belarus**

Basing on our evaluation of the situation in Belarus and analysis of Civil Society support programs we want to make the following suggestions:

1. *To make lobbying efforts aimed at altering the process of shaping programs for Belarus (from setting goals to defining programs' format and terms) at the level of decision-makers both at national (some particular country) and at international level.*
2. *To spend some time and efforts on making appropriate changes in existing and running programs (development of partnerships, projects' aims, participants, expected results and outcomes, evaluation of results etc.) for raising their effectiveness in democratization and building Civil Society in Belarus.*

## **1. The level of advocacy and lobbying**

### **1.1. General ideas and principles for support should be the following:**

- Recognition of Belarus as traditionally European country with appropriate Christian, cultural, and social heritage as a part of European heritage.

- Recognition of Belarus as a separate region (society) requiring a specific approach to development of democracy transformation and development programs at modern stage of its history.

- International and foreign donors and partners should determine new approach toward a question of ways of interaction with Belarusian authorities. As authorities don't have necessity in any kind of support from European democracies they will be hostile in relation to any kinds of projects and programs aimed at democratization of Belarus. In this case the only steady partners for European organizations having the same aims and priorities are organizations and structures representing pro-democratic part of Belarusian society. According to that ways and types of cooperation as well as rules of organizing it should be defined by these two partners but not by Belarusian authorities.

- The operation modules in Belarus should change. In 2006 after the presidential elections a significant change in Civil Society situation and social and political situation in the country in general will happen. Irrespectively of the elections' results a new strategy development and revision of priorities and format of donors' programs in Belarus are necessary.

- The approach to making strategic goals and objectives of donor organizations and main Civil Society actors in Belarus should be changed in its basis. Organizations of Civil Society in Belarus should have their own scenario of changes, not necessary similar to other countries (like Ukraine, Serbia, Georgia). Appropriate strategy and technology should be formed in Belarus and by Belarusian experts in cooperation with partners who are ready to make investments into democratic development of the country. None of scenario developed only by donor organizations can be implemented in Belarus and, as a consequence, none of projects for development of democracy in Belarus initiated by foreign organizations without proper partnership with Belarusian subjects should be supported.

- It is also necessary to change donors' approach to work with existing organizations of Civil Society. In modern situation it is useless, for instance, to work only with registered and ignore non-registered organizations and vice versa. The main principles for support should make strong input into democratization and Civil Society development in Belarus and keep democratic values inside organization and in their work with target groups.

### **1.2. The conditions of support to Belarusian Civil Society should be based on the following:**

1. Any new actual strategies for Belarus should be developed by obligatory involvement and by support of intellectual resources of Belarus and should be certainly discussed with key (large-scale and influential) Belarusian organizations and networks.

2. It is necessary to strengthen reflexive and systematic approach in program planning and implementation of permanent monitoring and analytical work in Belarus that will let to develop real-time recommendations on resource allocation and changes. Programs should invest not only to development of previously started and implementation of new projects but also to evaluation, research, monitoring, consulting activities in Belarus, development of strategies and coordination of available resources under strategic objectives.

3. International partnership programs should define their priorities in case of conflict of goals (for example, there is some contradiction between partnership development and Civil Society development in Belarus). Partner organizations can not always fulfill a role of change agent for Belarusian society. Requirements and agenda in Belarusian and western societies are different, thus a type and activity fields of organizations ready to international cooperation in Belarus and abroad do not match each other fully.

4. There should be not only long-term projects, but also activities supported in a format of “temporary targeted actions” when the non-democratic system “opens its weak point” (using publication, speech, participation in meeting with authorities, TV casts as “people representative”, using position of expert in suitable situations, etc.).

5. Support to communication sites development is of great importance. In democratic countries mass media, conferences, public debates, churches meetings and etc. work as interface for review and discussion of the situation in society, for presenting authorized opinions and creating ratings. In Belarus it is necessary to find another means for the same purpose, to replace interfaces of totalitarian society by traditional and democratic ones. Just support for newspapers (without creation of distribution system) and creation of independent radio from abroad (as it was proposed by EU) is not a proper solution.

6. To evaluate the programs aimed at Civil Society development in Belarus it is necessary to refuse from using some universal approach but to define specific and clear indicators and criteria basing on real situation in the country. Thus, availability of traditional formal criteria and indicators (procedure adherence, implementation of actions envisaged, following the donor’s or partner’s recommendations, even a number of participants indicated in event documents, etc.) does not give adequate information about activity efficiency of an organization or a project and about positive changes toward democratization.

7. Core support to NGOs is more vital now than support to current activities. Almost all NGOs have problems with premises. State premises are inaccessible for most of independent projects and organizations, doesn’t matter what topic or what goal they have. Office space is extremely expensive. So, it is important to support expenses for infrastructure and sometimes big events (conferences, festivals etc.) outside the country. The next important items for support are travel expenses and fees for people, who are experts and administrators of projects on local (Belarusian) level.

8. Organization of activities within the frames of support program for Belarusian Civil Society should take into account the fact that any development of civil initiatives in Belarus contradicts the policy of the present Belarusian authorities. Legislation, law enforcement practice and unwritten rules of work and interactions between NGOs and the state put any civil initiatives and programs in front of alternative: to be included into implementation of the state policy and be a part of the state budget or fulfill the mission and functions of Civil Society and then do not follow the rules suggested by the authorities. Thus, to be able to implement programs aimed at Civil Society development, donors and partners should have to work within the frames of non-registered (not recognized by the state) projects and very often with not-registered civic initiatives and organizations. They should deny to agree their activities and projects with the authorities and not to support activities being implemented in favor of the authorities.

9. In modern Belarusian situation significant support should be given to initiatives of Belarusian pro-democratic actors aimed at building cross-organizational links of cooperation and platforms of cross-organizational communication and activity. It is extremely important for the society if there will be established sustainable and wide cooperation, communication and partnership between various political parties, analytical groups, independent mass-media, non-governmental organizations and initiatives and cultural figures within Belarus.

10. Activity on developing and saving elements of Civil Society requires raising the level of security (first of all in information field) in modern Belarus otherwise people and organizations holding active civic position can become victims of repressions. A necessity in security system and people protection must be taken into account by both overall strategy and separate projects and programs (using appropriate technologies, training people etc.).

## **2. The level of making changes to existing programs**

1. Most of donor and partnership programs aimed at democratization of Belarus should be revised and redesigned (reprogrammed) in case their format and priorities don't fit well enough to present Belarusian situation or may stimulate strengthening existing power in Belarus instead of process of democratic development.

2. In existing programs for Belarus the main focus should be given to solving a partnership problem. Significant efforts should be spent either on searching and training of partners for solving specific tasks in Belarusian situation or on lobbying changes within the frames of each program (for example, emerging and support to some type of projects without foreign partner, several projects with the same partner etc.).

3. Civil Society organizations that have a long-term strategy on Civil Society development and are able to make situation analysis in Belarus, which proved their independence and adherence to democracy principals and values, should get support for the first turn.

4. Protection and support for NGOs in crisis situations. For example, rent of premises becomes crucial for NGOs, and it is necessary to provide urgent support to: a) NGO legal addresses and office rent; b) private premises for seminars and gatherings that have strategic character for representatives of Belarus Civil Society and based on their initiatives, which have cross project character.

5. Urgent actions to support "boiling" civic initiatives in a form of legal assistance and advising, support in negotiations with decision-makers, operational trips or publications. This interventions should be in-time and flexible.

6. Interesting projects to be included into the program should be selected not only via usual application procedure but also via monitoring and finding initiatives that already exist and require some careful support for development.

7. Social projects are popular direction for cooperation, where it is easier to find a partner and meet program's requirements. But in this case it makes sense to decrease support to projects or programs that have only purely humanitarian or charitable character with orientation on recipients and give priority to social services or actions, based on Civil Society initiatives, which promote the participatory and non-parasitic approach and independent solution of problems (among them we should stimulate building communicative sites for disadvantaged people, including creation of their associations and NGOs, organization of clubs, study circles, other educational events, etc.).

8. According to situation described before it also makes sense to support the following relations with Belarusian authorities: a) building communicative platforms inside social programs and projects (places for meetings as round tables, conferences, participation in other events etc.); b) forcing the authorities to negotiations and changes, growing social agents or/and agents of influence from inside authorities. It means resource-supported activity on finding and creating situations, which force the authorities to negotiations, to recognition of status and empowerment of all types of social agents.

9. Recognizing Belarusian pro-democratic actors as the main partners for cooperation with European actors can also be added by stimulating cross-organizational dialogue within Belarus. Attracting wider circles of socially active citizens is of great importance and priority for achieving some critical mass of democratically oriented population demonstrating appropriate model of behavior, norms, values and ways of communication.

10. During the projects' selection, monitoring and evaluation, consultations with the projects partners it is necessary to pay special attention on ability of this projects to help citizen think critically about what is going on in the country despite of the project character and topic. This could be achieved by educational methods as well as by producing more "image and art" products stimulating critical thinking of citizens.

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