

# Summary

## **Enhancement of cooperation between the public and non-governmental sectors in public policy decision-making**

The aim of the current research conducted by the Civil Society Institute is to identify existing shortcomings that occur during cooperation of the public and non-governmental sectors in public policy and decision-making. The research is used as a basis for suggestions and recommendations for improving the quality of the process for both sectors.

On the one hand, cooperation between the public and non-governmental sectors is defined as the relation between representatives of the state (elected politicians and public sector employees) and citizens (including non-governmental organisations representing their interests). On the other hand, it is understood as a process during which the concerns, needs and suggestions expressed by citizens and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are incorporated into public decision-making processes. Thus cooperation includes mutual communication and the endeavour to arrive at sensible and socially supported decisions.

Experts watching the condition and development of non-governmental organisations in Lithuania emphasise that there is still a lack of a critical mass of citizens actively involved in political life. This means that – intentionally or not – most citizens lack political conscience and are willing to leave decision-making to public employees. The insufficient number of NGOs, formalised groups of citizens actively working with the state, determines citizens having little chances to engage in public decision-making.

One of the main problems contributing to the lack of cooperation between the state and citizens in Lithuania is the sparse use of legally provided means of cooperation and citizen engagement in public decision-making. Other problems preventing cooperation lie beyond formal legal provisions. They encompass the absence of mutual acquaintance of the cooperating sides, lack of cultural tradi-

tions, low motivation and the key role of the human factor, rather than managerial and administrative procedures, in ensuring successful cooperation.

In order to detect the key shortcomings in the cooperation between the public and non-governmental sectors and suggest means for enhancing the process, our researchers have, first, analysed what civic engagement opportunities are provided for in national legislation and other legal documents and what is the formal regulation of the means of engagement. Next, public opinion and marketing research centre „Vilmorus“ has conducted representative surveys of two different audiences: the general public, and public sector employees. The surveys provided quantitative data regarding dispositions towards cooperation, the frequency of using different means of engagement, and obstacles towards successful cooperation. In order to understand subjective attitudes that public sector employees and NGO representatives harbour towards cooperation in public policy-making, 6 focus groups have been conducted. Each group comprised of either NGO representatives or public sector employees from institutions and organisations working in 3 different settings: the capital, a city with more than 100000 residents, and a district municipality town. Additional data was gathered about the availability and usage of e-democracy platforms on official municipal websites and about the presentation of public and civic cooperation in the annual reports of municipalities. All data was gathered from September 2013 till December 2014, thus the findings of the report are valid as per the situation during that time.

Compared to previous studies, this report focuses on the comparative aspects of the problem: both the quantitative surveys and the focus groups have provided data needed for evaluating cooperation opportunities and setbacks from the perspective of both cooperating agents – state representatives, public sector employees on one side, and citizens and NGOs on the other. This enhances our understanding of the similarities and differences of their motivation to cooperate, their knowledge of the underlying processes, previous experiences of cooperation, and obstacles towards more fruitful and more frequent engagement. Qualitative data from the focus groups also allowed to evaluate the situation at both the national and the municipal level, and provided additional insights into the formation of subjective attitudes towards cooperation and the obstacles it encounters on a daily basis. The content analysis of e-democracy platforms on official municipal websites enabled us to compare formally available opportunities for citizen engagement in local policy-making and their actual usage.

Two key tensions demonstrate the necessity to improve current means of cooperation between the public and non-governmental sectors. The first one is the contradiction between the numerous and highly available means of cooperation, and the fact that both citizens and NGOs rarely demonstrate active engagement in them. The second one is the tension between the widely-accepted collective view that it is essential that the state cooperates with its citizens, and the myriad of individual definitions of cooperation and how to engage in it, which sometimes contradict each other. Such civic passivity and hindrances during cooperation may be counteracted by improving the decisive components of the process: increasing the skills and expertise of both sides' representatives, building long-term relationships based on mutual trust, strategically managing information and communication processes, and reducing risk factors that hinder successful cooperation.

Legally established means of cooperation encompass three levels of civic engagement: informing, consulting and actively involving citizens in decision-making. Lithuanian law ensures the right of citizens and NGOs to request information from national and municipal institutions. National and municipal institutions are also obliged to provide the following public information free of charge: the ongoing activities of national and municipal institutions, recently passed laws or public decisions, and decisions to be discussed in upcoming Parliament sittings, executive cabinet meetings, municipal council meetings, as well as various national and municipal-level committees.

Legislation also establishes means for national or municipal institutions to seek public consultations with citizens, and obliges state institutions to consult NGOs on matters related to the non-governmental sector and its interests. Citizens and NGO representatives may also be invited to participate in governmental working groups and committees.

Means of active civic engagement include referendums, citizen-initiated legislative projects, public surveys, joint councils between national or municipal institutions and NGOs, parliamentary and municipal elections, participation in official e-democracy platforms and informal online initiatives.

Thus the legally available means of cooperation are sufficiently varied and numerous to provide a platform for engaging citizens and NGOs in policy-making. However, a sound legal base by itself is not enough to ensure that citizens will feel responsible and desiring to have a say in governmental matters. Accord-

ing to our survey data, 86 % of the general public knows at least one of the available means of influencing public decision-making. Knowledge about traditional means of engagement (more than half of the sample mentioned referendums, demonstrations, petitioning, directly addressing politicians or parties) prevails over knowledge about online means of engagement (various platforms mentioned by 20–40 % of the sample). However, 67 % of those who know at least one means of engagement (accordingly, 54 % of the whole sample) have not actually used any of these tools during the last 12 months. 61 % of the general public have also never searched for information about past or upcoming public policy decisions. Among those who did engage, the most popular means were referendums (21 %), petitioning (17 %) and using official websites of state institutions (11 %).

In stark contrast to the general public, most surveyed public sector employees admitted to knowing more than eight means of cooperation in decision-making. Therefore, at least in theory, their work experience, legal and administrative skills foster a better understanding of the means of civic engagement and their variety. From a practical point of view, 70 % of the employees in the sample have had direct experience with civic engagement at work during the last 12 months, and the most frequently mentioned means include interaction with official institutional websites (29 %), participation in councils and meetings (27 %), referendums (26 %), public consultations (24 %) and petitioning (23 %).

Thus there is a general disparity between the legal availability of the means of cooperation and how well-known and widely used they are among the general public. This may suggest passivity, lack of motivation, lack of information, and relatively high initial resources required to peruse certain means of influence such as referendums or citizen-initiate legislative initiatives.

Most of the laws pertaining to cooperation are advisory, rather than obligatory. Thus their implementation depends highly on the discretion, motivation and initiative of the public sector employees responsible for engaging citizens in decision-making at their institutions. Different institutions have different strategies of encouraging civic engagement, implementing tools to facilitate cooperation, promoting their use, and publicise ongoing activities. This, in turn, results in vastly different outcomes across institutions.

Our surveys show that there is a widely spread agreement among both the general public and public sector employees that cooperation of state institutions

with citizens and NGOs is essential during public decision-making. Subsequent qualitative research also showed that a frequently mentioned benefit of cooperation is the opportunity to combine complimentary traits characteristic of the two sides: the legal and administrative competences of public sector employees, and subject-specific knowledge and everyday experience of citizens and NGOs.

However, there is no shared understanding of how to define cooperation, what forms cooperation should take, and what the roles of cooperating sides should be. Both public sector employees and NGO representatives are prone to seeing themselves as leading experts and the other side as the supporting agent implementing the decisions. The indifference or incompetence of the other side is among the most frequently mentioned setbacks for successful cooperation.

The general public tends to disagree with the statement that national and municipal institutions pay heed to civic initiatives and public opinion. Public sector employees and the general public similarly evaluate national and municipal institutions as not paying heed to civic initiatives and public opinion. Thus both groups express a reserved view of the current state of cooperation between the public sector and civil society.

Since, as already mentioned, most of the respondents from the general public have not directly engaged in public decision-making, it is likely that their opinion is based on bias and stereotypes rather than direct personal experience. A vicious circle: citizens do not believe cooperation with the public sector will bring desired results and avoid engagement, precluding any positive engagement which would help change this stance. When asked about the reasons for not taking part in public decision-making, those who have not engaged in any means of cooperation mentioned the disbelief that engagement may have an impact (30 %), lack of knowledge (18 %), lack of interest (16 %), lack of time (12 %), trust in NGOs (9 %), trust in decisions made by state institutions by themselves (5 %). There is a weak statistical association between these reasons and the respondents' age. Accordingly, national and municipal institutions may address these issues to improve the frequency and degree of civic engagement: find appropriate channels for disseminating knowledge and skills among the youth, provide less time-consuming means of engagement for those in the workforce, and clearly communicate real-life examples of successful cooperation to the more pessimistic elderly.

Those among the general public who have used at least one means of cooperation with state institutions are divided into three roughly equivalent groups:

those whose experience was successful (proposals were implemented or partially implemented), those whose experience was unsuccessful (proposals were ignored without explanation), and those who do not know the outcome of their proposals or reasons were provided for not implementing them. A clear model of responding to civic involvement could serve to improve institutional image: successful experiences should be publicised, while those whose proposals are not implemented should receive detailed feedback about the reasons for rejection. Finally, those who do not follow the progress of their proposal should be proactively informed and motivated to show interest in the process.

Statistical analysis shows that there are no significant associations that would allow tying respondents' attitudes towards state institutions and engagement in decision-making to their socio-demographic characteristics. Qualitative focus groups provided insight about subjective factors and individual experiences which guide cooperation between the public and non-governmental sectors and reveal the reasons behind afore-mentioned tensions: why engagement is low despite numerous means of participating in public decision-making and a prevailing view of cooperation as a valuable civic process.

Cooperation of the public and non-governmental sectors currently does not occur as a strategically planned process, and state institutions rarely share best practices and working examples among themselves. Therefore success is highly dependent on the particular situation: the problem, the context, the people involved. Flexible problem-solving approaches may be possible in some institutions and unacceptable in others. Political support is required for applying flexibility, easing bureaucratic burdens and fostering an organisational culture geared towards civic engagement. The findings based on focus group data imply that there is a number of key directions along which the cooperation of public and non-governmental sectors should be improved: building mutual trust, negotiating expectations, resolving conflicting interests, ensuring continuity, increasing the effectiveness of information dissemination and communication, eliminating process-related obstacles and reducing the influence of the human factor.

Representatives of public institutions and NGOs provided a contested view of each other as potential partners in public decision-making. On the one hand, both sides wish to be appreciated as equals involved in a long-term dialogue and active cooperation. On the other hand, both suggest that the other side lacks goodwill and attention, which springs from mutually biased points of view and implicit expectations of how the other side should be operating. There are



persistent stereotypes that national and municipal institutions are inefficient bureaucratic establishments, while NGOs are unreliable enterprises centred on gaining access to financial state resources. In addition, each side is inclined to shift the responsibility for successful cooperation, as well as blame for less successful endeavours, towards the other. All of these factors contribute to mutual mistrust and a hesitant approach to cooperation.

Therefore, both sides should clearly communicate their intentions and concentrate on building and maintaining a good reputation, with a track record of socially beneficial activities, attendance of joint events, and motivated vision and mission statements. State institutions should diminish the influence of political events, such as elections, or personal ties between politicians and NGOs on the outcomes of decision-making. Before cooperating on specific projects both sides need to reconcile their expectations about the process, establish mutual rapport, and discuss shared interests and desired results. Initially differing views need not be an obstacle towards cooperation, but they have to be viewed as a necessary part of the process that is solved by conscious deliberation.

Conscious deliberation should also be applied to solve conflicts of interest which may arise at any stage of public decision-making: among several state institutions; among a state institution and the NGO or active citizen it is cooperating with; among several NGOs with stakes in the same decision; among independent and governmentally-established NGOs. Rather than brushing them aside or making a decision single-mindedly, a state institution should act to moderate the conflict and improve the decision by reconciling and incorporating as many different perspectives as possible. Likewise, NGOs and active citizens should also act with acceptance towards those with different agendas. A useful strategy may be participation in umbrella organisations which have a greater potential of influencing higher-level decision-making and gaining the trust of state institutions. All institutions, organisations and individuals partaking in cooperation should be prepared that their view of the problem and its solution may change throughout the decision-making process.

In general, citizens and NGOs are experts in specific subject areas and providers of information, while public sector employees are experts in legal and administrative matters. Ideally, though, NGO representatives would understand the basic workings of state institutions and law, while public sector employees would understand the main operating principles of the non-governmental sec-

tor and possess basic knowledge of the subject area. This would shorten the time required for decision-making, help build a professional relationship and facilitate mutual understanding. Educational programmes to enhance the skills of public sector and NGO representatives should be enacted regularly, especially ones geared at representatives of both sectors at once, as well as networking events and subject-area specific conferences.

The fact that cooperation of the public and non-governmental sectors only gives significant results in the long term should be seen as part of the process, rather than a detriment. Currently state institutions have a better infrastructure and human as well as financial resources than the majority of actors from the non-governmental sector. Thus they should accept the responsibility to invest more effort at the initial stages of cooperation, and to instil an internal organisational culture of constant cooperation instead of the opportunistic approaches that are applied currently. For example, dedicated employees may be responsible for constantly monitoring the non-governmental sector for contact and collaboration opportunities, and provide support to colleagues who would use this information in practice; politicians should be motivated to show an interest in cooperation during the course of their daily activities.

Continuity of cooperation has to be ensured in two respects. First, a citizen or NGO engaging in public decision-making should not only put forward propositions or problems, but also participate throughout deliberation and implementation of solutions. Second, such engagement should not be a one-time affair: rather, the same group of citizens or NGOs should regularly contribute to public decision-making. Ensuring continuous cooperation should also involve adjusting the speed of public decision-making: prolonged, interrupted decision-making with no visible results reduces citizens' motivation to engage, whereas if it is too hasty, citizens and NGOs do not have enough time to become acquainted with the specifics of the problem and properly contribute.

Information and communication is a significant area where two problems should be addressed for both sectors. First, there is a lack of information and skills to acquire information about relevant issues. Second, the quality, amount, timing and channels for disseminating information must be improved.

National and municipal institutions are frequently missing information about NGOs operating in their area of interest or geographical vicinity, specific social and infrastructural problems encountered by citizens and NGOs, and pre-



vious achievements as well as best practices in the field of civic cooperation. NGOs and citizens, on the other hand, encounter a lack of information about specific cooperation opportunities, upcoming events and meetings, changes in legislation, the amount and added value of successful cooperation projects. They also experience difficulties with the circulation of information while working with several state institutions at once.

Our content analysis of official municipal websites shows that while many of them provide the necessary technological means for finding the latest decisions, meeting agendas and e-democracy tools, active use of such tools by citizens, for example, reporting municipal problems on a map or participating in surveys, is a rare case. Keeping in mind that most members of the general public did not enumerate more than a few means of cooperation, and there was a lower percentage of those who were familiar with e-democracy tools, more effort should be put into proper marketing of these opportunities. On many municipal websites, the bulk of the news content is made up of past, rather than upcoming events, and they do not maintain a visible presence on social networking sites such as Facebook. State institutions would benefit from streamlining communication channels towards the needs of different audiences, including the use of social networking sites, and provide information about upcoming events and projects early enough for them to reach the target audience. Likewise, NGOs and active citizen groups should also ensure that their activities have an active media presence.

To eliminate process-related obstacles towards more successful and frequent cooperation, state institutions should first reorient the concerns of engaged citizens and NGOs from day-to-day material matters towards more ambitious goals with a chance of altering the social environment. However, such agendas then require a specific approach: breaking large problems into smaller steps, setting intermediate goals, evaluating their success, and re-framing the end goal accordingly. On the whole, citizens and NGOs engaged in public decision-making should be motivated to overcome challenges and solve problems rather than lodge complaints. State institutions would benefit from establishing internal evaluation criteria for citizen involvement, for instance, the amount of grassroots proposals that have been considered and implemented during a given amount of time, or metrics for evaluating the success of each instance of co-

operation. Such criteria would enable public sector employees to see their work in perspective and formulate strategic goals for citizen engagement.

The human factor was a recurring theme of all focus groups. It denotes that the success or failure of citizen engagement ultimately depends on the personalities involved: their competence, dedication and exerted effort. In cases when a well-meaning employee leaves a state institution or NGO, previously successful cooperation may cease, and vice versa, it may improve with the introduction of a motivated employee. Representatives of both sectors depend heavily on their personal social connections when seeking help or support for their cause. While seemingly benign in the short term, such dependence on personalities works to the detriment of cooperation in the long term, as it does not ensure continuity and make it difficult for new players to become involved. To reduce this factor, both state institutions and non-governmental organisations should promote knowledge transfer across employees, create organisation-wide databases of contacts and other important information and train new employees about the specifics of cooperation. Such organisational memory would ensure that a change of human resources will not have a lasting effect on cooperation and engagement.