

NGOs IN LITHUANIA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:  
CHALLENGES, CONSEQUENCES AND OPPORTUNITIES

OVERVIEW

OPEN LITHUANIA FOUNDATION

23.04.2020

The overview is based on a survey conducted on 1-15 April 2020. Responses were received from 166 Lithuanian NGOs. The survey is an adapted version of the Civil Society Development Foundation (Romania) questionnaire for EEA and Norway Grants Active Citizens Fund operators.

## Content

1. Situation analysis
2. The impact of COVID-19 on NGOs, overview of survey results
  - a) Methodological specifications
  - b) NGO target groups
  - c) Challenges and problems
  - d) Suggested solutions and measures that may mitigate the consequences of COVID-19 for the NGO sector
3. New opportunities and lessons for the future
4. Recommendations and suggestions

Annex 1

## 1. Situation analysis and assumptions for the NGO survey

- › Lithuanian NGOs and CSOs provide social, psychological, legal and other public services, including informal education, and offer public policy proposals. Like business enterprises, NGOs have obligations to third parties and full-time staff. Some NGOs carry out limited commercial activities in order to ensure the sustainability of their organization and the ability to provide services for the public good.
- › The majority of CSOs work with vulnerable or at-risk groups when public authorities cannot take care of them for various reasons. This was evidenced during the COVID-19 crisis in Lithuania: during this pandemic, CSOs mobilized volunteers and raised funds. Despite the risk, they continued to provide social and health maintenance services.
- › Many NGOs could not properly operate or continue their activities after the quarantine was imposed in March 2020.
- › The Civil Society Development Foundation of Romania urged the Open Lithuania Foundation and its partners, as well as 14 other country operators of Active Citizens Funds in other European countries, to prepare and conduct a survey of NGOs. The survey was to focus on the situation of NGOs during the COVID-19 pandemic and its threats and consequences for the non-governmental sector. (The Active Citizens Funds are financed by the EEA and Norway Grants Financial Mechanism.)
- › The summarized survey data will be presented to national government decision-makers responsible for policies affecting NGOs and local communities.
- › The survey data and recommendations will be presented to the EEA and Norway Grants Financial Mechanism administering agency, as well as to Active Citizens Fund operators in other beneficiary states in Europe. The survey results will also be made available to other donor funds in Lithuania.
- › The main objective of this survey is to identify the challenges experienced by civil society organizations as equal social partners and economic subjects during the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to prepare a package of support measures analogous or similar to those intended for small and medium businesses (subsidies, guarantees, tax relief, etc.). Also, this survey should encourage other donor organizations to consider more flexible conditions and requirements to ensure project implementation.
- › On 8 April 2020, NGOs and scholars published their public position and suggestions regarding the social effects of the pandemic, and the Open Lithuania Foundation unequivocally endorses it. Moreover, some of these recommendations and proposals were confirmed by the NGOs that participated in the survey. This document concludes with systematized recommendations and updated suggestions for strengthening NGOs and the people working in the sector, in order to promote the general welfare.

## 2. COVID-19's impact on the NGO sector: an overview of survey results

### a) Methodological specifications

The questionnaire was adapted for the Lithuanian context and published in social media on the page of a group unifying Lithuanian NGOs. It was also sent directly to the email addresses of NGOs and disseminated to other NGO-related platforms. By disseminating the questionnaire broadly, the Open Lithuania Foundation was seeking to gather data about the topical challenges and problems faced by local organizations.

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The questionnaire was filled out by 166 organizations / more than a half of them (51,6%) work in the social services, health, and education fields / 8 organizations in human rights/ 4 in advocacy /culture, democracy strengthening, sports/ more than 20 different fields represented in total.

48% of organizations have 6 staff or fewer (volunteers included) / 46% of organizations have more than 6 employees / 45% of organizations had average income over the last 3 years of more than 30 thousand euros / 44% of organizations had average income for the last 3 years of less than 30 thousand euros.

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The geographic distribution of respondents is also broad, although the majority of respondents were from the main cities of Lithuania (Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipėda); some respondents were from Panevėžys and Šiauliai as well as at least one organization each from Alytus, Šilalė, Mažeikiai, Telšiai, Zarasai, Varėna, Tauragė, Rietavas, Elektrėnai, Visaginas, Plungė, Raseiniai.

### b) NGO target groups

The respondents were asked what target groups that they serve will be most affected by the COVID-19 outbreak in the coming 6 months.

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The survey results show that the outbreak will most severely affect disabled people (13%) / elderly (13%), children and youth (6% each / people with various pre-existing conditions (10%), people with addictions/ families with children/ single parents/ divorced families or families with one of the parents in emigration as well as women suffering domestic violence.

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Frequently the respondents mentioned the tense emotional state of their target group. A few respondents also mentioned national minorities as an affected group of the economic crisis caused by COVID-19, for it could be

difficult for them to adjust to new conditions. Further, not only individuals will be affected, but so will the communities as a whole, as well as NGOs themselves and their staff (8%).

*“Elderly people as well as adults of various ages who have multiple sclerosis (MS), our main beneficiaries, are treated with immunosuppressive medications so they are in a high-risk group. Doctors are recommending postponing treatment, but without it the disease may progress. People with MS are often depressive, even having suicidal thoughts. The social distancing and the general tension resulting from COVID-19 serve to worsen the psychological and physical health of the patients.”*

*“Convicted persons, schoolchildren, the elderly, and public sector workers are all vulnerable groups that we serve by providing training and cultural services specifically targeted to their needs.”*

*“The victims of domestic violence and their family members, abusers and people experiencing crises.”*

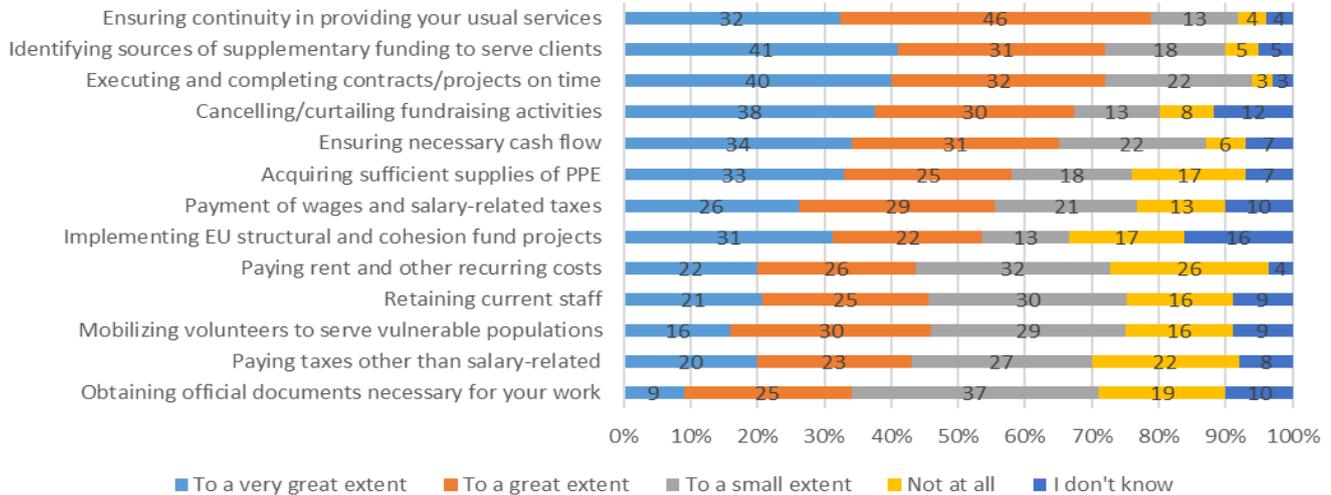
*“My NGO is working with transparency and public policy. It is already clear that the information shared with society is limited, the transparency of the public sector suffers, and the risk of human rights violations is increasing by using the COVID-19 crisis as an excuse.”*

### c) Challenges and problems

86,1% of survey respondents answered that their organization’s daily activities will be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic to a great or very great extent.

The 166 organizations that participated in the survey named a variety of challenges that they face in their regular activities due to the pandemic and quarantine as well as uncertain future prospects.

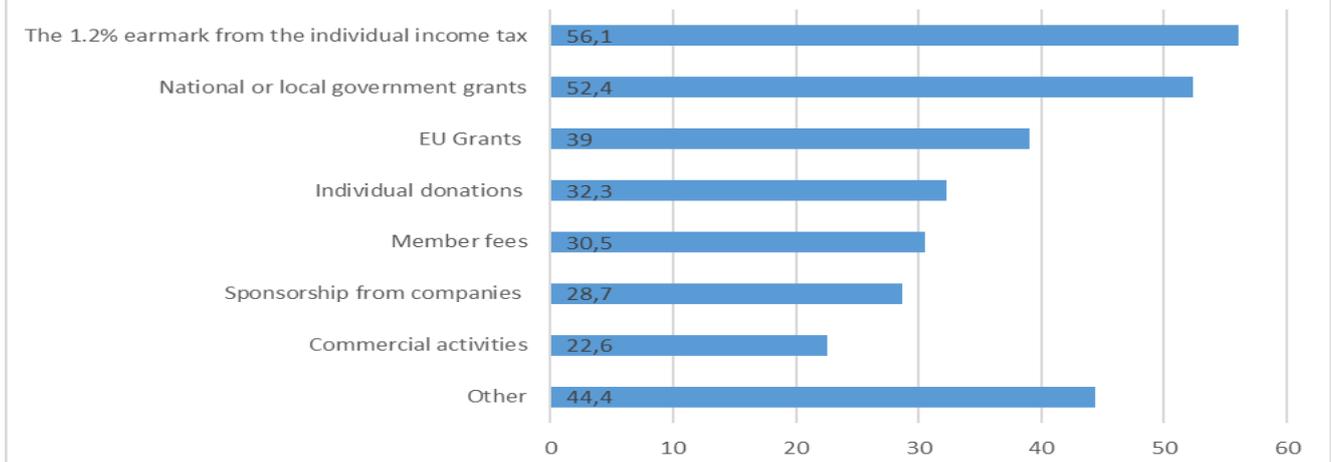
### Over the next six months, to what extent do you expect your organization to face these problems: %



The biggest concern and challenge to the non-governmental sector is ensuring continuity in the provision of their regular services to the organization's target groups (129). This is related to finding supplementary funding for additional support to regular target groups (118), cancellation or postponement of fundraising campaigns (119), and cash-flow control (105).

More than half (96) of the NGO representatives participating in the survey face the problem of acquiring personal protective equipment (PPE), important when providing social services to vulnerable groups or having direct contact with beneficiaries. Also, respondents mentioned the need for fast testing even though organizations are not designated a priority for testing.

### Name your top three funding sources from the list below, %



Almost half (77) of respondents are going to have serious problems retaining their current staff and paying wages and salary-related taxes.

Besides the standard questions, NGO representatives were asked to answer what additional challenges resulting from the COVID-19 outbreak they face over the short and long term.

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The majority answered that the biggest problem is cancelled or curtailed activities. The second most significant problem is a cut-off or delay in cash flow. The respondents often mentioned a shortage of PPE, the challenge of paying salaries, and issues related to remote work. Some of the respondents noted that their target groups sometimes lack the skills necessary to use digital tools.

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Some more specific problems also emerged in the survey, such as the lack of access to information and insufficient consideration given to human rights.

Some NGO representatives also mentioned that innovative initiatives implemented in some municipalities that were meant to solve problems of civic participation (e.g., implementing a participatory budget), or of ecology and environmental protection, are postponed for an unlimited time as all attention is directed to managing the pandemic crisis.

*“We lack computers; it is hard to communicate with children and families because not everyone has access to the internet; organizing meals for children; distributing food packages.”*

*“Clients are ill prepared for remote work. The organization is not strong enough in IT to conduct online education.”*

*“As the world concerns itself with the pandemic crisis, human rights are no longer a priority – public authorities and experts are less likely to care about these problems as they deal with the consequences of the crisis.”*

*“We cannot retain staff as we do not have enough money to pay salaries.”*

*“Unlike the situation in the business and other sectors, the Government does not ensure salary payment for those put on involuntary leave in NGOs or EU-financed projects.”*

*“It is hard to get protective equipment, while food and medication needs to be delivered to people’s homes.”*

*“All diabetics, young and old, are in the group of greater risk. Most elderly people with diabetes have had heart surgeries, all have cardiovascular disorders. Younger members and children usually have weakened immunity. We all are simply afraid and avoiding any contacts”*

*“The organization is dependent to very great extent on project grants from EU or other funds. If spending priorities shift from funding NGOs to more immediate needs, we could have serious problems in surviving as an organization, i.e., in conducting human rights monitoring, which is still so necessary during this pandemic.”*

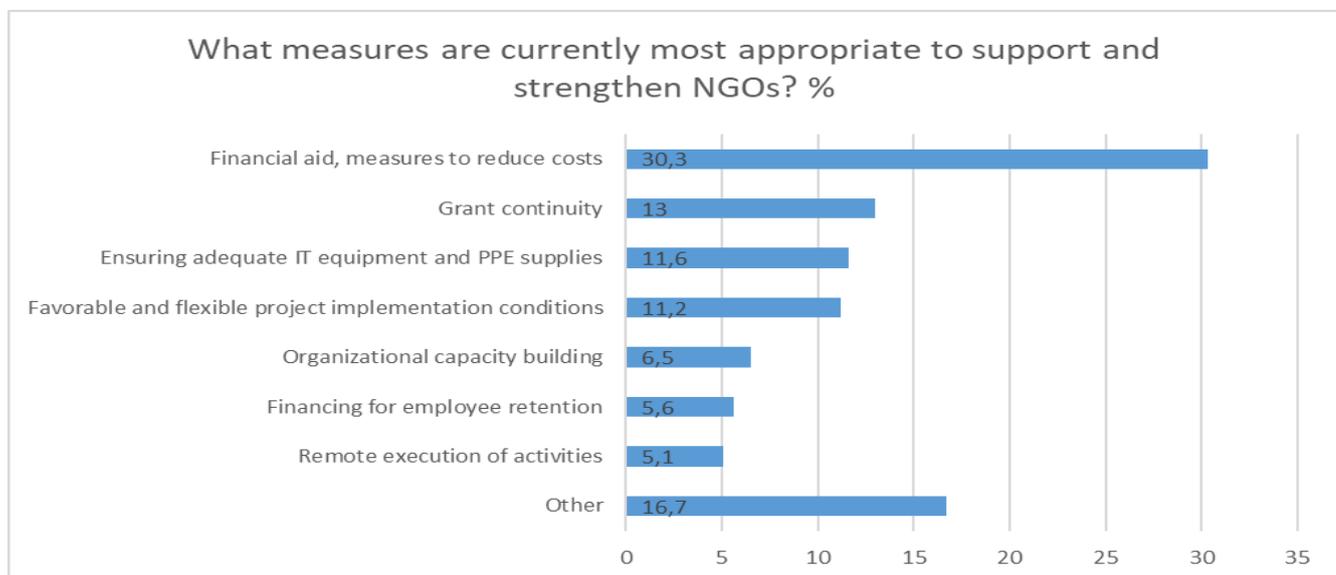
*“Many consumer rights violations and weakened possibilities to defend it.”*

*“Contact activities with people at risk. We have no chance to do it remotely because these people don’t have internet or do not know how to use it. Interrupted activity and staff retainment. In other words, our NGO may go under, as it is impossible to support the employees.”*

*“We cannot accept new people to our rehab program. The worst is that we don’t have anywhere to direct them. The Addiction Center is closed, so detoxification and the Minnesota program are unavailable.”*

#### d) Suggested solutions and measures that may mitigate the consequences of COVID-19 for the NGO sector

NGOs suggested compulsory additional measures and solutions that could mitigate the difficulties of NGOs operating in various fields as well as ensure that the needs of their target groups during this tense period are met. NGOs proposed actions for business organizations, designated programs, and funds and agencies distributing support.



When asked what measures would be suitable to support NGOs' activities and strengthen them, one third of the respondents (30,3%) named financial support as the main remedy, with other financial measures to reduce their costs and guarantee liquidity.

Some respondents (6,5%) also drew attention to the fact that their organization lacked skills to deal with a crisis situation, so organizational capacity building would be an appropriate measure.

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Several NGO representatives (13%) are worried that difficulties implementing projects as planned because of the quarantine will lead to interrupted financing, so maintaining consistent financing would be a good way to help them.

Some NGOs that work directly with their clients lack such means as the equipment to work from home as well as protective equipment (masks, disinfectant, gloves). Hence, it would be appropriate to supply those NGOs that need to have physical contact with their target groups to provide social, health or educational services.

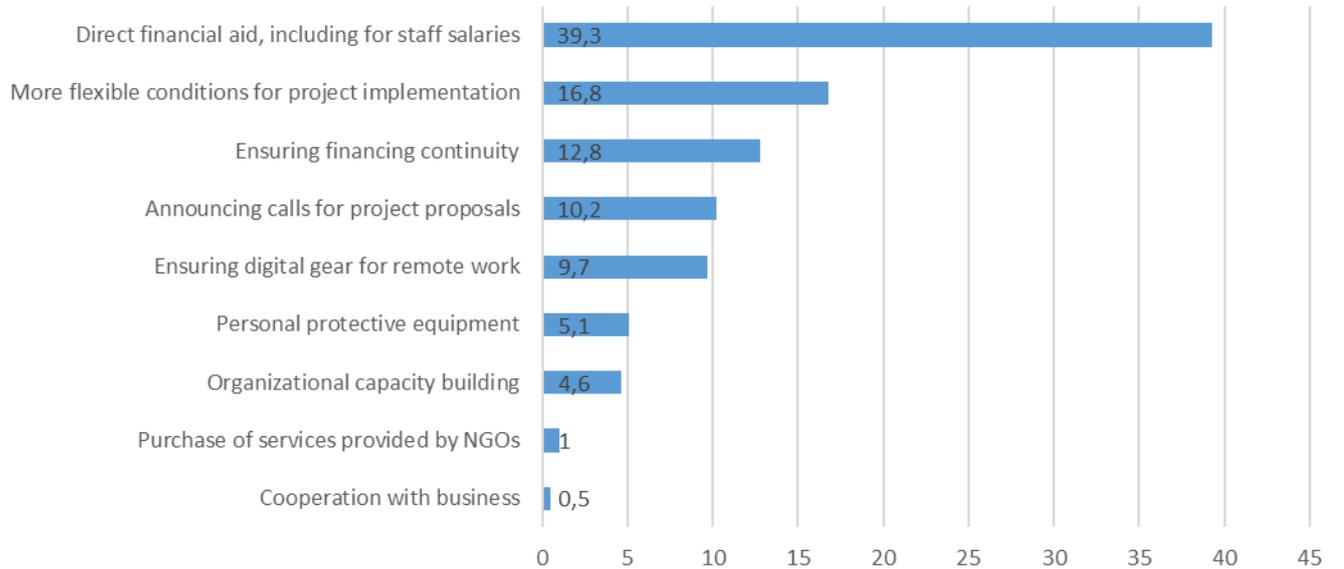
Moreover, respondents said that to maintain their organizations it would be useful to receive some kind of tax relief or at least financial aid for partial salary payments during employees' involuntary leave periods.

Also, several respondents identified the need for timely information for the non-governmental sector from various institutions (State Tax Inspectorate, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Social Security and Labour, etc.). The information would not only make managing an organization easier, but also could reduce the fears and worries that are prevalent in NGOs and communities providing services for vulnerable people.

Some respondents do not have the technical ability to work remotely because they or their target groups lack needed technical equipment.

When asked how business or institutional donors (ESFA, EEA and Norway Grants) could help to reduce the negative effect of COVID-19 for NGO functioning, a plurality (39,3%) answered that any financial support would be appreciated, including support for administrative expenditures.

## How can the business sector and institutional donors contribute to reducing the negative effects of the pandemic on NGO functioning? %



16,8% of NGO representatives commented that institutional donors could take into account the current situation and have a more flexible attitude towards the implementation of projects, allowing the adaptation of some activities to the current situation, changing them to remote activities, reducing the share of co-financing, and relieving bureaucratic and administrative requirements. In addition, NGO representatives believe that there could be more calls for project proposals rather than fewer.

When naming the challenges, NGO representatives included the lack of skills and competences of their own workers and their clients, the shortage of IT equipment and necessary digital tools. As a solution, they proposed that NGOs be allowed to acquire the necessary computer equipment and training.

*“The project financing is unclear or unfavorable. ESF and cohesion funds are late with answers to our questions about salaries and the process of project implementation; involuntary leave is unpaid; the use of funds for purposes other than was originally intended is not allowed (we need an online app that we are not able to purchase).”*

*“Reductions or moratoriums on rent and utilities, municipal taxes.”*

*“Grants and core financing.”*

*“Subsidize salaries during involuntary leaves; not apply the same activity standards; allow flexible work with the target groups; allow contactless internet activities (lectures, webinars) in place of direct contact; not charge rent for premises as we are not able to use them during the quarantine; do not form new organizations to replace current NGOs (it is better to allow experienced current NGOs to mobilize volunteers instead of founding new municipal organizations); allocate funds to develop digital tools.”*

*“The same support mechanisms business enterprises enjoy could be adapted for NGOs (benefits for the staff, tax payment postponement, financial injections, etc.).”*

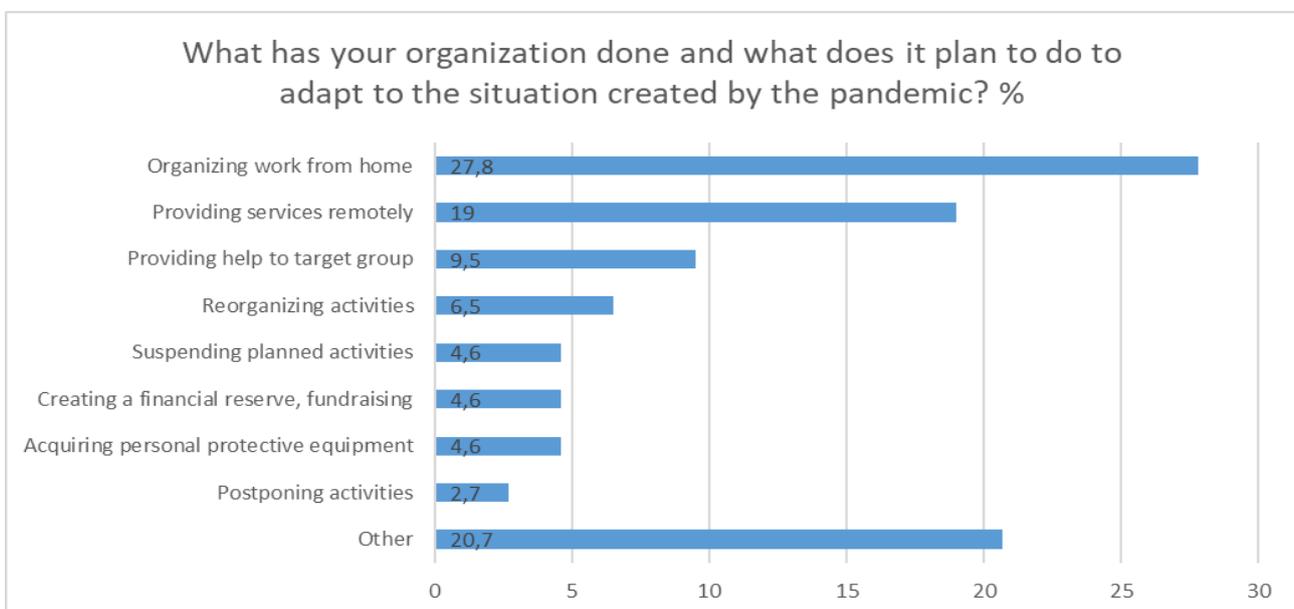
*“The business sector could provide more financial support for the non-governmental sector, while institutional donors could involve NGOs together with academic and research organizations in preparing an economic recovery plan for the country, including plans for strengthening civic responsibility in the wake of the damage caused by COVID-19 and its potential future harm. NGOs could and should become the main channel of public health strategy popularization and promote active public inclusion.”*

### 3. New opportunities and lessons for the future

As organizations tried to reduce or eliminate the consequences of the pandemic crisis, they adapted to new work conditions

When organizations were asked what they had done so far and what actions they planned to take to adapt and respond to the new situation resulting from the pandemic, respondents (27,8%) most often answered that their organization started working from home. A considerable number of respondents said that they changed the nature of their work in a way that they could provide services to their target groups remotely.

In addition, respondents mentioned that they need to re-think their ongoing activities and change their work schedule. Around 4,6% of NGO representatives said that they had to stop or terminate their activities because it was impossible to convert them into remote activities.



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NGO representatives also noted some positive consequences of the pandemic. Some representatives are convinced that certain social groups working in the field of education are improving their IT skills, which will serve them in good stead later in their work. In the face of this worldwide pandemic NGOs have an opportunity to strengthen their role in society by proving to public authorities, business and other social partners that the non-governmental sector is capable of providing public services successfully.

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*“The NGO sector is not involved enough in managing the COVID-19 crisis. The state apparatus reserves a great number of functions for itself instead of delegating them to NGOs. Effectively redistributing and coordinating tasks and engaging NGOs in the management of the crisis could be beneficial not only to the NGO sector but also to the whole country. However, I doubt that the government will pay enough attention to the non-governmental sector.”*

#### 4. Recommendations and suggestions

Taking into account the data of the survey as well as the public position paper of the NGOs and scholars on the social consequences of COVID-19 (hereinafter, the Position), we are inviting responsible institutions to prepare an action and recovery plan to benefit NGOs, including:

##### A. Recommendations of the Position:

- › Ensure that those NGOs where employees are providing contact services during quarantine can also receive additional compensation for the risk experienced during quarantine.
- › Considering the need, involve local NGOs that are providing social services in the municipalities.
- › Do not cancel already planned social services grant programs. We view as a negative step the current intent of the Ministry of Social Security and Labour and the Ministry of Finance to terminate funding for the program of complex services to families in 12 municipalities from July and not to expand services in the remaining municipalities in the future.
- › Ensure the supply of protective equipment (gloves, masks, disinfectant, etc.) to social and attended care workers in the non-governmental sector as well as their obligatory testing.

##### B. Recommendations from the survey:

- › Set a procedure for compensating the downtime of NGOs or provide for a mechanism of institutional financial support (e.g., NGO fund).
- › Prepare recommendations for EU and other institutions allocating grants concerning more flexible project implementation, e.g., extending the time for project implementation, allowing saving and carrying over project funds, allowing changes of some activities by moving them to virtual space or substituting other activities adapted to the current situation.
- › Reduce or eliminate the co-financing requirement in granting mechanisms; look for additional financing measures to cover the co-financed share in the projects of the European Commission.
- › Provide important and useful information intended for the non-governmental sector in a timely manner.
- › Involve NGOs in crisis management.



implementation in running contracts/projects					
9. Implementation of projects funded through EU structural and cohesion funds	4	3	2	1	0
10. Reaching supplementary funding for additional support for your regular target groups	4	3	2	1	0
11. Cancelling/ adjourning fundraising activities/ events/ campaigns	4	3	2	1	0
12. Obtaining official documents necessary for the good functioning of the organisation or for signing contracts/ responding to due diligence procedures (e.g. certificates, notarised declarations, etc.)	4	3	2	1	0
13. Acquiring sufficient supplies of PPE	4	3	2	1	0

## II. Exploring possible support options

**Q5. What measures do you consider should be taken in order to support the NGOs activities (either on short or long term)?**

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**Q6. What additional measures do you consider are needed to support and strengthen the activities of NGOs in view of the challenges identified in question 4?**

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**Q7. How can the business sector and/ or the institutional donors (EEA & Norway Grants, European Union, other donors) contribute to diminishing the negative effects of COVID-19 on the NGOs functioning?**

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**Q8. What has your organization done and what does it plan to do to adapt to the situation created by the pandemic?**

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**Q9. Please mention the measures and actions you took so far, and that you think could be followed by other organisations, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.**

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## III. Information on your organisation

**Q10. Name of the organisation (optional, leaving it to the one filling in the questionnaire)**

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**Q11a. The organisation you represent:**

1. Has up to 6 employees and volunteers	2. Has more than 6 employees and volunteers	0. I can't say
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**Q11b. The average income of organisation you represent is:**

1. The average income for the last 3 years is below Eur30 000	2. The average income for the last 3 years is above Eur30 000	0. I can't say
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**Q12. Name your top three funding sources from the list below:**

1. Member fees
2. Individual donations
3. 1,2 % earmark from the individual income tax
4. Sponsorship from companies
5. EU Grants
6. National or local government grants
7. Other international institutions grants
8. Any other dotations (national or international funds)
9. Commercial activities
10. Other

**Q13. Which is your organisations' main field of activity:**

1. Social and Health
2. Education
3. Human rights
4. Advocation and watchdog
5. Cultural

6. Sport
7. Democracy development / Civic Activism
8. Environment / Ecology
9. Support and Charity
10. Other

**Q14. Respondent name (optional)**

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**Q15. Email (optional)**

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**Q16. Any other comments/ suggestions/ urgent needs or matters you wish to address:**

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