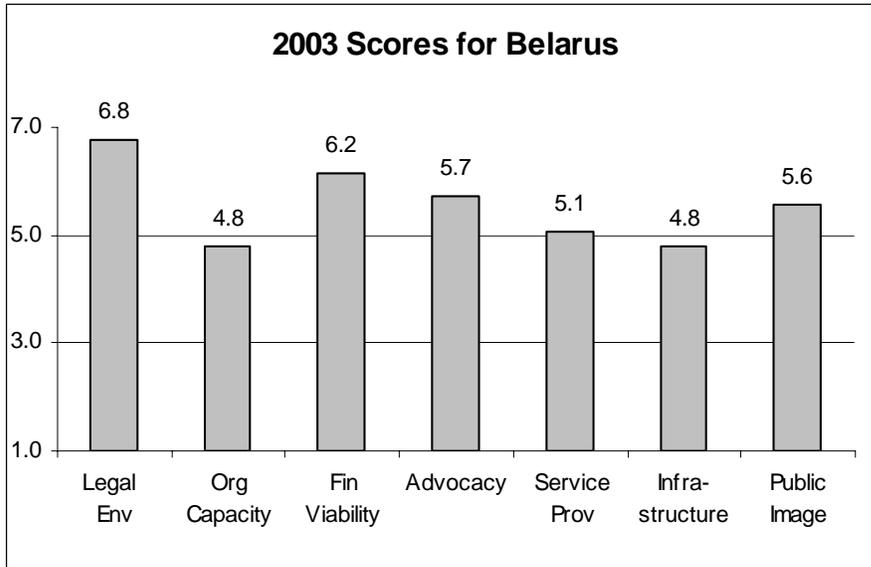


BELARUS



Capital:
Minsk

Polity:
Presidential

Population:
9,900,000

GDP per capita (PPP): \$7,544

NGO SUSTAINABILITY: 5.6

The year was notable for massive government pressure on the structures of civil society: many organizations experienced administrative

NGO SUSTAINABILITY	
2003	5.6
2002	5.3
2001	5.5
2000	5.7

pressure or were closed. As a result the Index score dropped close to Belarus' previous 2000 score. The laws are ambivalent and often disregarded; NGOs' attempts to defend their rights in court usually yield no positive outcome. Along with the loss of independent NGOs, the authorities continued to assist in the creation of quasi-NGOs and continued to render all sorts of support to state-controlled public

organizations. The increased government-led repression mobilized and united many NGOs and others were forced to practice harsh internal censorship. In general, the situation in the third sector has considerably worsened. By removing key resource centers and human rights NGOs, the authorities are trying to deprive many others of the necessary assistance and support. NGOs which are implementing social projects also became targets of administrative pressure. It is increasingly difficult for NGOs to work within the legal framework and to find sources of financing. Major mass media are controlled by the authorities and prevent NGOs' access to mass media channels.

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT: 6.8

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT	
2003	6.8
2002	6.5
2001	7.0
2000	7.0

The inconsistency of NGO-related laws permitted state authorities to use strong levers of influence on the third sector. Yet a larger problem is legal practice: the authorities often disregard legislation; the number of bureaucratic and administrative obstacles is growing. The authorities initiated a crackdown early in 2003 on the third sector: dozens of leading NGOs and resource centers received numerous written warnings from the Ministry of Justice or the court ordered them closed. There were many cases of NGOs closed down on minor pretexts related to internal procedures and documents of organizations (to the extent of punishing for the use of abbreviations in internal documents and lack of inverted commas in the title of an organization).

At the same time, registration of new membership-based NGOs, which was very slow in the previous years due to bureaucratic delays by the registering bodies in violation of the legislation, now became often practically impossible. Registration of NGOs remained an expensive procedure. Since the state authorities can interpret any activity of independent NGOs as political, many organizations resort to self-censorship, but even this does not guarantee them security and survival.

The state actively assisted the formation and development of state-controlled public associations. State-controlled NGOs receive considerable administrative, moral, and financial support from the state authorities. Presidential Edict #335 dated July 30, 2003 "On Republican State-Public Associations" provides legal grounds for the creation of more favorable conditions for the activity of some non-commercial

organizations whose purpose is to "implement the tasks important for the state."

There are organizations and independent consultants who render qualified legal support to NGOs, although their number is insufficient for providing legal support to all NGOs that need it. Such support includes systematic monitoring and analysis of legislation, rendering of a wide array of legal consultations and information support, as well as representing NGOs in court. However, such organizations became targets of persecution by the authorities themselves, along with all human rights NGOs. In addition to this, Presidential Edict No.13 dated April 15, 2003 "On some aspects of civil legal procedures" deprived human rights NGOs of the right to represent interests of members of other organizations in court. Attempts by NGOs to defend their interests in court often yielded little result, and the authorities do not change their decisions.

Local grants and donations are not treated as income and are thus exempt from income tax. However, the tax exemption procedure for foreign gratuitous aid remains complex, centralized, and closed for the public. Presidential Edict No.460 "On international technical assistance provided to the Republic of Belarus" dated October 22, 2003 is supposed to improve this situation, but its effectiveness can be overshadowed by other administrative impediments. Moreover, many provisions in the Edict are worded in an ambiguous manner and allow for multiple interpretations.

While NGOs are permitted to engage in economic activities that are authorized under their organizational statute, these activities are subject to the same tax rates and regulations as for-profit companies. Considering NGOs' poor business management skills and unfavorable business

climate, in most cases NGOs have neither the stimuli nor the skills to carry out for-profit activity. Procurement procedures in

the country are designed only for goods and services produced by commercial entities.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY: 4.8

An increasing number of NGOs understand the importance of constituency building. However, this task is complicated by heterogenic and sporadic character of

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY	
2003	4.8
2002	4.7
2001	4.8
2000	5.0

their projects which are often aimed at different target groups and have relatively short life cycle. The survival tactic forces NGOs to look for “support groups” also outside of their constituency. Strategic planning is becoming an active tool for an increasing number of organizations, in part due to the existing training programs, exchange of experience, and accumulated practical experience. However, a large number of organizations, especially smaller ones, are not taking full advantage of this tool because of lack of experience and a general deterioration of the sector, which makes them concentrate on immediate survival tactics rather than strategic issues. In addition to that, strategic planning is also hampered by frequent changes in external environment (for example, legislation).

The structure of management is defined in NGOs’ statutory documents. Many NGOs have transparent and well-functioning internal procedures. Donors’ requirements and existing training programs also contribute to the formation and transparency of such structures. At the same time, NGOs avoid unnecessarily revealing internal information to the state authorities, clients, and the public at large. NGOs statutory documents also provide for the clear delineation of responsibilities between staff and board members; however this delineation is often violated in practice. Volunteerism is not yet a well-developed concept or practice. There is still a tendency towards one-person leadership.

Several NGOs have a sound technical base, adequate to their goals, and acquired mostly through donor funding. The existing resource centers provide NGOs additional possibilities for access to communications. The technical base is more developed in regional centers and larger towns, while in smaller towns and villages NGOs’ lack equipment and access to communications and qualified personnel. The liquidation of resource centers also limits technical possibilities of their clients.

FINANCIAL VIABILITY: 6.2

Financial viability remains one of the main issues for NGOs. Foreign funds continue to be the main source of NGO funding. With a reduction in foreign support, experts note insufficient coordination of donor activities. Possibilities of financing through domestic sources are rather limited. The low level of public income does not allow seriously consideration of membership dues as a source of financing. Occasional cases of financial and in-kind support of local initiatives from the local business community exist; however, the existing economic and legislative environment does not stimulate such initiatives and even impedes them. Cases of local budget financing of independent NGOs

FINANCIAL VIABILITY	
2003	6.2
2002	5.7
2001	6.0
2000	6.0

are an exception rather than a rule. At the same time, pro-governmental public associations, such as the Belarusian Republican Union of Youth, have access to considerable state financial sources and mighty administrative resource. With a “carrot-and-stick” policy this organizations has already recruited thousands of members all over the country. In its work style, goals and multiple interests, including commercial, as well as powers delegated to it, this organization is very similar to its communist predecessor, *Komsomol*.

While a limited number of independent NGOs used to contract with the government to provide social services, these contracts are now extended mainly to the state-controlled pro-governmental organizations. The same can be said about in-kind support of NGOs by local authorities (for example, providing free-of-charge premises or discount rates for office space). In this situation even experienced NGOs find it difficult preserving the existing connections with supporting partners, not to mention attempting diversification of their base of financial and non-monetary sources.

Cases of social entrepreneurship among independent NGOs are few. The capacity for social entrepreneurship is restrained by the existing legislative base, administrative impediments, and lack of necessary managerial skills among the organizations' personnel.

The legislation and its application require NGOs to have a high-quality system of financial reporting. Because of this and because of a rather complex system of accounts and taxes, NGOs are forced to use ad hoc or regular services of experienced accountants. However, such services are expensive, and many organizations cannot afford them. As a result of the anti-civil society campaign in Belarus, NGOs have limited possibilities for using donor assistance, which considerably raises risk and has a negative impact on NGOs' viability.

ADVOCACY: 5.7

The number of direct communication channels between NGOs and decision-makers has reduced. Such possibilities still exist mostly on the local level where there are instances of rather successful cooperation between NGOs and local

powers on a number of social issues. For example, within the framework of the USAID-sponsored Counterpart Alliance for Partnership program, local communities are establishing dialogue with local authorities and are jointly solving acute social

problems. At the same time, local authorities are very cautious about cooperation with independent NGOs, one of the reasons being the pressure coming from structures above.

ADVOCACY

2003	5.7
2002	5.4
2001	5.5
2000	6.0

There are isolated instances of cooperation between NGOs' representatives and national level authorities (for example, NGOs' participation in HIV/AIDS prevention projects, anti-trafficking projects, etc.). The result of these activities is often of conceptual, theoretic, and advisory character rather than tangible and leading to concrete decisions and actions on the part of the authorities. In most cases, direct cooperation of NGOs and authorities on the national level is possible within the framework of projects administered by international organizations. In many cases this cooperation is limited to roundtable events and seminars often conducted under the patronage of a third party. NGOs are well aware of the importance of establishing dialogue with the official structures, but they are realistic in assessing possible results of such a dialogue, as the authorities

are mostly avoiding any dialogue of this kind.

NGOs improved the understanding of the importance of advocacy campaigns for defending common interests. There are acting coalitions of NGOs united by common interests in certain sectors (environment, anti-trafficking, etc.), as well as broader coalitions on defending interests of civil society at large. Mechanisms of supporting advocacy are practically lacking, and coalitions are trying to defend the interests of their members with the help of "corridor" talks with members of Parliament and by conducting different campaigns (for example, the campaign "Our Solidarity" on attracting the attention of broad community to the problem of civil society persecution). Such initiatives united NGOs and increased the awareness of the international community and citizens of Belarus, but hardly affect the positions of power structures. Attempts by NGOs and their coalitions to advocate and promote legal reforms are either ignored by the authorities or aggravate growing tensions.

SERVICE PROVISION: 5.1

SERVICE PROVISION

2003	5.1
2002	4.9
2001	5.0
2000	5.0

Numerous NGOs have accumulated considerable practical experience and clientele over the past couple of years, as well as earned the recognition of the local and national state structures. Most active NGOs continue to provide a broad spectrum of basic social services, predominantly in the areas of education, culture, humanitarian aid, and health protection. In

a number of cases the state recognizes the importance of NGOs' products, but very rarely does the state extend grants to independent NGOs. In most cases NGOs are experiencing increasing difficulties of all sorts and are being forced out by the state-founded and state-controlled public associations.

At the same time, many NGOs lack specific focus; their skills, experience and resources are insufficient for a better assessment of their target group and professional consistent work in respective sec-

tors. In addition to that, trying to survive in the existing conditions, many NGOs base their activity on priorities of financing institutions, and not on needs assessment of local target groups. Competition over the sources of financing is increasing. Still, in many NGOs their members remain their major clients, and a broader audience is neither aware nor involved in their activity. The problem of rendering services to target groups is complicated by the difficulty in obtaining the needed licensing and other administrative and legal impediments. However, in a number of cases NGOs have started to actively exchange

experience and render information, legal, and resource services to each other.

NGOs are practically unable to achieve cost-recovery by rendering services because of a limited clientele, low paying ability of clients, the prevalent conviction that NGO services must be free of charge, as well as a limited spectrum of services as such and existing objective obstacle for the economic activity of NGOs. As a result, NGOs are forced to rely on donor assistance or government-extended subsidies.

INFRASTRUCTURE: 4.8

NGOs established a nation-wide network over the last couple of years; it covers

INFRASTRUCTURE	
2003	4.8
2002	4.5
2001	4.5
2000	5.0

over 60 residential towns and has accumulated considerable influence and experience. Since 1999, regional resource

centers have been united in a network of Belarusian Association of Resource Centers (BARC). Resource centers used to serve as a forum for NGOs' discussions and mutual projects, provide access to equipment, communications, information, and provide trainings and consultations. Later, leading centers started to more actively consolidate the efforts of the civil society institutions and try to improve the work with mass media and state structures. However, in spring 2003 the authorities started an unprecedented attack on NGOs, and some of the most notable resource centers were attacked and *de jure* liquidated among the first ones. These centers are currently looking for ways to continue their activity in the present conditions.

There are different types of NGO coalitions in the country. Some of them are formed to solve some short-term problems, others are long-term unions where parties share common values and are united by common strategic priorities. Acting in a number of cases as resource centers, administrative subdivisions of coalitions render different sorts of information, legal, and technical support to its members. Affected by the environment, many of the previously existing and new alliances started to more actively defend interests of their members and informed the public about the topical issues. The goals of coalitions are different, and no one organization or committee would advocate the interests of the whole third sector. However, there are rather influential and notable alliances, such as the Assembly of Pro-democratic NGOs, the largest umbrella organization created in 1997 and uniting a large number of Belarusian organizations and initiatives. Resource centers and NGO coalitions are actively stimulating information exchange among its clients and target groups; however many NGOs at the local level still feel an acute lack of topical information and are largely

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excluded from the process of NGOs interaction, also for purely technical reasons. The number of high-quality information and analytical materials prepared by NGOs and their coalitions is rather small, and the number of suppliers of such information is rather modest.

Donor organizations remain the main source of funding for resource centers and for NGOs supported by these centers. The possibility to charge for services is very limited because of financial instability of most NGOs. The possibilities of local grants from resource centers and associations are also limited, and the number of local grants is diminishing.

Over the last couple of years a broad spectrum of NGOs and training specialists emerged in Belarus. The number of elaborated and existing methodologies and text books could largely satisfy the existing demand in training. There are licensed educational and diploma programs, and local specialists found a good balance between foreign experience and the specific

local conditions and acquired rich practical experience. However, the training capacity is more readily available to NGOs in large cities, and many of the educational services rendered by NGOs still lack a systematic approach. Often the effectiveness of such services is considerably lowered because of the lack of post-training consultations and information support.

There are positive examples of interaction and partnership between NGOs and mass media, business, and local bodies of power. However, such examples are still isolated, short-term, often informal, and based on personal contacts. The society still has a long way to go until businesses and authorities will react to NGOs with understanding and respect, and not suspicion and distrust. At present, many NGOs consider it a "success" if the authorities do not interfere in their activity, not to mention assistance and support.

PUBLIC IMAGE: 5.6

Public image of NGOs is a reflection of the results of their activities and mass media coverage of their activities. Due to a number of reasons, values of the civil society and democratic institutions are not well established and accepted by all Belarussians.

Therefore, NGOs have to prove their public use and worth to the population and to officials. In some cases NGOs manage to do it at the local level, in fewer cases at the national level, and then cooperation of NGOs with the population and power structures becomes

PUBLIC IMAGE	
2003	5.6
2002	5.2
2001	5.5
2000	6.0

possible and mutually beneficial, and public perception becomes positive.

The spectrum of communication channels among NGOs varies from organization of public meetings to distribution of printed and electronic materials, publications in mass media, participation in radio and TV talk shows. Some NGOs have PR-managers. However, the general population knows little about the activity of the third sector.

The existing regime provides less and less space for civil initiatives, and independent NGOs are increasingly perceived by the central authorities as a threat. Con-

Considering that the mass media is under the tight control of the authorities, NGOs are restricted from communicating freely with the public and the media often reflects the government's negative attitude to NGOs, harshly criticizing independent organizations and presenting in a positive

light only government-controlled public associations. Where independent outlets do exist, NGOs often do not take full advantage of this opportunity because of their lack of experience and resources.