

# CHALLENGES OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS AND HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN COMMUNITY – BASED RESEARCH

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**Abstract.** The article analyses the ways that can be used to support Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) collaboration on solving societal problems and to foster knowledge transfer to the community in answering specific research needs and involving students in community - based research. Community - based research is community-driven, participatory and action-oriented research which results are useful to community members in making positive social change and promoting social equity.

**Keywords:** civil societal organizations, community-based research.

## Introduction

Society faces Grand Societal challenges in different areas (European Commission, 2018) such as:

- health, demographic change and well-being;
- food security, sustainable agriculture and forestry, marine and maritime and inland water research, and the Bio economy;
- secure, clean and efficient energy;
- smart, green and integrated transport;
- climate action, environment, resource efficiency and raw materials;
- Europe in a changing world - inclusive, innovative and reflective societies;
- secure societies - protecting freedom and security of Europe and its citizens.

Thus, interaction between civil society organizations (CSOs) which represent a wide range of interests and ties, and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) which produce and transfer knowledge, is very important. CSOs, which are recognized as strategically important participants in the development process and an effective but underutilized vehicle of development (Ghaus-Pasha, 2004), can play an important role in improving governance & regulation, enhancing transparency, responsiveness, inclusiveness and effectiveness. The current societal challenges and their growing complexity make us realize that the expertise of civil society organisations (CSOs) is more important than ever. Scientific research provides a solid basis to build solutions on, however, the lack of resources and access to research expertise often hinders CSOs to be involved. HEIs can have an active role in helping CSOs to surpass these obstacles, while engaging in community-based research and boosting key competences in their students and staff.

In order to analyse the needs of CSOs in terms of societal research questions / issues that can be answered by the teams of students/teachers/researchers a research was carried out.

**The aim of research** – to analyse the needs of CSOs in terms of societal research questions/issues that could be answered by higher education students.

### **Objectives:**

- To identify CSOs, profile in Lithuania and European countries experience dealing with societal issues.
- To identify HEIs contribution to the solution of public problems through community-based research.
- To identify desirable initiatives to tackle the problems that CSOs face.

**The methods of research:** documentary analysis, survey.

## **Profile of Lithuanian CSOs dealing with societal challenge**

The activities of non-governmental organizations in Lithuania began in 1991, after Lithuania's independence was announced. A few years later the first Law of Public organizations of Lithuanian Republic (1998) was issued and it was the basis for non-governmental organizations' (NGOs) establishment.

In accordance with referred indications of Non-governmental Organizations' Development Law of the Republic of Lithuania (Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas, 2013), associations, charitable funds and majority of the public bodies, with the exception of political parties, trade unions, employers' organizations and a few others, can be considered as NGO.

In Lithuania, the activities of charitable funds and public bodies are regulated by special laws. Therefore, it could be stated that NGOs in Lithuania

are those which are set up and operate in the frames of the laws for public bodies, associations and charity and support funds.

In recent years, there is an increasing tendency of NGOs cooperation with the state authorities. NGOs take over from them some of the public services in certain fields (cultural, sports, social security, education, preventive activities, etc.).

According to various research data, only a bit more than half of all registered NGOs actually operate. Out of all NGOs, there are more than 1800 community-based organizations (Lietuvos Respublikos Socialinės apsaugos ministerija, 2014). According to this document the growth of community-based organizations began in 2002, and it reached a peak during the period of 2003-2004. This sudden growth is related to the EU LEADER+ type financial measures, which have been used for various initiatives of rural communities.

In order to represent the interests of NGOs and strengthen the NGO sector, Non-governmental Organizations Information and Support Centre started its activity in Lithuania (Nevyriausybinų organizacijų informacijos ir paramos centras, 2016). The voluntary register of NGOs called “NGO Atlas” (Transparency International Lietuvos skyrius, 2018) was created and 2004 NGOs have already registered there. NGOs provide information about their fields of activity, their supporters, managers and needed volunteers (Pradedama veikti NVO registras, 2016). According to the “NGO Atlas” data NGOs operate in various areas: environmental protection, culture and leisure, citizenship democratization, the reduction of social exclusion, health and healthy lifestyle, education, science, children and youth, strengthening local communities and others.

Currently NGOs brought together more than 1 million Lithuanian citizens. In order to better regulate NGOs activity and to develop cooperation between NGOs and public authorities the Concept of NGOs Development (Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybė, 2010) was approved.

### **HEI collaboration with CSOs through research, in terms of addressing Societal Challenges**

The analysis of documents shows that the community – based research is conducted on the initiative of individual scientists, the cooperation with CSOs on research is not systematic. According to Jarasiunaite et al. (2015) participatory action research or community – based research is a quite new approach to research in Lithuania.

According to the Ministry of Social Security and Labour (Lietuvos Respublikos Socialinės apsaugos

ir darbo ministerija, 2018), the NGO sector is not yet sufficiently developed at the moment to be able to play its important role of ensuring the development of democracy and the strengthening of civil society, so it's natural that the cooperation between HEIs and CSO is also not strong yet and needs to be developed.

In Lithuania there are developed strategic documents, in which the importance of active citizenship and citizens' involvement in the policy development and service delivery is recognized: Lithuania's Progress Strategy “Lithuania 2030” (Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas, 2012), National Progress Programme for 2014-2020 (Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybė (b), 2012) and Public Management Improvement Programme (Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybė (a), 2012). Lithuania has taken significant steps to improve the legal and political systems, in order to modernize the public administration, to increase efficiency and productivity and to maintain accountability and transparency, creating a context in which citizens will be engaged in public policy making process (OECD, 2015).

The analysis of strategic science-related documents, for example such as Policy Guidelines for Lithuanian Science and Innovation change (Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas, 2016), shows that Lithuanian science and innovation system is mainly focused on fostering science-based innovations for competitive economy and forming a creative society, so the main priority is given to scientific research in accordance with Lithuania's Research and Innovation *Smart Specialization* Strategy (RIS3), which aims to increase business competitiveness (MOSTA, 2016). However, there are national research programmes, which are not related to the commercialization of research results, and which imply close collaboration with the CSO sector. For example, National research programme Welfare society (2015–2020) aims to produce a comprehensive analysis of the preconditions, factors and trends for the development of a welfare society in Lithuania, to study the possibilities and the obstacles for its development, and to help public authorities to pass strategic decisions and recommendations for the development of a welfare society (Lietuvos Respublikos Švietimo ir mokslo ministerija, 2015).

In 2015 Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education analysed the results of Higher Education Institutions external reviews. According to the analysis, it can be stated that HEIs play an important role in the regions (Centre of Quality Assessment in Higher Education, 2016).

The experts' findings indicate that the potential for collaboration between HEIs and CSO-sector in the field of community – based research is high. Such collaboration could be activated by means of modern models tested in European countries. One of such models is the Science Shop model.

### **Science Shops model for community-based research in Lithuania**

The Science Shop model started in 1970 in the Netherlands and later spread across Europe (Fisher, 2004).

Science Shops model is a small entity that carries out scientific research in a wide range of disciplines, usually free of charge, on behalf of local civil society. They are often based in higher education institutions, where research is carried out by students as part of their curriculum – under the supervision of the Science Shop and experienced researchers (Living Knowledge, 2016).

Since a few decades the Science Shop model (Living Knowledge, 2016) of community-based research (CBR) has been successful in bringing students, researchers and civil society together towards tackling real issues both at local and regional levels.

The ENtRANCE project (ENtRANCE project proposal, 2017) started in 2017. The overall aim is to enhance social responsibility and social engagement in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), more specifically of higher education students, staff and governance, through delivering scientific research support to their local communities.

Five European higher education institutions propose a flexible learning approach involving students and researchers in community-based research projects with civil society organizations.

The model of Science Shop is still relatively new in Lithuania. Currently two Science Shops operate here.

The first Science Shop in Lithuania was established in 2013 by the Institute of Social Innovations, a non-profit organization (K. Aleksandravičiūtė, 2017). The core of the Institute's researchers consists of sociologists and communication specialists, so far mostly these Science Shop projects have been undertaken in the field of social sciences. However, this Science Shop aims to broaden its research area as much as possible in the future. It is expected to involve scientists and students of other areas too.

The second Science Shop in Lithuania was established by Vilnius College of Technologies and Design (VTDK) in 2015 within the EnRRICH project, financed by Horizon 2020 programme. This

Science Shop aims to become a mediator between community and the College involving students to local community issues solving through applied research. It started to work with CSOs in the Vilnius region to develop community-based research projects, suitable for students to carry out as part of their degree programmes. Since January 2016, 13 projects were successfully finished, 15 academics and about 160 students were involved. Pilot projects were mainly carried out in the field of Sustainable urban development and Engaging & Active Design.

### **Research methodology**

The research was carried out in 2018. Invitations to participate in the research were sent to various CSOs – NGOs, associations, community-based groups, foundations, voluntary organizations. In order to get a comprehensive understanding of the situation, invitations were sent to CSOs operating in various fields of Grand Societal Challenges. The sample of the research was 77 respondents.

In order to measure the needs of CSOs in terms of societal research questions / issues that could be answered by higher education students the quantitative research instrument questionnaire was used. The questionnaire contained closed-ended and open-ended, direct and indirect questions divided into 3 blocks such as *The CSO Profile*, *The Way of Addressing Societal Problems*, *Collaboration with HEIs in the Matter of Societal Research Questions*.

*The CSO Profile* section consists of questions revealing the organization's type, size, objectives, societal challenges it addresses to.

*The Way of Addressing Societal Problems* section helps to identify what kind of actions organizations take in order to solve the problems / issues they face, what type of research problems they mostly face with.

*Collaboration with HEIs in the Matter of Societal Research Questions* section reveals how teams of students and researchers could contribute in solution of societal problems.

### **The CSO profile**

The research revealed the CSO profile in Lithuania. It showed that mainly 52 % of NGOs and 44 % of associations participated in the survey. There was only one community-based group among the respondents. There were no respondents who were just newly established (existing less than 1 year), however there was a small part (10 %) consisting of young organizations, existing less than 3 years. Vast majority of CSO (90 %) are operating more than 3 years and are small organizations with less than 5 employees which work with volunteers.

The respondents mainly work in the fields of following societal challenges: „Health, demographic change and well-being “(48), „Europe in a changing world – inclusive, innovative and reflective societies “(35), „Secure societies – protecting freedom and security of Europe and its citizens “(25), „Climate action, environment, resource efficiency and raw materials “(15) (Figure 1).

Majority of respondents aim to inform, educate and advise people. Just a few respondents mentioned that their goal was protesting and lobbying. Among the other goals – professional consolidation, rehabilitation and reintegration, animal welfare, representation of artists, increasing civil engagement, engaging community were mentioned.

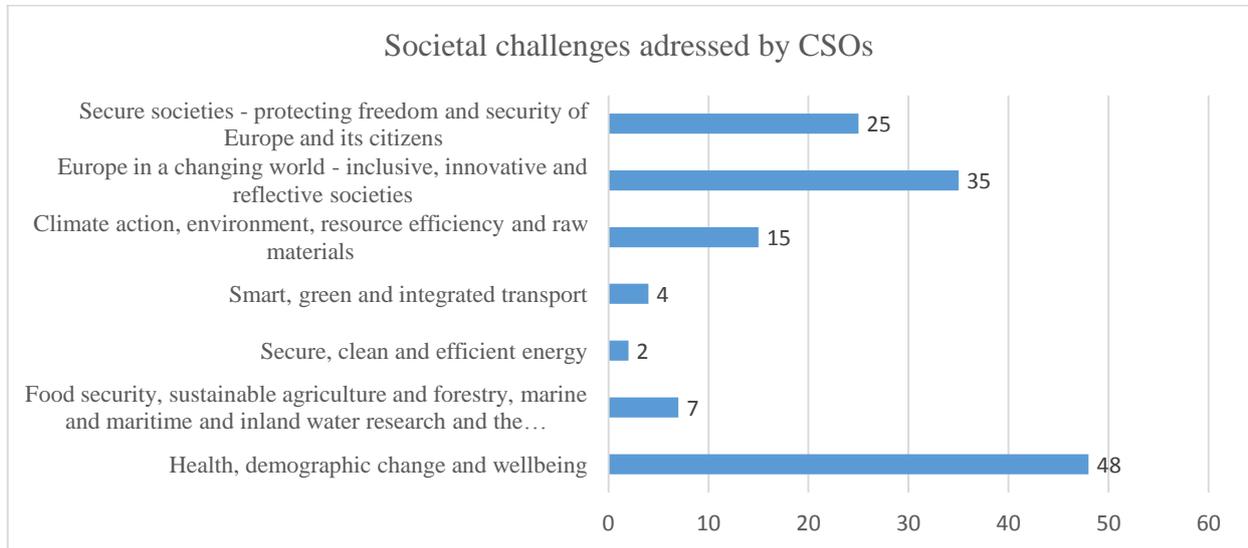


Figure 1. Societal challenges addressed by CSOs

### The way of addressing societal problems

Analysing if CSOs need the research and what type of research problems they mostly face with, it must be pointed that 52 % of the respondents indicated that they needed research by addressing societal problems. Those who needed research mainly worked with Health & Well-being societal challenges (60 %), Inclusive & reflective society (15 %). CSOs are facing all types of

research problems. The figure 2 discloses that many times CSOs faced simple problems, requiring expertise from a single academic discipline (45 %). A significant number of respondents sometimes (54 %) faces complicated (54 %) and complex (46 %) problems, when a multidisciplinary approach is needed. Quite a big number of respondents think they rarely (31 %) face with wicked problems (Figure 2).

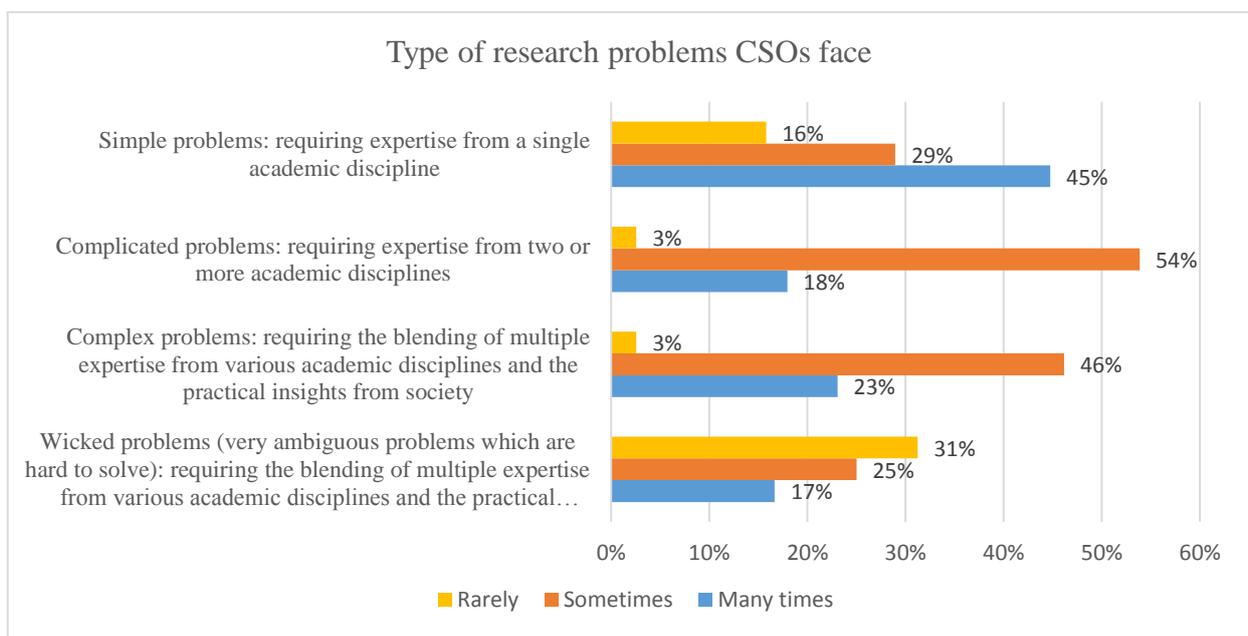


Figure 2. Type of research problems CSOs face

### The CSO profile

Almost half of the respondents in need of research (47,5 %) indicated they did not know if they would like to cooperate with HEIs. As an argument it was mentioned that there was no experience of such collaboration and CSOs were not sure, if research findings would be reliable

35 % of respondents indicated they were not sure, if students would be able to solve CSOs 'research problems, as they were not sure, if students would be really engaged in order to meet the deadlines and qualitative requirements. They were also not sure, if students had enough competences to finish the research. CSOs also thought they might not be able to support students due to lack of time (Figure 3).

According to CSOs preferences the optimal time

to conduct a research would be a period of three months, a period longer than 6 months was not acceptable at all. That demonstrates that CSOs are very short in time due to the problems with human resources. So, it would be important to be aware of the domain and activity of the CSO and communicate it accordingly.

A majority of CSOs in need of research were ready to give researchers a full briefing about the problem and would meet researchers on a regular basis to discuss the progress. 49 % of the respondents were ready to let the students be in service of the organization for at minimum one day per week, what could lead to more comprehensive collaboration. Running a student-internship seemed like something that was more difficult for CSOs to accommodate, as only 31 % confirmed this possibility.

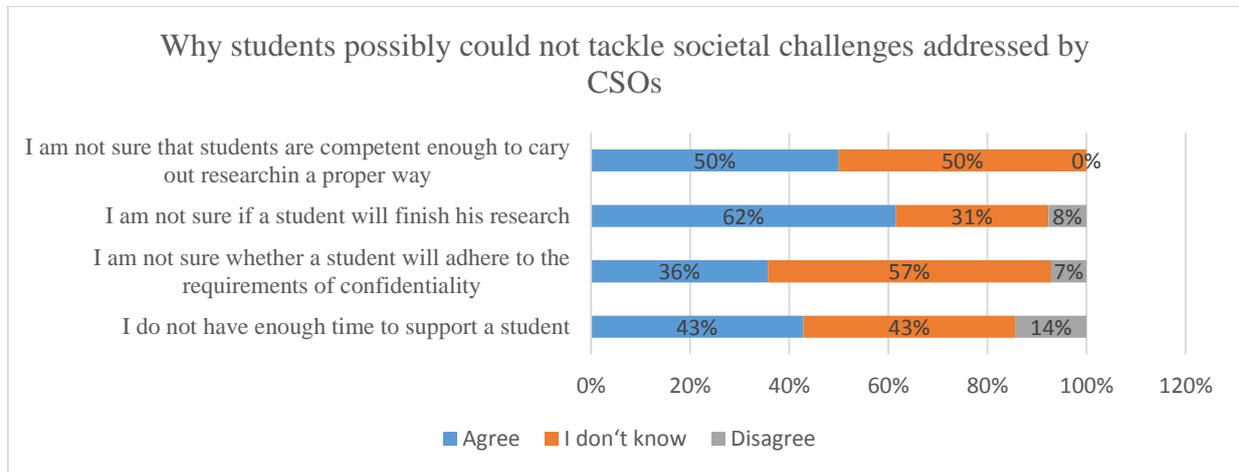


Figure 3. Circumstances why students could not tackle societal challenges

Majority of CSOs were ready for meeting with the team of students / teachers / researchers on a regular basis to talk about the progress of the

research. Only 10 % of CSO were willing to compensate the costs of research team (Figure 4).

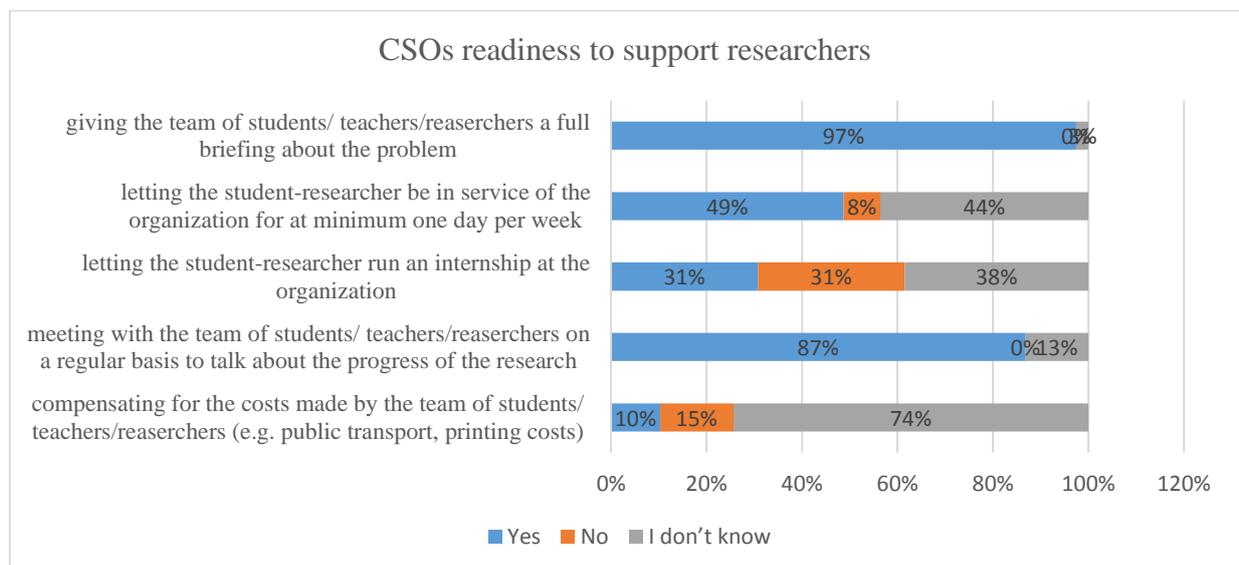


Figure 4. CSOs readiness to support research

CSOs considered that most important skills in order to be able to tackle research problems were the following: ability to anticipate future (93 %), situational awareness (97 %), collaboration (98 %), openness & transparency (95 %), ethical thinking (95 %), and ability to act (98 %). Pro-activity (59 %), adaptability (59 %) and inter-cultural communication (62 %) were less relevant.

Only 12,5 % of respondents in need of research used the opportunity to offer research topics for students in frames of this study, 9 research topics were offered for students. 8 research topics were offered with the domain of societal challenge *Europe in a changing world – inclusive, innovative and reflective societies* and 1 research topic was offered in the field of *Health, demographic change and well-being*. Offered topics are focused on rather complex or wicked problems,

CSOs have very limited financial abilities. Half of the respondents would not be able to make any financial contributions to the research expenses and only 37 % could contribute up to 100 € in order to cover research costs.

## Conclusions

1. A vast majority of CSO is operating more than 3 years and are small organizations with less than 5 employees which work with volunteers.
2. Half of CSOs indicates that they deal with research activities addressing societal challenges and they have willingness to collaborate with HEIs in terms of research. But near the half of the respondents express their doubts about such collaboration. Due to the fact that some CSOs consider research no relevant for their activity and no previous collaboration experiences, HEIs should be proactive by establishing cooperation with CSOs.
3. As an argument was mentioned that there is no experience of collaboration between HEIs and CSOs. CSOs also are not sure, if research findings are reliable – they have some doubts, if students have enough competences and whether they are engaged enough in order to meet the deadlines.
4. Collaboration between HEIs and CSOs could be activated by means of modern models tested in European countries. One of such models is the Science Shop model which should be implemented into HEIs curriculum.
5. CSOs in need of research mostly work with the challenges of Health & Well-being and Inclusive & Reflective Society, they mainly aim to inform, educate, advise and support people in terms of goods, services or ideas.
6. Respondents mention they are facing all types of research problems – often these are simple research problems, requiring expertise from a single academic discipline, sometimes the research problems were complicated or complex, when a multidisciplinary approach was needed. CSOs expect students to offer some creative solutions.
7. Speaking about financial compensation of the low cost incurred by research team CSOs are not willing to cover low costs of research team but the majority of Lithuanian CSOs would like research to be finished within 3 months.
8. CSOs consider that most important students' skills in order to be able to tackle research problems are the following: an ability to anticipate future, situational awareness, collaboration, openness & transparency, ethical thinking, and ability to act. In order to build trust, it is necessary to teach students how they should work with CSOs in terms of communication, ethics and time management.

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