



2019 CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

Estonia

July 2020

Cover Photo: Members of the Beresan Youth Bank present their achievements at the 2018 Annual Civil Society Development Forum, an event organized by Ednannia with support from USAID. The Forum is the largest national platform for learning, communication, and experience sharing among nonprofit organizations in Ukraine, typically bringing together approximately 2,500 participants from the non-profit and private sectors, donor community, media, governmental bodies, and local authorities.

Photo Credit: Ednannia, Ukraine

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For Estonia

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Developed by:

United States Agency for International Development

Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance

Center of Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights and Governance

Acknowledgment: This publication was made possible through support provided by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) under Cooperative Agreement No. AID-OAA-LA-17-00003.

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or FHI 360.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A publication of this type would not be possible without the contributions of many individuals and organizations. We are especially grateful to our implementing partners, who played the critical role of facilitating the expert panel meetings and writing the country reports. We would also like to thank the many CSO representatives and experts, USAID partners, and international donors who participated in the expert panels in each country. Their knowledge, perceptions, ideas, observations, and contributions are the foundation upon which this Index is based.

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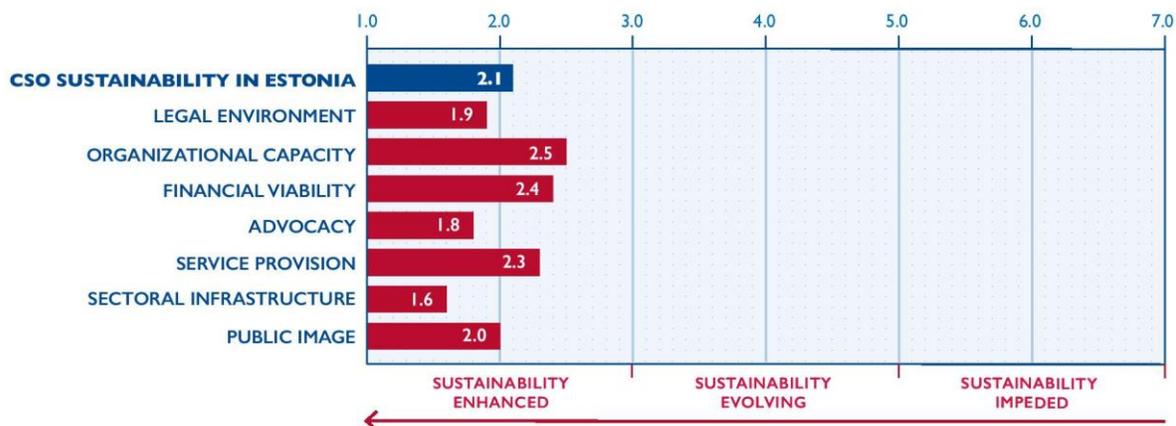
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OVERALL CSO SUSTAINABILITY: 2.1



The year 2019 was an election year for Estonia, with national parliamentary elections taking place in March and European parliamentary elections in May. The Reform Party placed first in tense national elections but proved unable to form a government. In April, parliament approved a coalition government formed by the Center Party, conservative Isamaa Party, and far-right Conservative People’s Party of Estonia (EKRE), whereupon the Reform Party and Social Democratic Party became the opposition.

EKRE was openly critical of CSOs working on minority issues, diversity issues, and women’s rights. During the coalition talks and after taking office, it threatened to cut funding for the Estonian LGBT Association, Estonian Human Rights Center, and women’s organizations. The debate about whether to fund these organizations continued throughout the year. Members of far-right parties in local municipalities also harassed the Estonian LGBT Association. After the elections, the Kõigi Eesti (My Estonia, Too) movement was formed to promote a caring, respectful, and inclusive country offering opportunities for all. The movement organized a concert in April that was attended by more than 60,000 participants.

A significant change for civil society was the new government’s creation of a new ministerial position, the minister of population, which was filled by a member of the Isamaa Party. The minister of population works within the Ministry of the Interior and oversees civil society development, including cooperation with the National Civil Society Foundation (NCSF) and Family Endowment Foundation. These areas had previously fallen under the minister of the interior. Other areas of responsibility include family and population policy, the integration of new immigrants, engagement with exile communities, and religious issues.

Despite increased political polarization and a less friendly new government, overall CSO sustainability did not change in 2019, with no score changes noted in any dimension of CSO sustainability. Civic space in Estonia is still ranked as open, the highest level, in the 2019 CIVICUS Monitor. The Freedom House Freedom in the World 2019 report assessed Estonia as free with no significant changes. However, the 2019 Global Rights Index published by the International Trade Union Confederation mentioned Estonia’s repeated violations of workers’ rights, noting that companies often bypass collective bargaining with unions to push for individual agreements directly with workers.

The size of the civil society sector has been stable in recent years. According to the 2019 National Civil Society Strategy Impact Evaluation, the report of a five-year assessment conducted by Tallinn University and the Institute of Baltic Studies on behalf of the Ministry of Interior, of Estonia’s roughly 22,551 CSOs, 82 percent operate at the local level and 55 percent operate both locally and nationwide. In 2019, about 2,530 organizations had public benefit status, which makes them eligible for income tax breaks. The most common focus areas for CSOs are recreational activities (17 percent of CSOs), sports (16 percent), and culture (14 percent). According to the 2019 Report on the State of Civil Society in the EU [European Union] and Russia published by the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum, 93 percent of social enterprises are registered as nonprofit associations. Estonian is a working

language for 91 percent of CSOs, while 18 percent of CSOs consider Russian a working language and 10 percent count English among their working languages.

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT: 1.9



The legal environment for CSOs did not change in 2019. Estonia's laws on CSO registration are generally favorable. For all legal forms and focus areas, registration is a fast and simple process that can be accomplished online through the e-Business Register operated by the government's Center of Registers and Information Systems. CSOs must register to obtain legal status, which is a condition for funding and other benefits. Informal groups may operate without restriction.

The Nonprofit Associations Act regulates the responsibilities and procedures of CSOs' internal bodies, such as the membership and managing boards. CSOs' reporting obligations are clearly set forth in the laws. CSOs must file annual reports, unless they had neither equity nor turnover for a period of at least one year.

Annual reports may be filed online.

The laws do not limit the scope of permissible activities. CSOs and their representatives may operate freely, openly express criticism, and address all matters of public debate. CSOs have the right to assemble and participate in public protests, and they exercise this right regularly. CSOs are protected from arbitrary dissolution by the government. CSOs have a legal right to contest governmental decisions in court.

CSOs are generally free from harassment by the central government, local governments, and the tax agency. However, attacks on minority organizations have increased in recent years. On limited occasions, municipalities try to limit CSOs' activities by introducing restrictive procedures or reducing funding. For example, in 2019 several municipalities tried to prevent the election of village elders who would represent local interests by setting minimum levels of voter participation for elections to be valid. Such measures hinder the work of grassroots CSOs, which are active mainly at the village level. In 2018 and 2019, the municipality of Rakvere reduced funding for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) film festival Festheart. The festival organizers appealed the decision twice in court; in the second hearing, the court ruled that the municipality did not have the right to reduce funding, and the funding was reinstated.

CSOs may earn income by charging fees for goods and services, establishing social enterprises, engaging in fundraising campaigns, and accepting funds from foreign donors. CSOs are allowed to compete for government contracts and procurements at the central and local levels.

In 2018, the parliament approved changes to the Gambling Tax Act to reduce political influence in funding decisions. Responsibility for distributing funds was transferred from a committee of politicians to government ministries, which have more transparent decision-making processes and can use the funds to establish long-term strategic partnerships with CSOs. In 2019, the ministries of social affairs, education, and culture distributed funds from the tax directly to organizations in their respective areas. However, the ministries' approach to distributing funds varied, and CSOs complained that there was a lack of transparency and information about the ministries' plans.

CSOs that engage in charitable work may apply for status as public benefit associations and foundations, which makes them eligible for income tax breaks. Political parties, professional organizations, and business associations are not eligible for this status. Individuals may deduct donations to public benefit organizations of up to EUR 1,200 (approximately \$1,340), and legal entities may make tax-free donations to public benefit organizations of up to 10 percent of the previous year's profit or up to 3 percent of personnel costs during the current year.

Organizations often lack sufficient resources to pursue court proceedings. The government provides free legal aid to individuals who cannot afford it, but there is no such service for CSOs. Lawyers sometimes work pro bono or

at reduced costs with CSOs. For example, a law firm assists the Estonian Human Rights Center with strategic litigation at discounted rates. Very few lawyers are trained in or familiar with CSO-related laws, but in most cases in which CSOs utilize the services of lawyers, such as appealing funding decisions in court, expertise in CSO law is not necessary.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY: 2.5

CSOs' organizational capacity was generally stable in 2019. According to the 2019 Report on the State of Civil Society in the EU and Russia, a growing divide exists between Estonian CSOs with the capacities to involve volunteers, create partnerships, and raise funds and less established organizations that do not have these capacities.

Most CSOs clearly identify their potential constituents and beneficiaries and actively seek to develop relationships with them. CSOs often involve their constituencies in their activities or ensure that their activities represent constituents' needs and interests. For example, the Estonian Youth Council, which is well-established throughout the country, organizes numerous events throughout the year through which it strategically involves its members and local representatives. As the 2019 Report on the State of Civil Society notes, it is not necessary to be a member to become involved in a CSO's work. As a result, an increasing number of CSOs do not actively recruit new members. According to the 2019 National Civil Society Strategy Impact Evaluation, which often cites data from 2018, many CSOs have reported a slight decrease in the number of members in recent years. About 50 percent of CSO members are actively involved in their organizations.

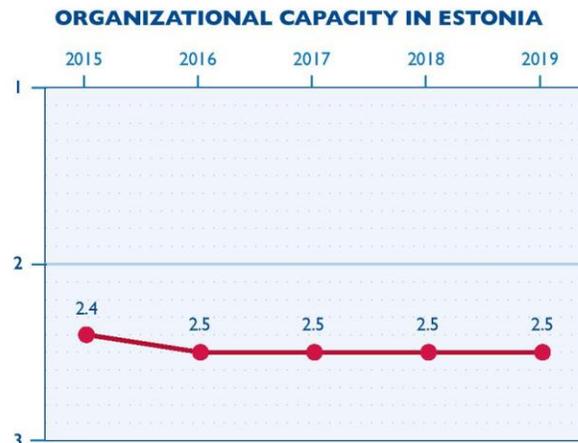
Larger CSOs generally have clearly defined management structures, including an explicit division of responsibilities between the board of directors and staff, which is stipulated in the law. All CSOs must specify policies and procedures in their bylaws when they are formed. CSO' bylaws often define additional rules, such as the number of people on management boards. Most CSOs operate in an open and transparent manner and allow contributors and supporters to verify their appropriate use of funds through their annual reports.

Every CSO has a defined objective, which is needed for legal registration, and most also have a mission statement. According to the 2019 National Civil Society Strategy Impact Evaluation, about 20 percent of CSOs have written strategy documents. However, smaller CSOs often lack the capacity to incorporate strategic planning techniques into their decision-making processes.

CSOs have shown a slow but steady trend towards professionalization in recent years. The number of paid staff has increased slightly. According to the 2019 National Civil Society Strategy Impact Evaluation, about 23 percent of CSOs maintained permanent staff, compared to 21 percent as reported in the 2014 edition of this evaluation. Staff is usually hired on contracts lasting for at least six months. Some CSOs have adequate human resources practices for staff, including contracts, job descriptions, payrolls, and personnel policies. CSOs recruit and engage volunteers actively, although the number of CSOs engaging volunteers is decreasing. Roughly 53 percent of CSOs involved volunteers in their work in 2018, a decrease from the 60 percent reported in the earlier study. Since Estonian CSOs tend to be small, they usually lack the capacity to coordinate the large groups of volunteers sometimes offered by corporations and government offices.

Larger CSOs utilize the professional services of accountants, information technology managers, and lawyers. These services are often outsourced rather than provided by staff, although the cost is a burden for most CSOs.

CSOs' resources generally allow for modern office equipment and internet access. According to the 2019 National Civil Society Strategy Impact Evaluation, about 49 percent of CSOs stated that they did not feel that they lacked equipment. At the same time, 25 percent of CSOs felt that they lacked the transportation services they needed. For example, local service providers and grassroots initiatives felt that access to their stakeholders was hindered



because of limited public transportation. CSOs effectively use modern technology, including social media, to facilitate their operations. However, they are often unable to develop innovative digital solutions, such as data visualization and open data applications, to improve their access to information, reduce their costs, or increase their impact.

FINANCIAL VIABILITY: 2.4



CSOs' financial viability was unchanged in 2019 and continues to be generally solid. According to the 2019 Report on the State of Civil Society, public funding is available to CSOs working in almost every field, and donations and earned income continue to increase. In addition, funding guidelines are generally more flexible than previously, and the burden of financial reporting continues to ease, which allows CSOs to focus more on impact and less on the details on specific expenses. However, the gap between stronger and weaker CSO continues to grow as smaller organizations struggle to access resources. In addition, the 2019 report concludes that there has been a decrease in the overall number of funding sources for CSOs.

Some CSOs have access to diversified sources of income.

According to data presented in the 2019 National Civil Society Strategy Impact Evaluation, 29 percent of associations received funding from a single source of funding, 23 percent from two sources, and 33 percent from three or more sources, while 16 percent of associations did not receive any funding. When respondents were asked to name their three most important sources of funding, membership fees continued to be the most common source of funding and was named by 52 percent of organizations, a decrease from 58 percent in 2013 and 63 percent in 2009. The second most common source of funding was local government grants (35 percent of organizations) and the third most common was economic activity (30 percent), figures that were largely unchanged from previous years.

Both central and local governments usually provide funding to CSOs in an open and transparent manner. According to the 2019 National Civil Society Strategy Impact Evaluation, about 18 percent of CSOs received funding from the central government, compared to 23 percent in the 2014 evaluation. Ministries usually fund larger CSOs through strategic partnerships, grants with open calls for proposals, and small projects. Some ministries are not considered reliable funders. For example, the Ministry of Education assigns funds to service-providing CSOs without consulting them first and varies the amount of funding available from year to year without explanation. NCSF, a subsidiary association of the Ministry of the Interior, provides funding to CSOs for organizational development, participation in international events, and cost sharing for international funds. However, at slightly over EUR 1 million (approximately \$1.14 million), NCSF's grant budget is small and has not changed in years.

Estonia's first venture philanthropy fund, the Impact Fund, was established in 2018 with funding from entrepreneurs and is managed by the Good Deed Foundation. In 2019, the fund provided funding to five CSOs to develop or expand their services. The Education Fund, also funded by entrepreneurs and managed by the Good Deed Foundation, was launched in 2018 and supported five educational initiatives in 2019. Funded projects included an internship program to allow headmasters of schools to develop their leadership skills through cooperation with CSOs, businesses, and municipalities.

The CSO sector's reliance on foreign funding is very limited, with only about 4 percent of CSOs receiving funding from European sources and 1 percent from other international sources. The Active Citizens Fund sponsored by the European Economic Area and Norwegian Financial Mechanisms was launched in 2019 and issued its first call for proposals in September. The Fund will distribute approximately EUR 3 million to CSOs over the next four years. Seventeen projects had been notified that they had been selected to receive grants by December. The reporting requirements for CSOs receiving this funding are very bureaucratic and difficult for CSOs to meet.

Many CSOs earn income through the provision of services. According to the National Civil Society Strategy Impact Evaluation, the proportion of associations earning income increased to 57 percent in 2017 from 49 percent in 2013. Nearly two-thirds of Estonian municipalities outsource public services to CSOs.

CSOs also raise funds from their communities and constituencies. According to the Estonian Tax and Customs Board, donations to Estonian CSOs have continuously increased in recent years, with donations by individuals and legal entities amounting to EUR 23.3 million (approximately \$26 million) in 2018, up from EUR 21.9 million in 2017. Together with anonymous and foreign donations, total donations to CSOs reach EUR 40.2 million (approximately \$44.8 million) in 2018, up from EUR 36 million in 2017 and EUR 31.3 million in 2016. The Charities Aid Foundation's 2019 World Giving Index, which provides aggregate data from the last ten years, reports that an average of 20 percent of respondents in Estonia have donated to a CSO over the past decade.

CSOs use digital technologies such as web pages, portable card readers, and online platforms to gather donations. The Network of Estonian Nonprofit Organizations (NENO) coordinates the Network of Organizations that Collect Donations. In 2019, a meeting of the network focused on donation-collection technology. For the first time in 2019, the network cooperated with NENO and the office of the president to organize Estonia's first Giving Tuesday, through which EUR 128,000 (approximately \$143,000) was raised.

CSOs typically have sound financial management systems. Audits are not obligatory, although some larger funders require project audits, and some organizations voluntarily conduct audits to demonstrate their transparency. The majority of organizations state they do not need additional financial management training.

ADVOCACY: 1.8

CSO advocacy was stable in 2019. Various direct avenues of communication and collaboration connect CSOs and policy makers at the central and local levels, and the law and government policy require public access to government decision-making processes through working groups, public hearings, and other means. CSOs' capacity to formulate and implement effective advocacy strategies varies. While well-established organizations such as the Estonian Fund for Nature conduct visible, effective campaigns, CSOs' capacity to advocate on the local level is low.

Cooperation between the government and CSOs is guided by the Estonian Civil Society Development Concept (EKAK), which is coordinated by a twenty-two-member committee of government and CSO representatives and chaired by the minister of population (previously, the minister of the interior). Every other year, parliament organizes a debate to discuss the implementation of EKAK and the development of civil society. CSOs and public officials also work together in a vast number of committees as well as networks and coalitions. For example, the coordinating committee of the Open Government Partnership advances cooperation between CSOs and the government and includes a civil society roundtable. CSOs also serve on the government's Sustainable Development committee. In addition, CSOs participate in government decision-making through informal means, such as the citizen initiative portal, Rahvaalgatus.ee, which allows petitions with at least 1,000 signatures to be submitted to the parliament. The two petitions receiving the most signatures in 2019 both related to climate change. Government ministers and members of parliament often attend public events, which offer CSOs opportunities to approach them directly to arrange meetings.

One of the most notable instances of cooperation between the government and CSOs in 2019 was the development of the Estonia 2035 strategy, which is expected to be approved by the end of 2020. A large number of CSOs contributed to the strategy through meetings, public discussions, and online stakeholder participation on both the national and local levels. Parallel to Estonia 2035, civil society developed its own strategy under the leadership of the Ministry of the Interior and its strategic partners NENO, the Estonian Social Enterprise Network, and other partners. The strategy's main areas are likely to include knowledgeable and active citizens; capable and



caring communities; capable CSOs and social enterprises; transparent and inclusive policy making; and religious freedom; it is expected to be approved in August 2020.

The Estonian Chamber of Environmental Associations, an eleven-member network created in 2002, continued to work on Estonia's forest policy and a national strategy to abandon coal. Its petition for a climate-neutral Estonia by 2035 gathered more than 2,000 signatures and was submitted to the parliament. Fridays for Future, an international movement of students protesting the lack of action on climate change, was active in Tallinn and smaller towns in 2019, although many students struggled to get permission from their teachers to leave school to participate in the protests. A local initiative on the small island of Saaremaa advocated for a plastic-free environment in cooperation with partners from various sectors, such as small businesses. An element of the campaign's effort to raise awareness among local populations was a song festival called the I Land Sound, which used non-disposable dishes borrowed from a local caterer and was one of the largest events in Saaremaa in 2019.

Several CSO efforts led to the proposal, enactment, or amendment of legislation in 2019. For example, Invisible Animals, an organization advocating for the wellbeing of animals, furthered its national campaign to abolish fur farms by collecting more than 6,000 signatures on a petition. Legislation to ban fur farms was pending before parliament at the time of writing this report.

CSO capacity to engage in advocacy related to digital issues is low. For example, CSOs have low awareness and capacity to act on the Open Government Data and Public Sector Information Directive, which entered in force in 2019 and addresses open data and the re-use of public sector information. CSOs engaged in minimal discussion about the directive and would benefit from support and training to better understand the concept of open data and its use in their work.

NENO and the Network of Organizations that Collect Donations sought to promote reforms to the tax code by increasing the tax deductions available to donors in order to foster the development of philanthropy.

SERVICE PROVISION: 2.3



CSOs' service provision was largely unchanged in 2019. CSOs provide services in a variety of fields. According to the 2019 National Civil Society Strategy Impact Evaluation, the most common areas for CSO services are recreational activities (provided by 46 percent of CSOs), training (31 percent), community cohesion (23 percent), counseling (23 percent), and programs for youth (19 percent). The most common target groups for service-providing CSOs are youth, children, communities, and the elderly. Families and people with disabilities are less frequent target groups.

NCSF and the Good Deed Foundation implement the Nula program, which incubates new social initiatives. In 2019, three participating initiatives received EUR 25,000 (approximately \$27,900) each in funding: Jututaja, which

builds bridges between young people and the elderly; Andmekool, which provides literacy training and data consultations to strategists from the public, civic, and private sectors; and GTL Lab, which advances project-based learning in schools.

According to the 2019 National Civil Society Strategy Impact Evaluation, the goods and services that CSOs provide often reflect the needs and priorities of their communities. The report states that CSOs believe they have improved their inclusion of target groups in service provision in recent years. At the same time, municipalities and public institutions often lack the means to pay for their services, even though demand is high. In 2019, three municipalities outsourced services to CSOs with the support of a development program funded by the Ministry of Finance. The program, which was implemented by the Social Innovation Lab, used co-creation methods and other innovative approaches to facilitate the municipalities' work with CSOs. Afterwards, the program put together a manual for other municipalities to use.

CSOs also work with academia. According to the 2019 National Civil Society Strategy Impact Evaluation, about 14 percent of CSOs mention that they have cooperated with universities, usually on initiatives such as development programs, training, and evaluations. CSOs provide goods and services to the public, private, and civil society sectors.

The government at both the national and local levels recognize the value of CSOs' services through public statements, policies, and practices.

SECTORAL INFRASTRUCTURE: 1.6

The infrastructure supporting CSOs in Estonia is well established and did not change in 2019. According to the 2019 Report on the State of Civil Society, Estonian CSOs have successfully advocated for and built a reliable infrastructure.

CSO resource centers operate in every Estonian county. They offer CSOs access to information, training, and other support. The support centers have developed the MAKIS web portal, recently renamed MTYabi, which offers practical information about the full lifecycle of CSOs. In addition to providing funding to CSOs, NCSF coordinates the activities of CSO consultants at the CSO resource centers and provides other forms of support for CSOs.

The Local Initiative Program provides grassroots initiatives with small grants. Funded by the government and coordinated by the Ministry of Public Administration, the program's main aim is to build and sustain strong communities. The Open Estonia Foundation distributes funds from the Active Citizens Fund. Through the first call for projects in 2019, seventeen projects received funding valued at more than EUR 1.1 million (approximately \$1.23 million) for a period of eighteen to twenty-four months. Among the grant recipients were the Green Tiger project, which aims to develop an economic model in Estonia that respects natural resources and the circular economy; the Opinion Festival, which educates young democracy trainers; and the Peaasi project, which offers mental health services to Russian-speaking communities.

Several networks and development programs support CSOs. For example, NENO manages networks of donation-collecting and advocacy organizations. In recent years, umbrella organizations and informal networks have been established to represent common interests in almost every field. However, the 2019 National Civil Society Strategy Impact Evaluation concluded that membership in umbrella organizations and cooperation within the sector has declined. The quality of cooperation is also uneven, and unhealthy rivalries between CSOs increased in 2019, especially between more traditional, conservative CSOs and more liberal organizations. Several conservative organizations wrote to the government requesting a reduction in funding for organizations focused on minority rights, especially among LGBTI populations.

Umbrella organizations, the network of community development centers, various CSO development programs, and freelance consultants offer capacity building to CSOs on financial management, fundraising, volunteer management, constituency relationships, and other topics specific to civil society. Advanced specialized training is also available in areas such as strategic management and advocacy.

CSOs sometimes work in formal and informal partnerships with the private sector, government, and the media. For example, the Opinion Festival, a cooperative effort of all three sectors to improve debate and civic education and tackle issues of common concern, took place for the seventh time in 2019. The festival brings together all layers of society to share their worldviews and take part in discussions organized by media, political parties, and other groups. The festival is free of charge and open to everyone in Estonia. The SPIN program, based on the popular British program Kicks, is jointly funded by municipalities, businesses, and the Good Deed Foundations Impact Fund. SPIN offers young people sessions that combine football training with the development of life skills and was offered in nine municipalities in 2019. As a result of the SPIN program, 10 percent of participants have



improved their scholastic achievement and 21 percent have better school attendance. Partnerships between civil society and private corporations are not widespread. Limited support systems and trainings encourage such partnerships, which will be a focus of Giving Tuesday in 2020.

PUBLIC IMAGE: 2.0



CSOs' public image was stable in 2019. CSOs engaged in both advocacy and service provision benefit from media coverage at the local and national levels, in both public and private media, and in traditional and online media. The media provide analysis of the role of CSOs and are often willing to work with CSOs to discuss current events or publicize their impact. CSO representatives are often invited to participate in television shows. For example, the national broadcasting company invites CSO activists to take part in its morning shows and other talk shows fairly often. In 2019, the Good Deed Foundation noted that coverage of its Impact Fund was fairly positive, and journalists sometimes even contacted the fund on their own. While interesting local initiatives, such as the construction of a "parade" of over 1,500 snowmen in Järva County, can garner countrywide coverage in

national dailies, smaller organizations can find it difficult to attract coverage if they do not have connections to journalists. In addition, local newspapers often fail to distinguish between public service announcements and corporate advertising and require smaller organizations to pay for announcements of trainings and other community events. Although media coverage is mostly positive, the number of negative stories about organizations focused on minority rights increased in 2019.

The public has a positive perception of both advocacy and service-providing CSOs, understands the concept of CSOs, and is fairly supportive of CSOs' activities. Some people with more conservative views tend to be unsupportive of minorities and the organizations representing them, but so far this tendency has not had a major impact on general opinions about CSOs. Businesspeople and local and central government officials also have fairly positive perceptions of CSOs, although people who do not know the sector tend to be skeptical about their work.

CSOs often use social media to build communities, raise awareness, and promote their activities. In 2019, several campaigns, including Giving Tuesday, Fridays for Future Estonia, and other climate change initiatives and campaigns reached large audiences on social media. For years, the Open Estonia Foundation has had its own radio show, Open Estonia Foundation Minutes, and NENO publishes a magazine, Good Citizen, whose articles are often distributed by other news media. CSOs have found that having ongoing relationships with journalists is important for positive coverage and influencing public opinion. While larger CSOs are able to develop such relationships, smaller organizations find it challenging to decide what is newsworthy and to attract media attention.

All CSOs in Estonia are required to submit annual reports. These are posted on the register and can be easily accessed for a small fee. In 2002, CSOs agreed upon a code of ethics. All members of NENO, which currently number over 100, must subscribe to the code, while other organizations are urged to subscribe to it in order to ensure transparent, open, inclusive, and legitimate operations.

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or FHI 360.

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