

REPORT



Mapping the Needs and Challenges of Civil Society Organisations in Cyprus

MARCH 2022

Introduction

The NGO Support Centre is an independent, non-governmental, non-profit organization dedicated to the development and strengthening of civil society in Cyprus. The Centre's programmes, projects and activities invest heavily in capacity-building for Civil Society, to strengthen organisations, promote active citizenship and empower vulnerable groups in Cyprus.

In February 2022, the NGO Support Centre launched a survey for mapping the needs and challenges of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in Cyprus, aiming at collecting representative data which would highlight the best ways to support the organisations and to maximise their social impact. The survey focused both on the needs of organisations in terms of organisational and management capacity but also on their needs in terms of their knowledge of EU rights and values as well as their role as contributors to social dialogue and advocates for human rights.

The survey had two main sections, the first aimed at collecting data regarding the profile of Civil Society Organisations and the second aimed at revealing the challenges regarding the existing framework for the operation and development of Civil Society Organisations in Cyprus. The survey was directed at CSOs active across the island and responses were collected between the 16th and the 28th of February 2022 from a total of sixty-six representatives of Civil Society Organisations. The survey was developed in Greek and English.

To complement the findings of the survey and to gather more in-depth knowledge and insight into the current challenges facing CSOs on the island, the NGO Support Centre implemented two Focus Group Discussions with CSO representatives, who participated voluntarily. The first discussion took place on the 28th of February 2022 with seven participants and the second on the 3rd of March 2022 with five participants. The discussions were structured around key questions emerging from the results of the 2022 survey and participants were consulted based on their experience and expertise in working with various target groups. The Focus Group Discussions were conducted in English.

The purpose of this report is to publish the results of the survey and the key findings of the focus group discussions and to provide a resource for stakeholders that can be used to inform their present and future actions aiming at supporting and strengthening civil society in Cyprus.

1.

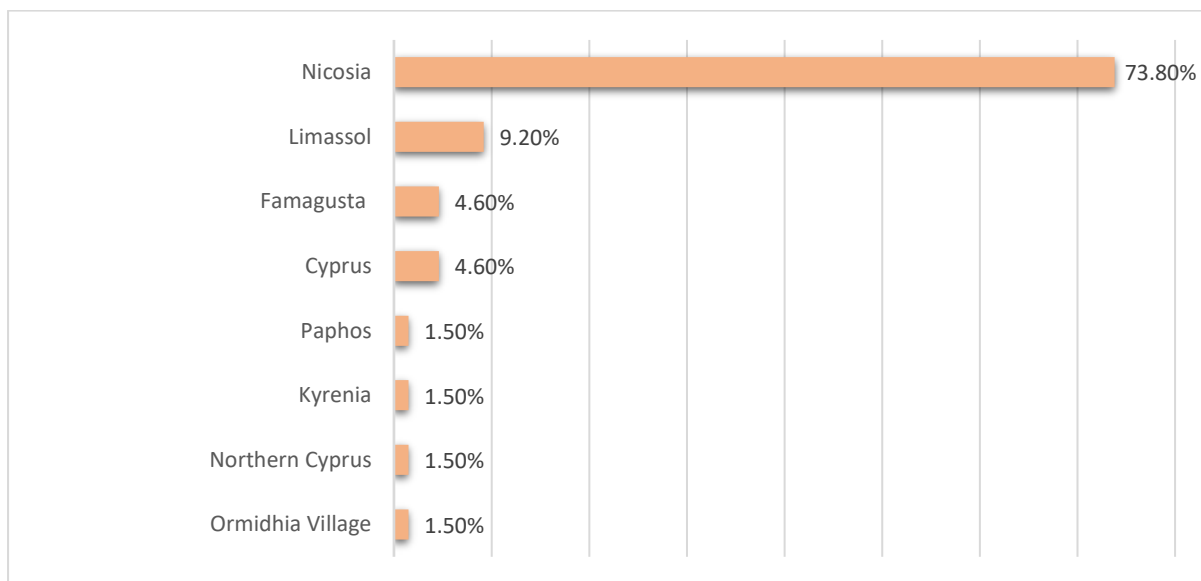
Survey Results

- The survey to map the needs and challenges of Civil Society Organisations in Cyprus was launched by the NGO Support Centre on the 16th of February 2022 and closed on 28th of February 2022.
- Respondents: Representatives (Board members, staff, volunteers) of Civil Society Organisations operating in the whole of Cyprus.
- Total responses: 66

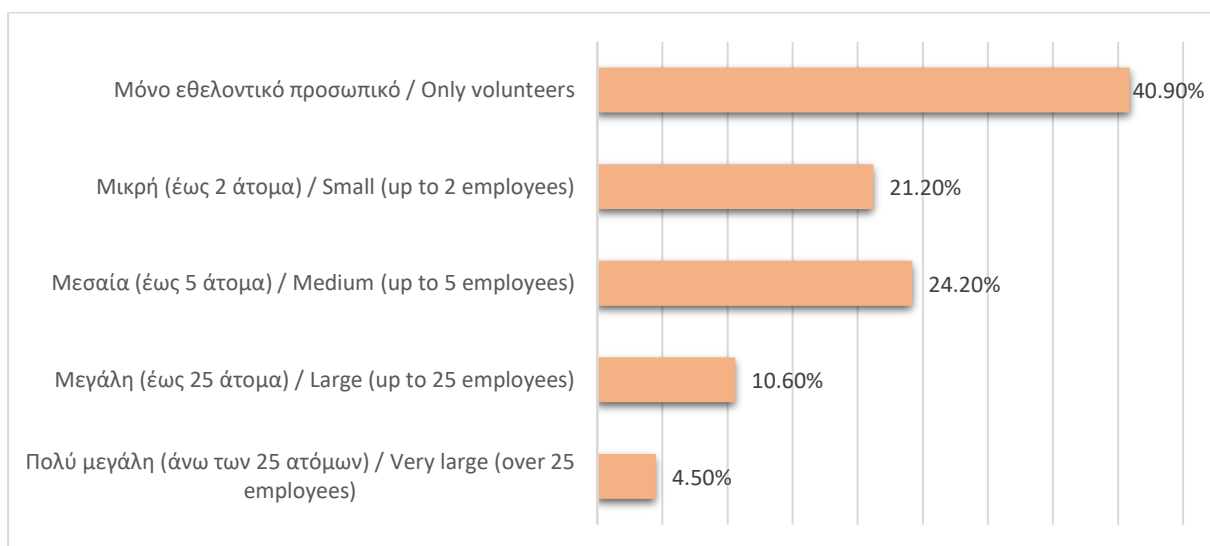
Section 1:

Profile of Civil Society Organisations

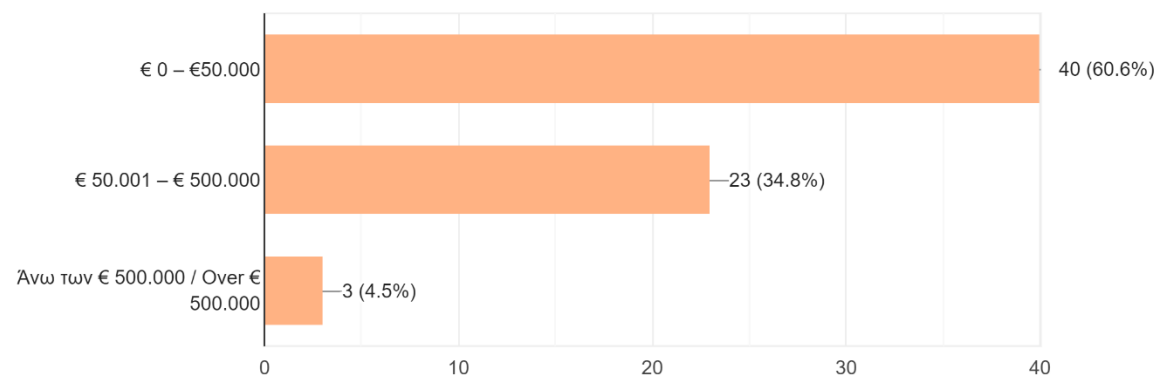
1. Location of organisation



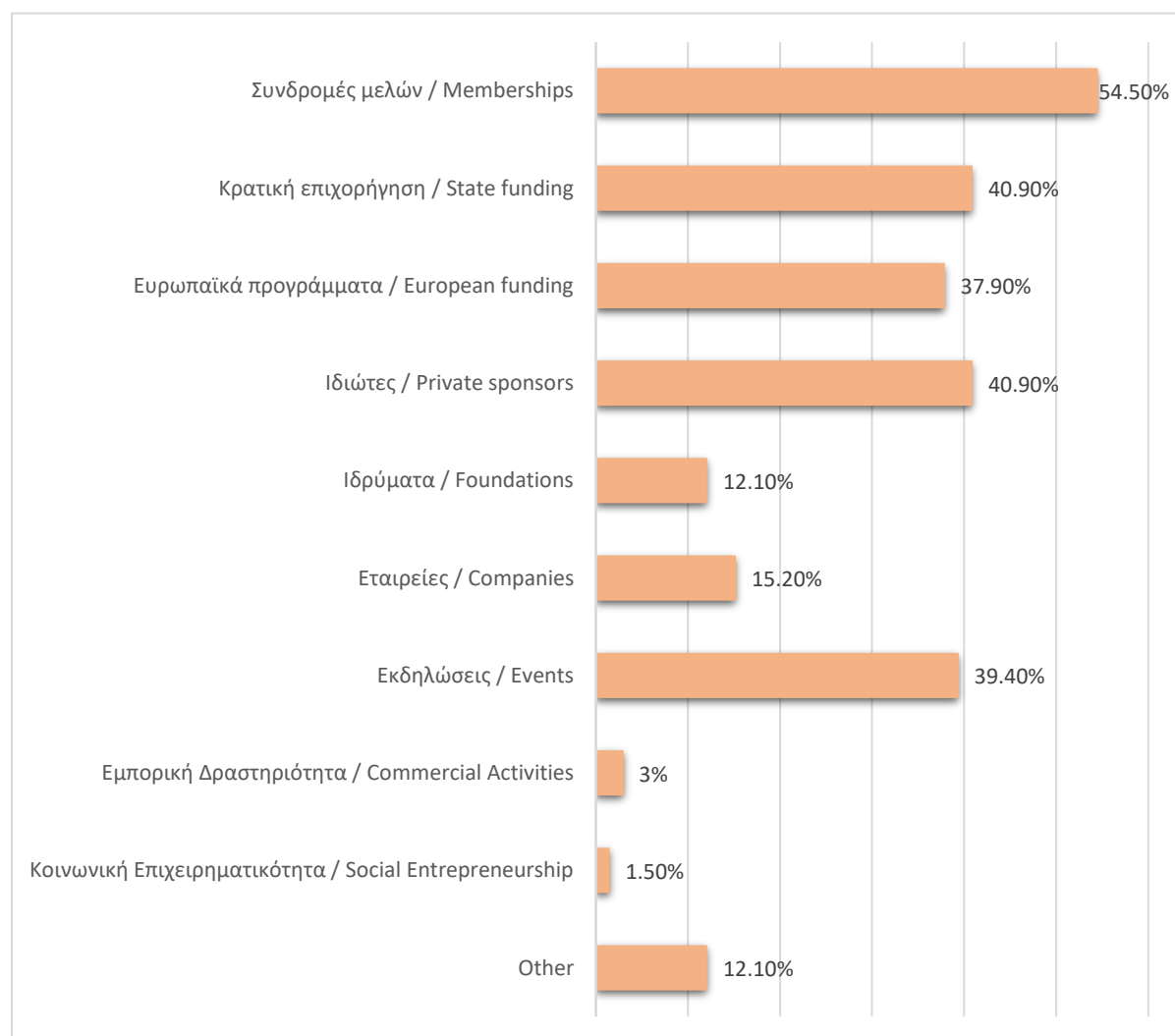
2. Size of organisation, based on paid employees



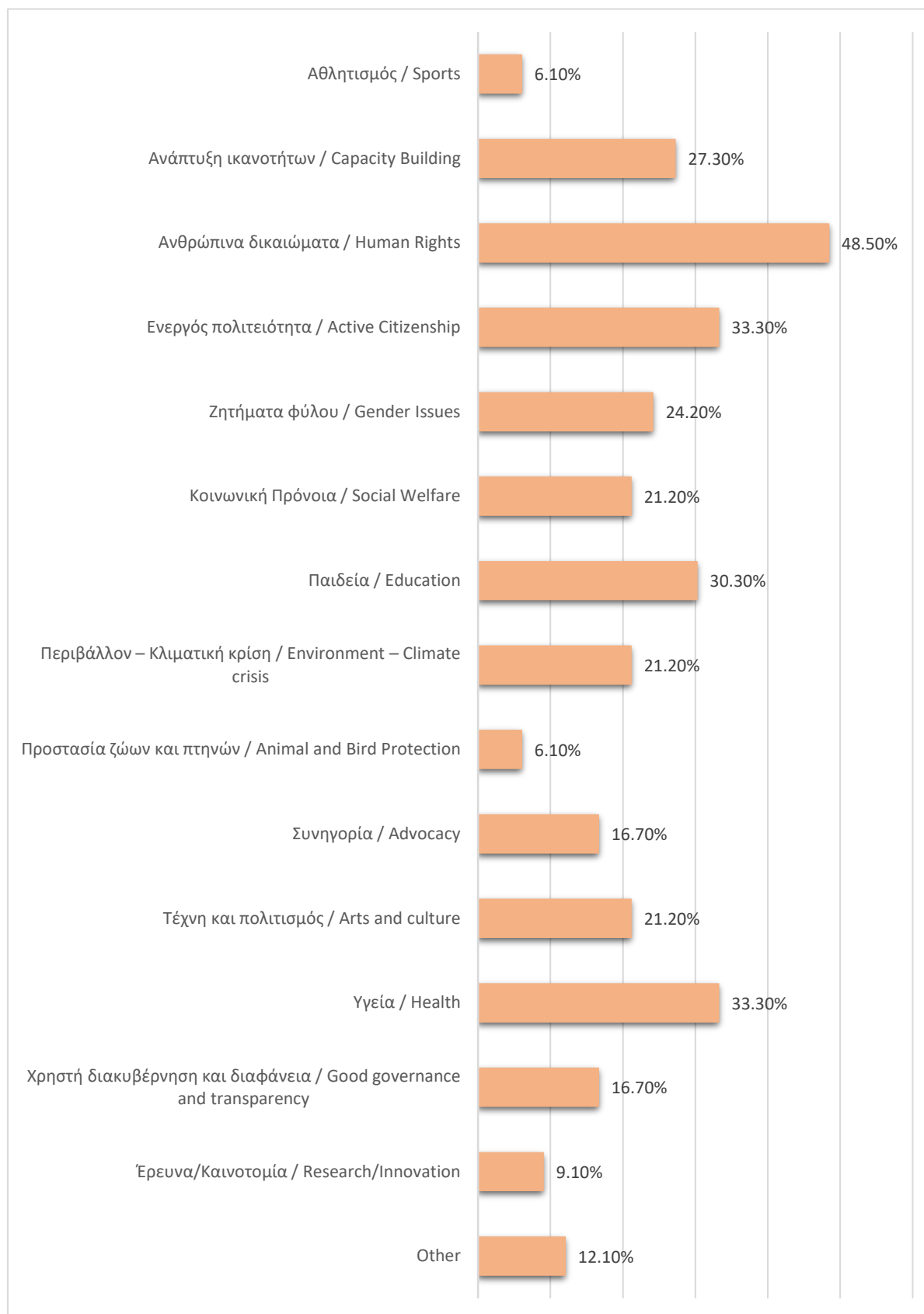
3. Annual turnover of the organisation, based on the 2020 financial year



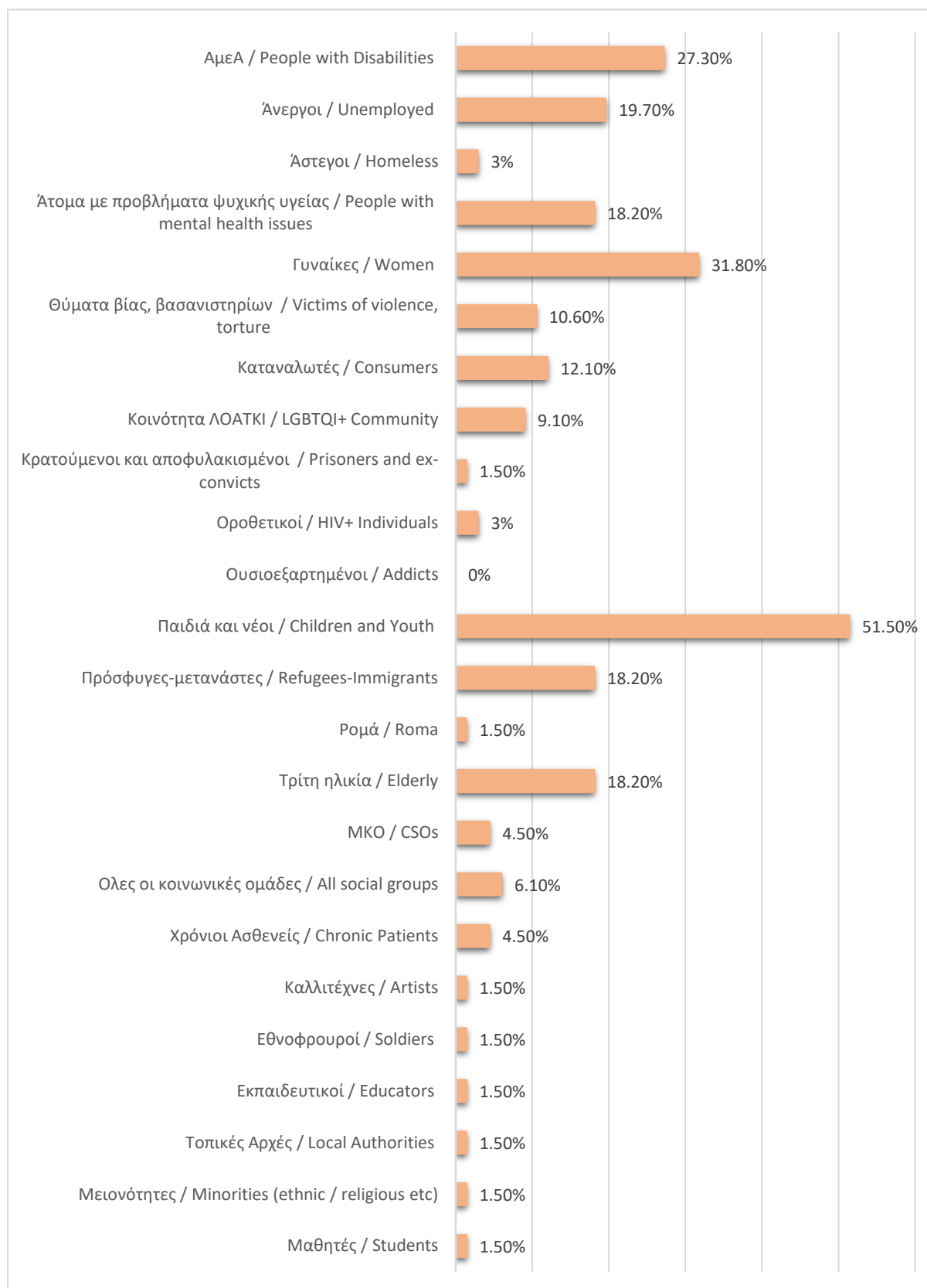
4. Main sources of income (choose up to three)



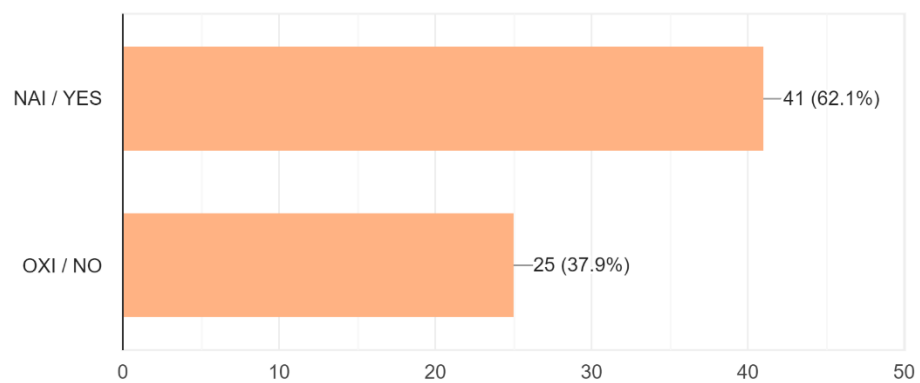
5. Main fields of action (choose up to five)



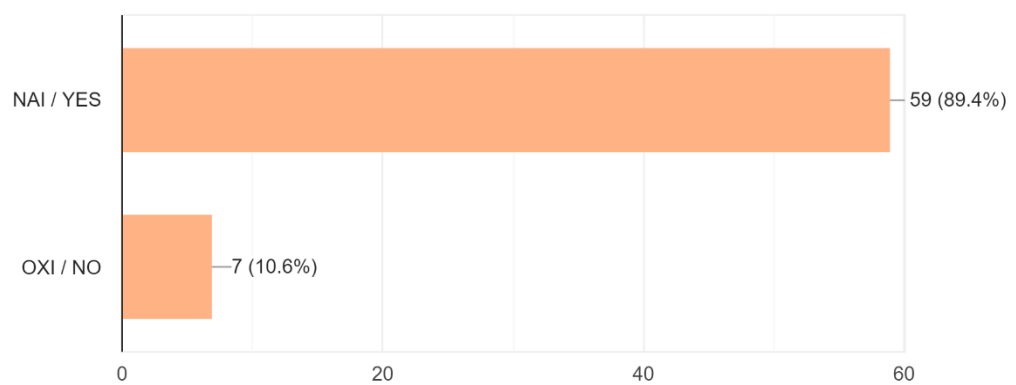
6. Main target groups (choose up to five)



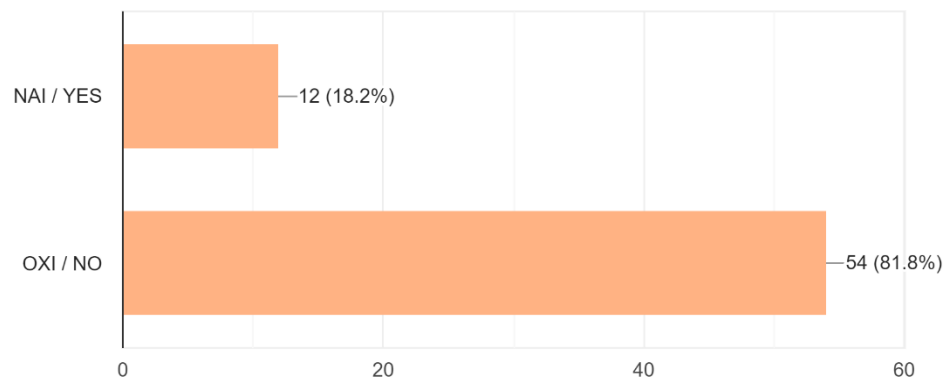
7. Have you integrated the gender dimension to the internal procedures of your organisation?



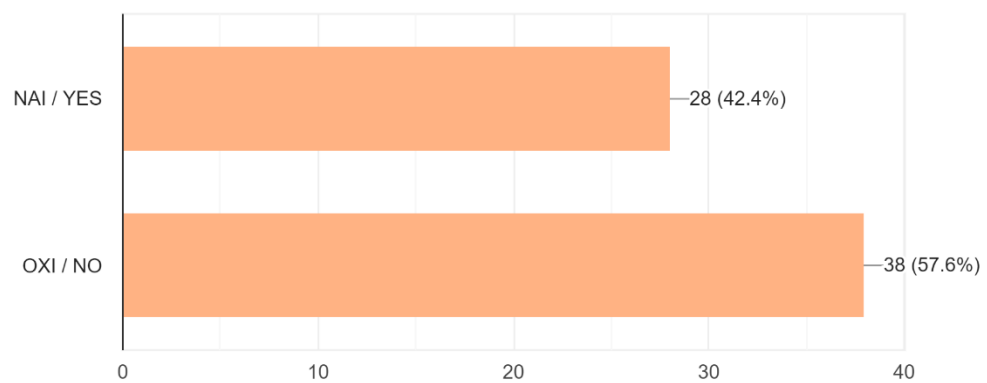
8. Does your organisation engage volunteers?



9. Does your organisation receive consistent funding from private sponsors?



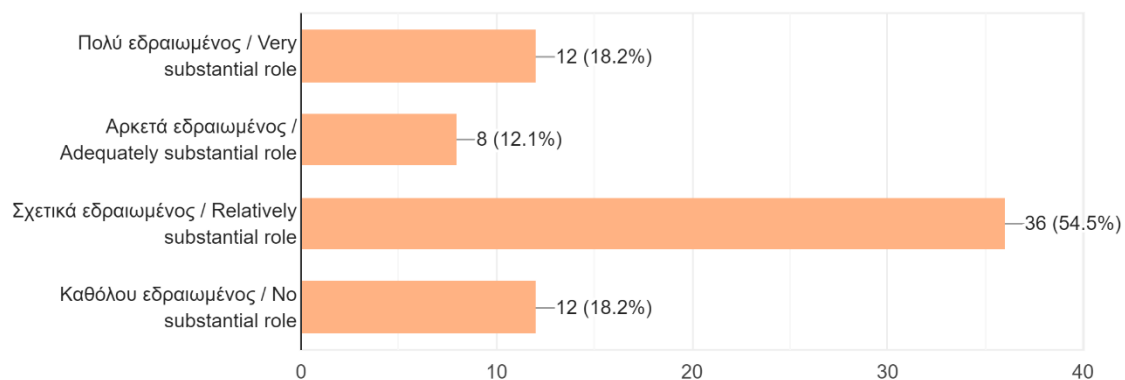
10. Is your organisation actively involved in intercommunal/bicommunal initiatives?



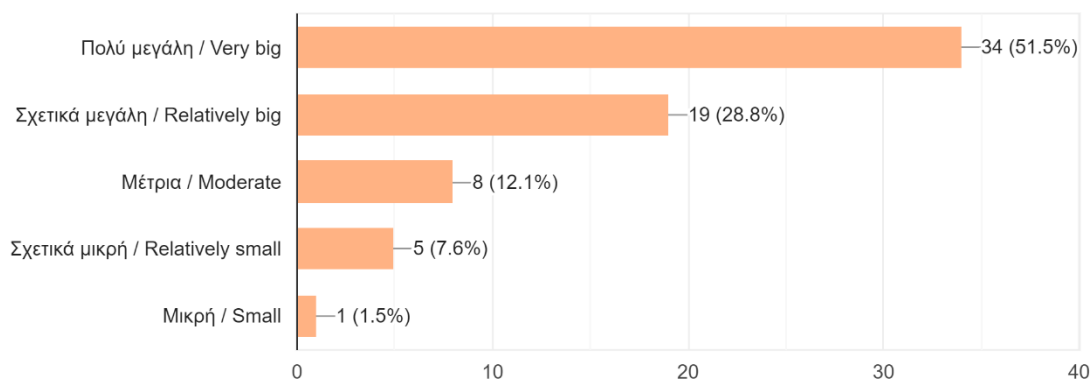
Section 2:

Existing framework for the operation and development of Civil Society Organisations

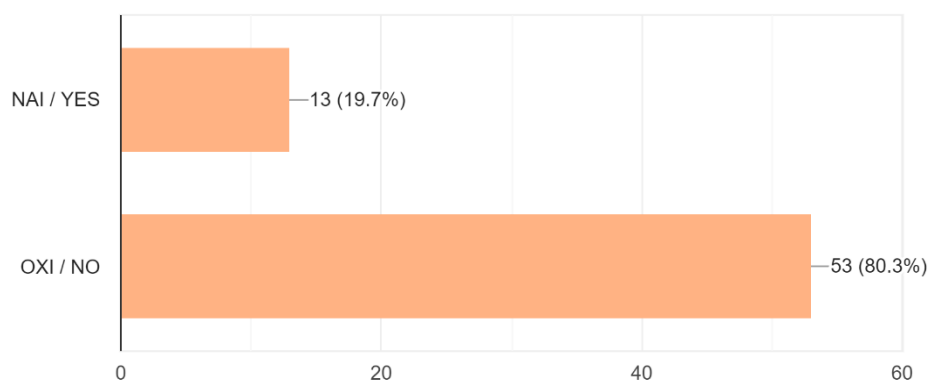
1. Do you consider that Civil Society organisations have a substantial role as essential contributors to social dialogue for the development of policies and strategies in Cyprus?



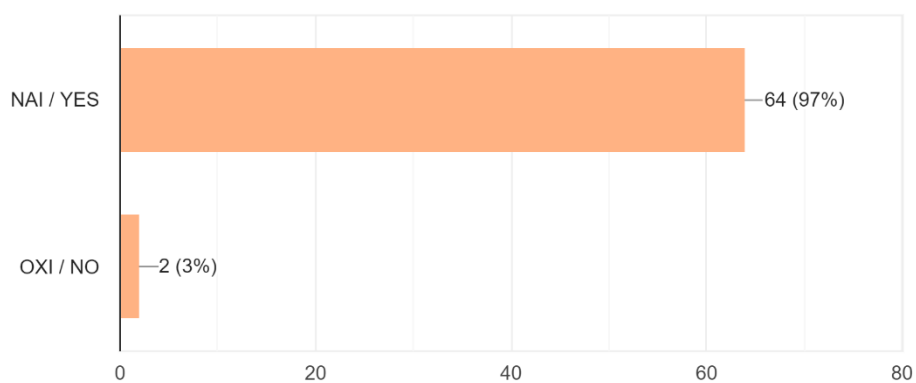
2. How do you assess the need for acquiring funding towards the sustainability of your organisation in this current period?



3. Do you consider that the existing funding programmes available to Civil Society organisations are sufficient for developing their activities and achieving the desired results?



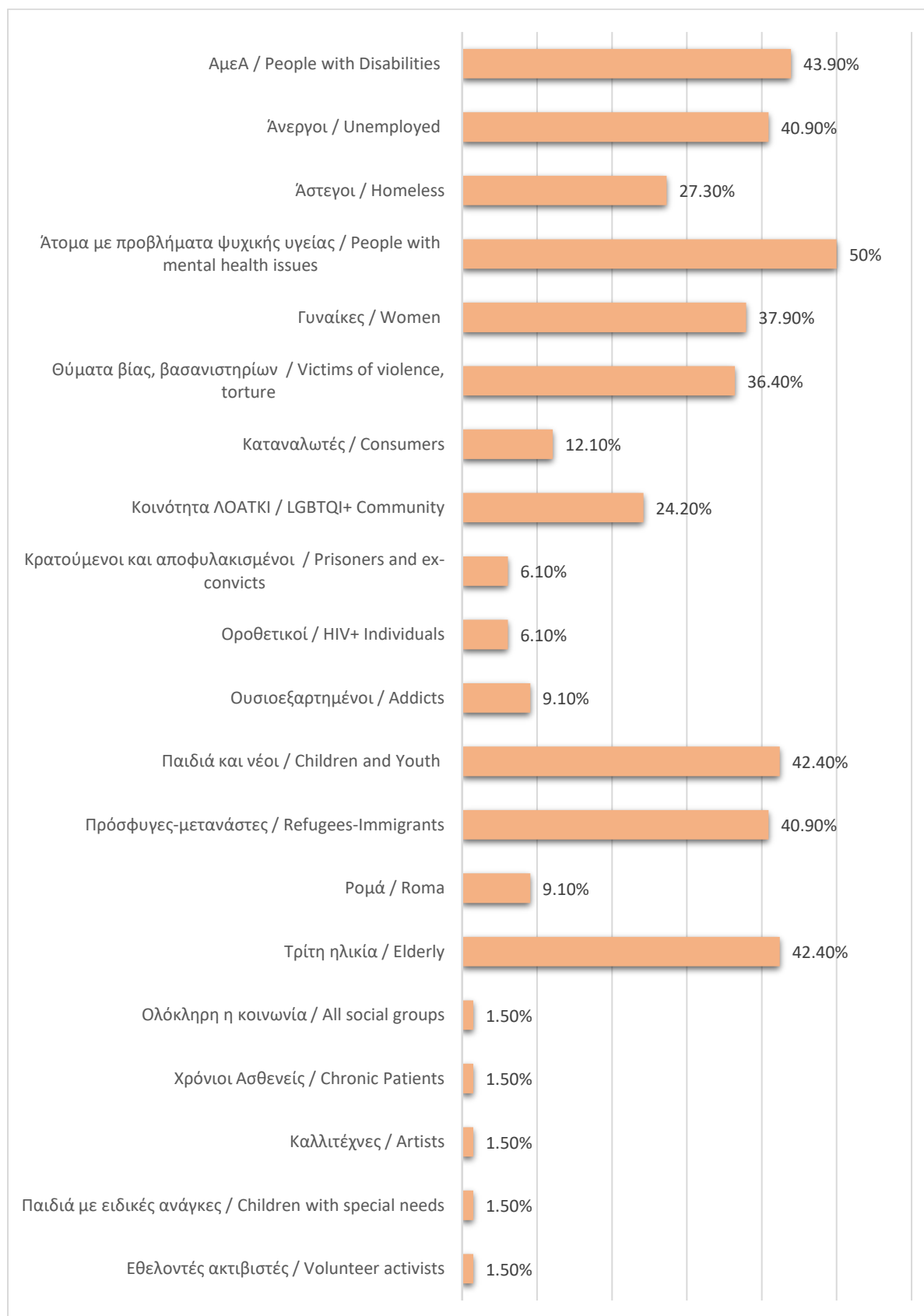
4. Do you believe that small Civil Society organisations face increased difficulties in ensuring funding for the development of their actions?



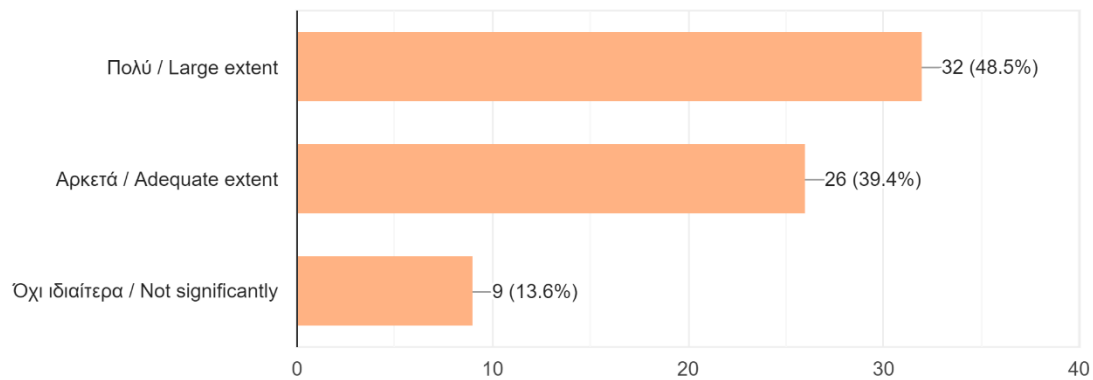
5. Choose the forms of intervention that in your opinion need to be strengthened in the immediate future (choose up to five)



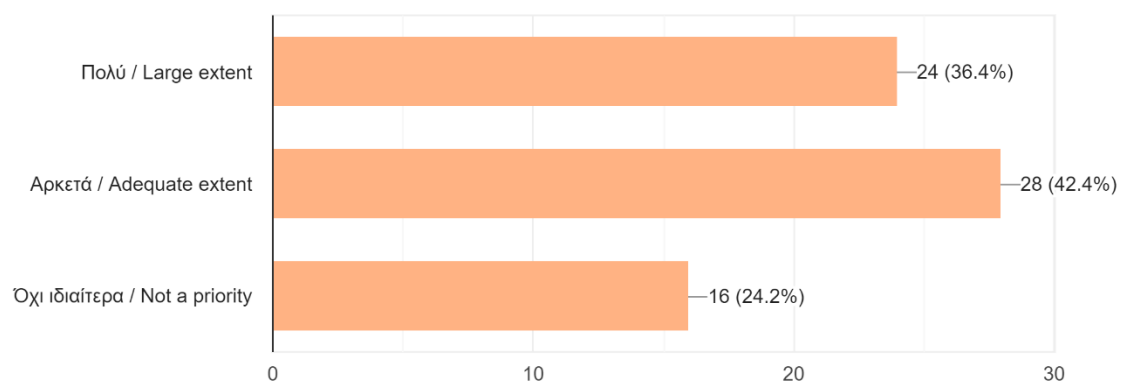
6. Choose the target groups that you deem to need urgent support (choose up to five)



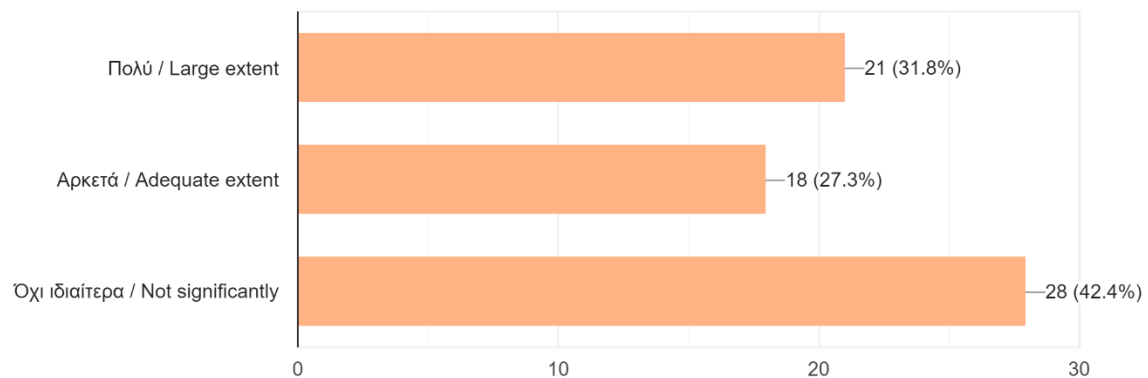
7. To what extent does your organisation invest in the implementation of awareness-raising actions?



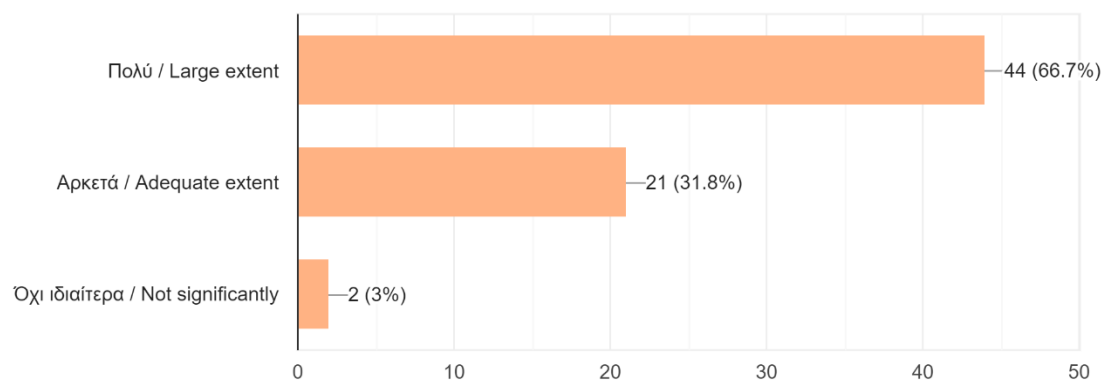
8. To what extent is the development of actions to strengthen open dialogue processes a priority for your organisation?



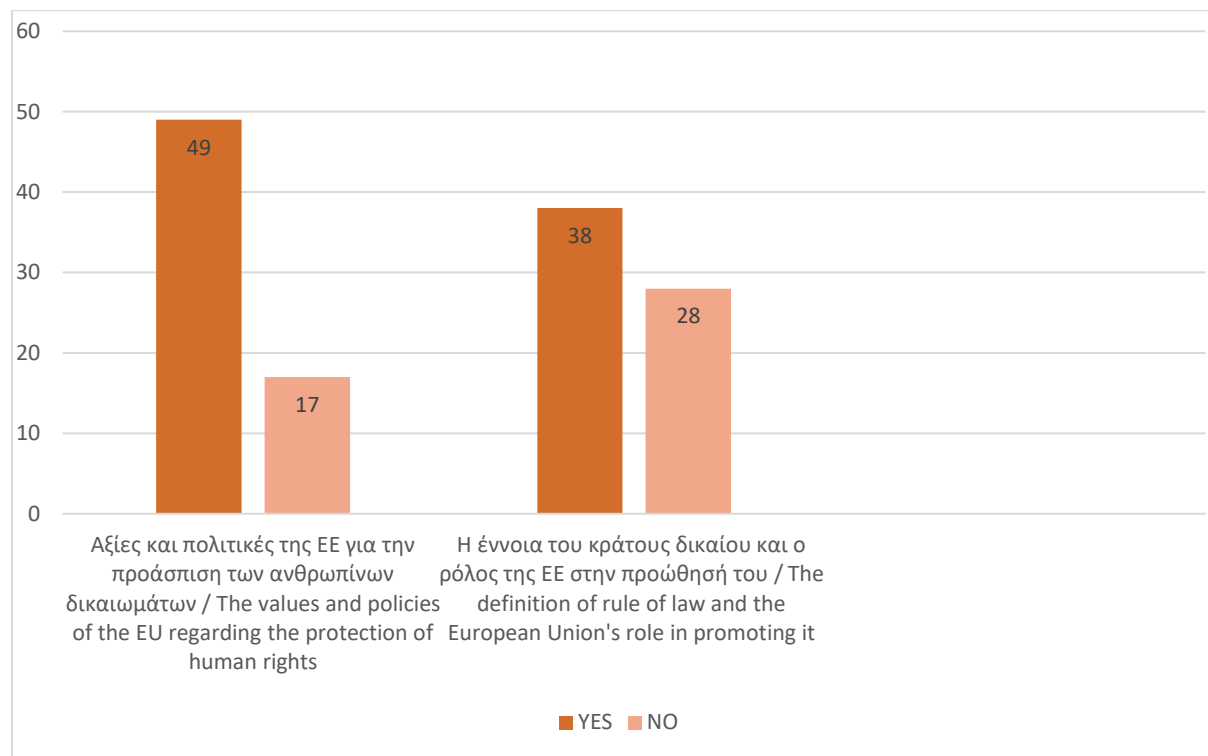
9. To what extent does your organisation prioritise the creation of initiatives that aim to improve transparency and good governance within Civil Society organisations?



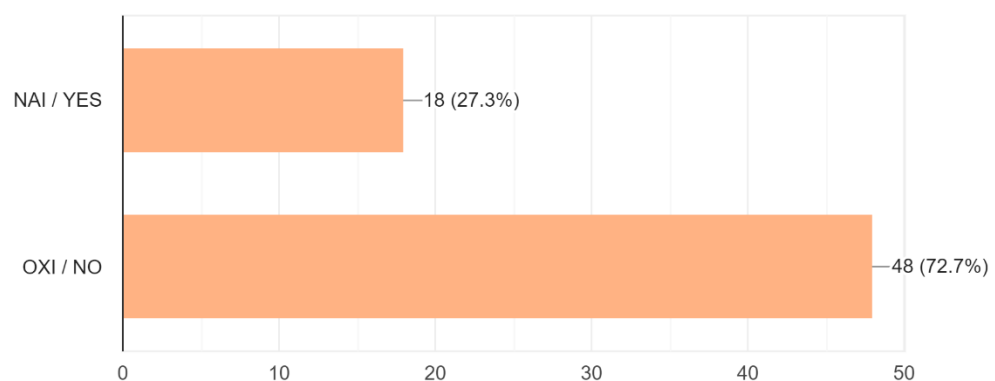
10. To what extent do you consider that capacity building aiming at strengthening Civil Society is necessary?



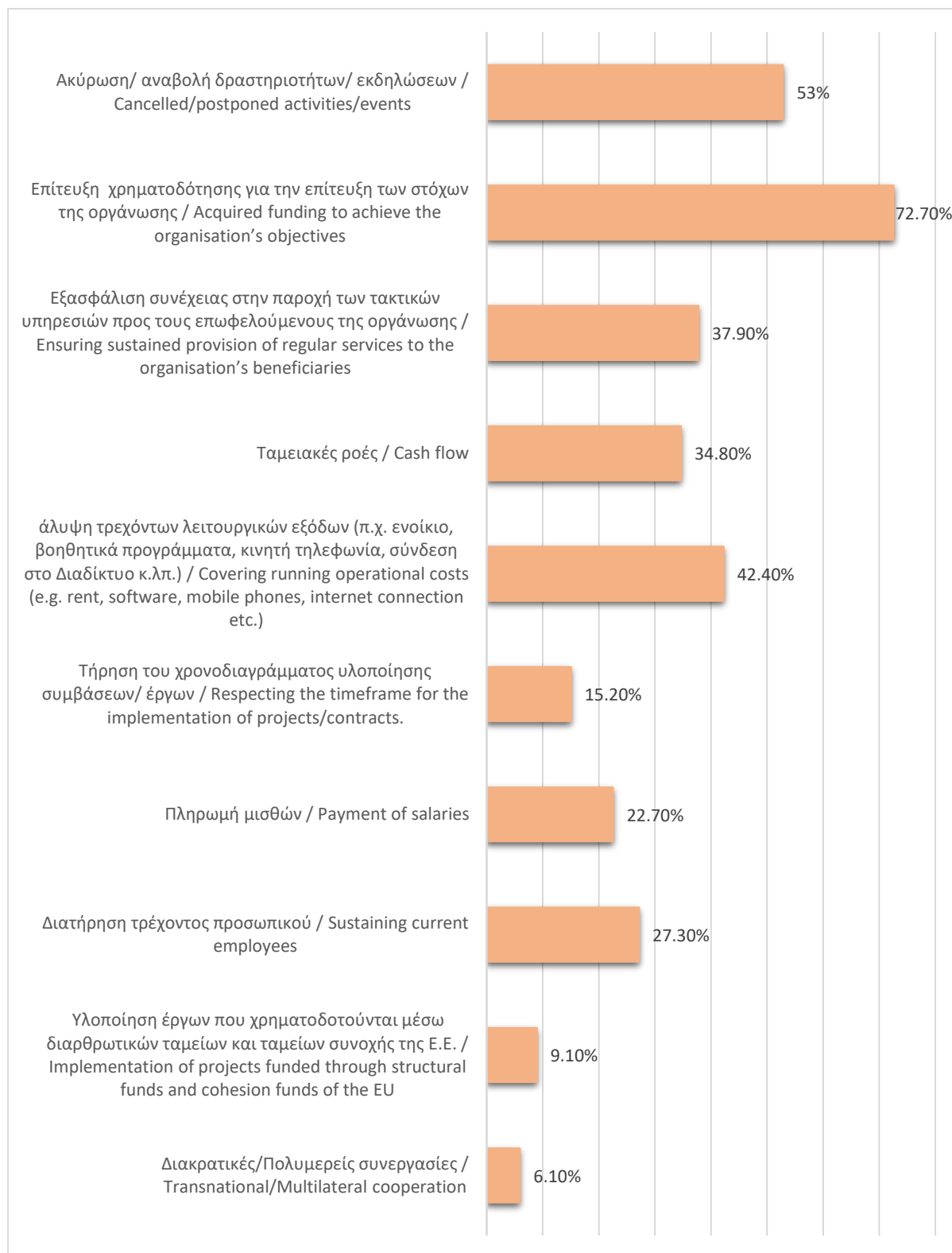
11. Do you believe that your organisation has sufficient knowledge regarding:



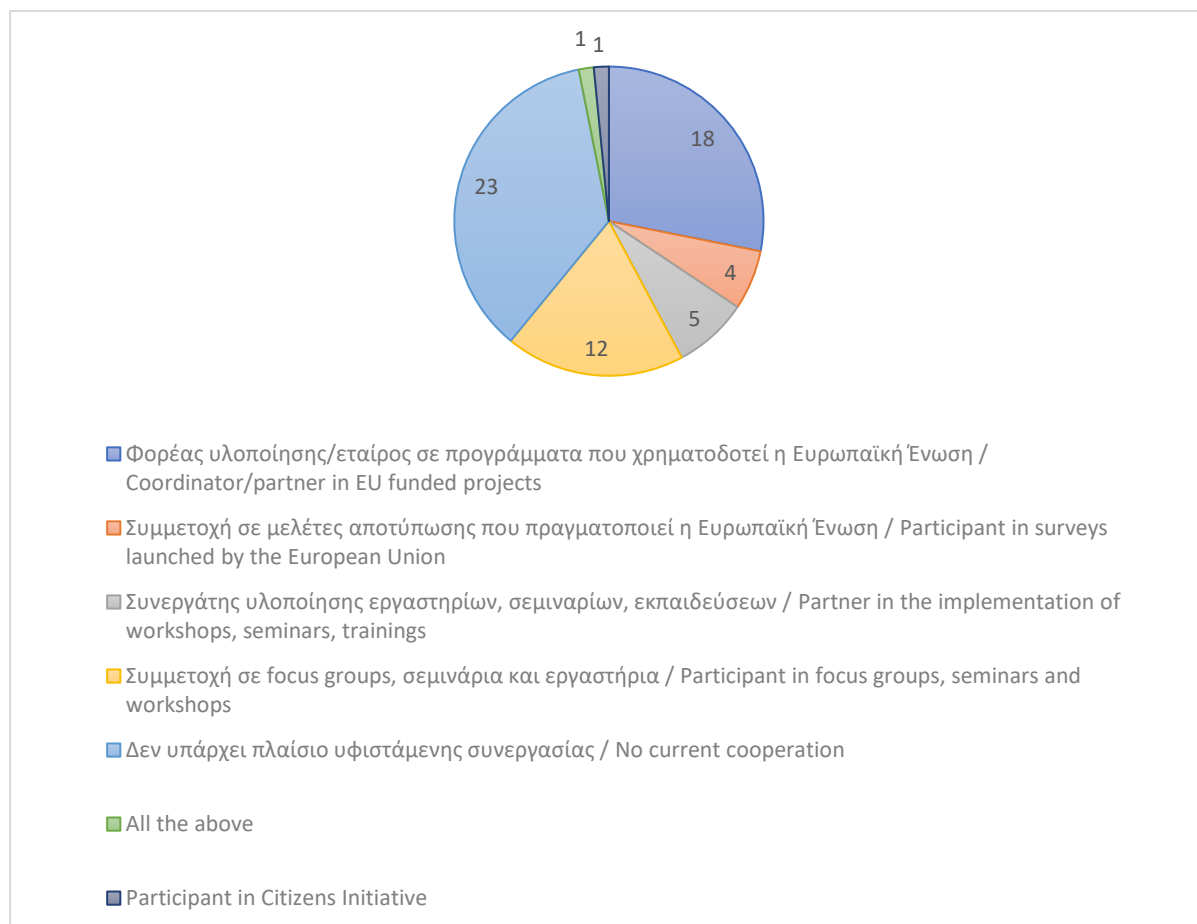
12. Do you believe that there are sufficient community initiatives that are based on the principle of “active citizenship”?



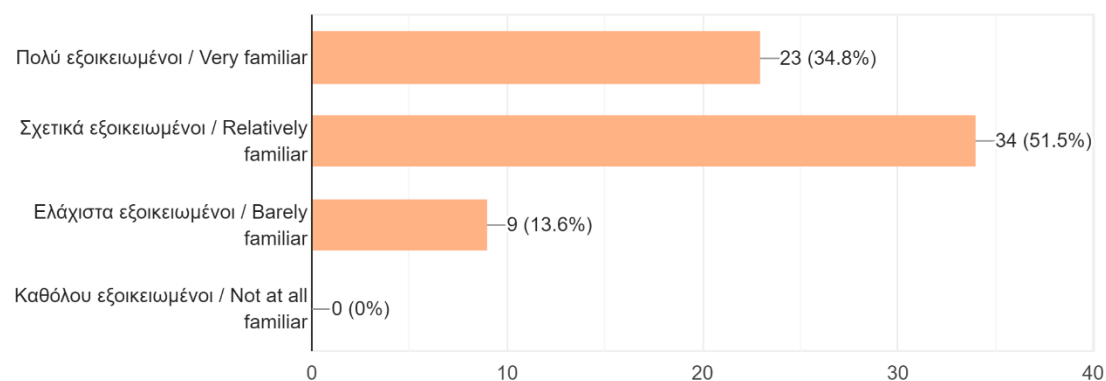
13. Indicate the three most important challenges that you believe will greatly or significantly affect Civil Society organisations in the next six months



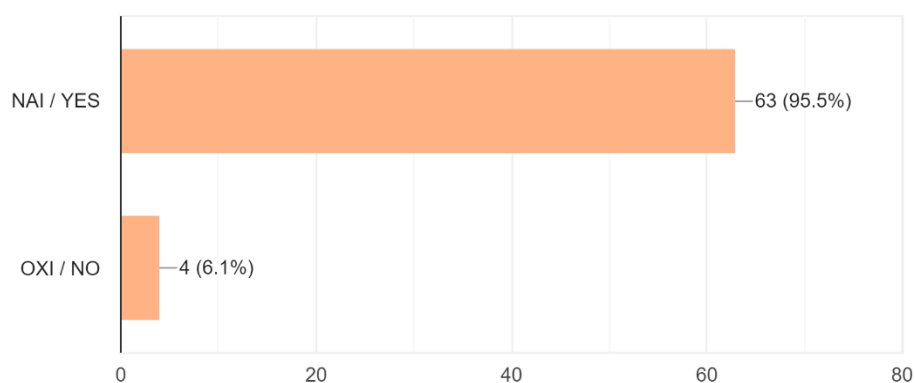
14. Which of the phrases below best describe the relationship between your organisation and the European Union?



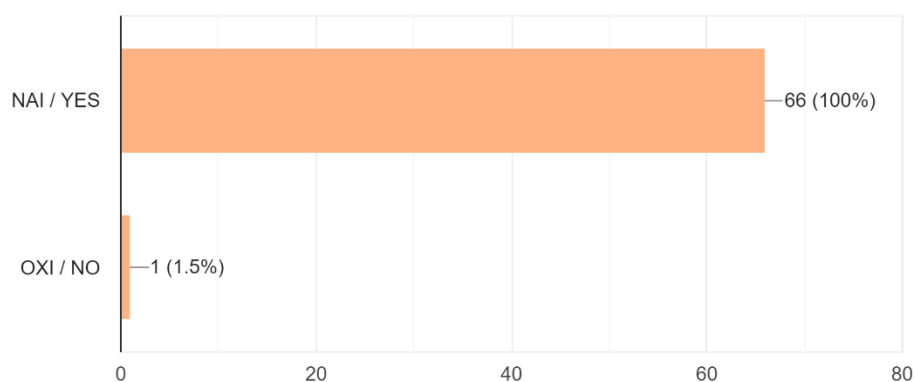
15. How familiar are you with the values of the European Union?



16. Do you believe that the European Union should establish more funding programmes aiming at supporting and strengthening Civil Society?



17. Do you believe there is a need for more programmes that focus on knowledge exchange between Civil Society organisations in different member states?



2.

Key Findings of Focus Group Discussions

- The NGO Support Centre implemented two Focus Group Discussions with CSO representatives on the 28th of February 2022 and the 3rd of March 2022.
- Total Participants: 12 representatives (Board members, staff, volunteers) of Civil Society Organisations operating in Cyprus.
- The discussions outlined in this chapter were structured around key questions emerging from the survey. The findings are based on the opinions and views expressed by participants of the Focus Groups, as extracted from transcripts of the audio recorded conversations, as well as notetaking by members of the NGO Support Centre staff during the discussion.

1. The role of civil society in social dialogue

What can be done to support the role of CSOs as partners in social dialogue?

Most participants stressed the lack of a structured dialogue with Civil Society on all levels. It was noted that there is no mechanism that places civil society as a legitimate

“In Cyprus the civil society doesn’t hold a legitimate space as a stakeholder” – Focus Group participant

stakeholder in social dialogue and policymaking processes in Cyprus and no legal framework or established procedure to determine its role. The need for the development of a formal process supported by a legal framework defining the participation of civil society as a partner in social dialogue was expressed by various participants. This would oblige the government to have a real dialogue with all stakeholders, not just those that are usually invited to consultations for different social issues in Cyprus.

Some participants suggested that raising awareness on all levels on the importance and legitimacy of civil society, as an advocate for fundamental rights and an essential contributor to social dialogue, is a necessary step forward. This includes an acknowledgement and appreciation of civil society by policymakers but also awareness raising among the wider public about the role of civil society. Knowledge and capacity building within civil society was also stressed as being vitally important, as many organisations in Cyprus lack experience in

“It is really important to support and empower CSOs to develop their capacity to run advocacy actions” – Focus Group participant

advocacy and in approaching policymakers to initiate dialogue. Organisations also face difficulties in ensuring access to information about opportunities to participate in social dialogue and about the

current developments in the policy field that affect the target groups they work with and for. Participants suggested that the development of simple guidelines with information for CSOs on how to participate in decision-making processes would be helpful, particularly to support smaller, volunteer-based, less experienced organisations.

2. Access to funding for small organisations

In what ways can small CSOs be supported to overcome the difficulty in ensuring funding for the development of their actions?

The majority of participants emphasized the value of networking and creating synergies in enabling small CSOs to access funding. By identifying common goals and playing to each-

other's strengths, organisations can overcome capacity limitations and submit proposals that align with their priorities. This depends on better communication, networking

"[...]it all boils down to creating synergies" – Focus Group participant

and mutual understanding within the civil society sector in Cyprus which is currently very dispersed. Peer to peer mentorship within civil society was also mentioned as a good practice to support small CSOs in all areas of their operation, including their fundraising capacity. Participants also expressed the need for organisations to engage in networking with other stakeholders, including the business sector, where there could be opportunities to source funding but also pro bono services to support their operation.

"[...] the lack of professional capacity, like staff, is one of the biggest challenges" – Focus Group participant

Lack of experience and expertise in proposal writing was identified as a main challenge small CSOs face, considering that they often depend on volunteer work and that they lack the funds to employ specialized

staff. According to some participants, access to EU funds, which is the main source of funding for civil society in Cyprus, is becoming increasingly competitive, leaving small, less experienced CSOs in a disadvantaged position. It was also noted that EU funding programmes are focusing more and more on a rights-based approach in civil society projects and small organisations in particular need support to build their capacity and develop their awareness to adopt a rights-based approach in their actions and align

"[...] organisations are struggling to fit their activities within the rights-based approach" – Focus Group participant

their priorities with those of the EU. Another point made was that the increasingly complicated process of navigating the legal framework for the operation of CSOs in Cyprus is a factor affecting organisations in establishing and maintaining their legal status, which consequently creates an obstacle to their access to funds.

Participants suggested that one way to address these issues would be to make smaller grant schemes available, with simplified proposal writing procedures and to minimise the administrative burden involved in accessing funding, to enable less experienced organisations with limited staff capacity to compete for funds. It was also emphasized that information and support to access funding opportunities should not only be concentrated in the urban areas but that there should be a deliberate effort to make information available to small organisations in rural, underserved areas to benefit all communities.

"It is important to find a way to make all the information available to everyone even organisations in rural areas." – Focus Group participant

3. Transparency and good governance

What can be done to enhance transparency and good governance within civil society?

“The sector needs to be self-governed” – Focus Group participant

Regarding the development of transparency and good governance within civil society organisations, participants focused on the need to educate and build the capacity of the

sector to establish and to follow self-governance models. It was noted that in Cyprus, the policing of organisations by the government to comply with laws, rules and regulations has not been successful as a strategy to support organisations in this domain and that approaches that prioritise providing information, education and capacity building are necessary.

Some participants shared that being members of European and international federations helped their organisation to develop the necessary tools in terms of transparency and good governance and that this experience can be applied to provide guidelines to other organisations to develop their own internal procedures. The

“[...] good governance has to do with Board of Directors and staff” – Focus Group participant

development of simple guidelines that can act as a standard template to be adopted and followed by CSOs to improve good governance, was supported as a way to address the needs of civil society in this area. Capacity building training and awareness raising were also recommended as a necessary step forward, noting that both Board members and staff/volunteers should be targeted, to clarify their roles and responsibilities and help organisations grow. It was also stated that caution is needed when requiring and creating these processes for CSOs, in order not to disregard the smaller organisations and their needs and capacities.

“CSOs are not really aware that being transparent or having good governance policies will benefit them in the end and increase the trust of the community” – Focus Group participant

Emphasis was placed on the need to create awareness around the importance of transparency and good governance for building the integrity of the sector and for collectively providing a more credible standing for the role of civil

society in the community. This could have a positive impact on the acknowledgement and appreciation of civil society both among its beneficiaries and among policymakers and government, according to participants. As part of this process, a suggestion was made that CSOs in Cyprus should be encouraged to publish their annual reports publicly and not only to submit them when reporting to the relevant authority.

4. Capacity building

Can you provide examples of what you would consider capacity building that strengthens civil society?

Most participants agreed that advocacy and communications are two main priority areas where civil society currently needs to be strengthened. These areas were identified as important for the development of individual organisations as well as the civil society sector as a whole. It was noted that CSOs need to improve their visibility and to develop their

“[...] you have to learn every day and adjust to a rapidly changing system” – Focus Group participant

communications skills to enhance their networking opportunities and reflect their work better to the wider public to ensure their engagement and support. Participants acknowledged that the

communications needs of CSOs are very wide covering various specific areas such as engaging with the public, engaging with media and countering misinformation. It was also noted that the needs of organisations are constantly changing according to new trends and realities and that emphasis should also be placed on supporting organisations and upskilling to adjust to the digital transition and make the most of digital tools.

Advocacy training was deemed essential to support the ability of civil society to effect change within society and to participate actively and effectively in social dialogue.

“My first priority would also be advocacy and reaching out to more rural areas of Cyprus as well” – Focus Group participant

Participants re-instated the need for

civil society to improve on reaching out to CSOs in rural areas with information and support, noting that this is necessary to determine the different needs and dynamics within different environments and that this also requires better advocacy and campaigning skills within the sector.

“People like to see practical solutions and real-world examples” – Focus Group participant

Knowledge exchange and the sharing of success stories and best practices between CSOs from different countries were also mentioned as effective ways to

support organisations in Cyprus to adopt innovative practices and strengthen their impact. Study visits and transnational exchanges were suggested as a medium for capacity building that is currently underdeveloped in Cyprus. Participants also identified a gap in the support to CSOs that concerns capacity building for Board members, to be better aware of their role and responsibilities within their organisations and to establish a healthier communication with staff members and volunteers. It was further noted that acquired knowledge is often lost

when changes are made to the Board and that it is important to find a way to transfer this knowledge and experience so that there aren't any gaps created for the organisation.

"[...] we need to have capacity building for Board members" – Focus Group participant

In terms of organisational capacity, a special mention was made to volunteer management as an area which is not adequately understood or addressed within civil society, and which is affecting the willingness of volunteers to engage with organisations. It was also stated that management for CSOs should generally not be overlooked as an important area for capacity building as it forms the basis of decision-making, communication, and progress within organisations.

5. EU values, human rights and the rule of law

In addition to values and policies, would you consider knowledge of EU law and international human rights conventions important in the context of supporting civil society?

Many participants acknowledged the importance of the knowledge of EU law and international human rights treaties for civil society to be able to support its priorities and defend democracy and civic space in

"[...] democracy and the space in which we work are based on these principles and values" – Focus Group participant

Cyprus. A strong awareness of the values and policies of the EU, especially regarding human rights violations, was identified by some participants as essential to strengthen the advocacy actions of organisations. Some current examples that were given included the need to defend the rights of people with disabilities who face reduced mobility at times of war or catastrophe as well as the limited capacity of people with disabilities to engage in online activities and their right to participation during the Covid-19 pandemic. It was also noted that organisations can collaborate and coordinate advocacy actions transnationally based on EU law and international conventions.

Some participants representing CSOs operating in the Turkish Cypriot community expressed a level of uncertainty regarding the effectiveness of applying EU law and EU treaties to the work of civil society across the island due to the current political context and the fact that the governing authorities in their community might not feel the same pressure to be in line with EU law. Questions were also raised regarding the credibility of international treaties, in the face of current global developments. It was noted, however, that a general awareness of EU rights and values is important for CSOs to be able to influence policy towards the direction of upholding fundamental rights that can be beneficial towards everyone on the island. In this regard, the importance of establishing links between CSOs in both communities was also

stressed as a necessary step to ensure a wider impact and awareness regarding the protection human rights.

NGO Support Centre

27, Ezekia

Papaioannou street

1075 Nicosia Cyprus

+357 22 875099

www.ngo-sc.org

info@ngo-sc.org

