

Study on CSO Communication and Trust Narratives

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The aim of the project is to strengthen the capacities of civil society organizations (CSOs) to enhance resilience in communities against disinformation, fake news, and information manipulation. At the same time, this research examines public perceptions of CSOs and their activities, as well as identifies the key factors influencing the formation of trust and credibility.

The research findings aim at supporting CSOs in improving their strategic communications, strengthening public trust, and promoting effective cooperation with the general public and state institutions.

The views and conclusions expressed in this research paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- **CSO** – Civil Society Organization
- **FG** – Focus Group
- **FGD** – Focus Group Discussion
- **LGA** – Local Government Authorities
- **NGO** – Non-Governmental Organization

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community meetings, focus group discussions, and online anonymous surveys conducted in three regions of Armenia served as the basis for developing an in-depth, multi-layered, and systemic picture of the relationships among CSOs, citizens, local self-government bodies (LGAs), regional authorities, and state institutions.

The results of the analysis show that CSOs continue to be key actors in community-based social protection, support to vulnerable groups, crisis response, and the resolution of local issues. However, the full realization of their impact is restricted by institutional, communicative, and cultural gaps.

CSOs' self-perception as rapid-response, flexible, and community-oriented actors aligns with the observations of LGAs and state bodies; nevertheless, the latter often emphasize the irregular and informal nature of cooperation difficulties in data exchange, and the not always localized approaches of programs. The absence of institutional mechanisms for beneficiary identification, joint needs assessment, and notification leads to overlapping interventions, uneven distribution of assistance, and, in some cases, a decline in trust.

The insufficient development of participatory culture, the material dependency of residents' motivation, and the instability of CSO-community relations limit the long-term impact of programs. At the same time, in crisis situations, the lack of coordinated response, as well as interregional, regional, and intercommunity cooperation, becomes particularly evident, significantly reducing the effectiveness and timeliness of interventions.

The analysis confirms that strengthening mutual trust, accountability, and partnership-based cooperation between public administration and civil society requires institutional solutions, including the clarification of roles, joint planning, secure data-sharing tools and procedures, cross-sectoral coordination platforms, as well as interregional, regional, and intercommunity coordination mechanisms and permanent communication formats.

The research findings demonstrate that, in order to fully utilize the potential of CSOs and strengthen the role of civil society, what is required is not fragmented cooperation but stable, continuous, and clearly structured partnership among all stakeholders, based on shared goals, mutual trust, and a long-term vision. This approach can serve as a sustainable foundation for effective community development, strengthened social protection, and the construction of a society resilient to crises.

INTRODUCTION

In Armenia's community-based environment, civil society organizations (CSOs) continue to occupy a key and multi-layered role. In the fields of local social services, humanitarian assistance, educational and inclusive interventions, as well as the protection of vulnerable groups, CSOs create additional capacities that the state system, particularly under crisis situations, is not able to fully ensure. At the same time, their activities are currently at a point of transformation, where not only the consolidation of previous successes of fragmented cooperation becomes evident, but also the need to reach a new level of cooperation within the community-state-civil society triangle.

This analysis aims to synthesize the results of focus group discussions, community meetings, and online anonymous surveys conducted in three regions, including Lori, Shirak, and Syunik, in order to reveal how CSOs perceive their own role and how this perception is reflected and, at times, reinterpreted by other actors within the community ecosystem, including local self-government bodies (LGAs), regional state authorities, social services, the private sector, the media, representatives of the academic and expert community, and community residents, including vulnerable groups.

The research is built on a methodological approach aimed not only at collecting opinions, but also at identifying systemic patterns, strengths and weaknesses, gaps in cooperation mechanisms, and the frameworks of the "architecture of trust" within communities. The research incorporates both discourse and narrative analysis and a method of juxtaposing the positions of community actors, allowing for the identification not only of immediate responses but also of their underlying logic.

The picture formed during the regional meetings is both diverse and interconnected: it shows that CSOs view themselves as "coordinating, complementary, and supportive" actors within the community social environment, yet often operate under conditions of resource constraints, project-based instability, and "fragile" trust. On the other hand, community and state actors perceive CSOs as necessary, but not always systematized partners, whose engagement, according to their assessment, may at times be situational, intermittent, or insufficiently localized.

This analysis seeks to decode this dual perception by demonstrating where the successes of cooperation are more visibly layered, where institutional and communicative limitations persist, what risks arise from gaps in data exchange, and why it is important to reconsider the culture of state-CSO-LGA relations by situating

it not within a logic of control or unilateral and non-objective criticism, but within a framework of shared responsibility on certain issues, mutually constructive criticism, and partnership-based interaction.

Finally, the study also aims to bridge the observations recorded at the community level with a broader strategic context, highlighting the opportunities through which CSOs can become not only service providers, but also systemic actors shaping community development, social protection and inclusion, as well as overall stability and resilience. The presented analysis simultaneously maps existing challenges and emphasizes those directions of cooperation that can transform the current logic of the community environment by strengthening the unity, impact, and public trust of civil society.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE RESEARCH

The methodology of this research is built around the idea that public attitudes toward civil society and the framework of trust can be understood only through the synthesis of multi-layered and interconnected processes. The CSO-public interaction is not a linear phenomenon measurable along a single line; it is shaped by the ***socio-political environment, the media landscape, institutional trust, public awareness, value-based perceptions, and, at times, labeling and long-term narratives***. Accordingly, the research methodology was selected in a way that allows for the simultaneous ***reflection of citizens' individual experiences, organizations' communicative behavior and approaches, as well as the influence of broader public discourses and narratives and systemic gaps in strategic communication***.

The research was conducted using mixed methods, combining primary data analysis with qualitative and quantitative approaches, while also ensuring cross-validation of data. In the first phase, a secondary data analysis was carried out, within the framework of which existing research sources were analyzed. This phase was important not only for establishing a contextual foundation, but also for the development of the questionnaires, clearly defining the criteria by which public and partner attitudes and trust toward CSOs would subsequently be assessed.

Fieldwork was conducted using purposive sampling in three regions of the Republic of Armenia – Lori, Shirak, and Syunik, selected to represent regional and socio-economic diversity. These regions were also target regions for the “People in Need” organization in terms of programming and presence¹. Due to the nature of the sampling, this research is not representative of the entire territory of the Republic of Armenia, and the observations presented in the study do not necessarily apply to other regions.

These three regional environments made it possible to observe different patterns of public perceptions, ranging from community-level diversity to active civic environments. Accordingly, ***one community meeting-discussion (a total of 3) and two focus group discussions (a total of 6) were conducted in each region, involving approximately 100 participants in total***. This allowed for the simultaneous examination of broad community audiences and sector-specific professional perspectives, as well as the positions of state and local self-government bodies.

¹ Accordingly, the participants of the study are also predominantly partners or beneficiaries of the “People in Need” organization, and the views presented in the research may reflect the sector in which the Organization operates.

Each focus group discussion included 8-12 participants. Some of them involved representatives of CSOs, while others included communication specialists, lawyers, journalists, various actors from the media field, as well as experts from the academic community, representatives of local self-government bodies, and representatives of state institutions.

The community meeting-discussions, each attended by 15-20 community members, ensured multi-profile representation, including community residents, youth, students, representatives of local businesses, community activists, experts from the health and education sectors, as well as representatives of vulnerable groups, including displaced persons. This format created a broad field for observing public attitudes, where citizens' value-based motivations, experiences, as well as trust-enhancing or trust-undermining factors emerged.

Such comprehensive, participatory, and inclusive approaches made it possible to identify the internal and external narratives and dynamics that shape CSOs' self-perception and public attitudes toward them.

At the end of each discussion, with the participants of the meeting, excluding CSO representatives, a short online anonymous survey was conducted in order to complement the qualitative narratives with quantitative data. Participants completed a semi-structured questionnaire consisting of 11 questions, in which they assessed their experience of communication with CSOs. Although these data do not provide a statistically representative picture of the population, they were important for obtaining an overall internal mapping of trends and sentiments, as well as for triangulation with qualitative data.

During the analytical phase, the method of critical discourse analysis and its sub-methods from discursive and narrative perspectives were applied, combined with quantitative data. ***Narrative analysis made it possible to identify recurring narratives and patterns through which communities interpret the role of CSOs, such as "helpers," "external agenda," "grant consumption (eaters)," "community supporters," and others.*** Discourse analysis helped to understand the frameworks through which the public perceives civil society and the value-based prisms through which its activities are assessed. The analysis also revealed citizens' emotional responses, including trust, skepticism, indifference, distrust, and others.

The methodological approach is based on clearly defined criteria that guided both the development of the questionnaire and the analytical foundation of the research. These criteria include the level of knowledge and awareness of CSOs, the structural conditions of public trust, the scope of activities and cooperation, accessibility and comprehensibility of communication, narrative influences,

dynamics of public participation, as well as the impact of the overall environment of institutional trust.

This methodological framework made it possible not only to obtain comprehensive and reliable data, but also to understand not only what the public thinks about CSOs, but also why it thinks so, which narratives guide these perceptions, and which conditions form the basis of trust or distrust. The research has become both a concentrated reflection of community experiences and a guide for civil society, aimed at planning and implementing communication through more strategic approaches by applying targeted, accessible, transparent, motivating, and trust-building tactics and methodologies.

PART 1

THE CONTEXT OF CSO COMMUNICATION AND TRUST NARRATIVES TOWARD CIVIL SOCIETY IN ARMENIA: EXISTING EXPERIENCE AND STUDIES

In Armenia, perceptions and discourses regarding civil society are formed within a multi-layered environment where the influences of *access to information, media consumption, the socio-political context, institutional and horizontal trust, as well as narratives that have been formed and entrenched over the years, intersect and overlap*. In other words, citizens' attitudes toward CSOs cannot be viewed as the result of a single factor; rather, they emerge through the combined impact of dynamic, continuous, and interacting processes.

This section of the study presents the full set of multi-layered factors that shape public perceptions of civil society in Armenia. The analysis is based on the synthesis of existing studies, which together reveal the multi-faceted and multi-layered contextual picture of the relationship between CSOs and the society.

Low awareness as a key factor: One of the most evident issues in perceptions of civil society begins with the low level of public awareness. The Caucasus Research Resource Centers – Armenia (CRRC – Armenia) study "*In the Triangle of Awareness, Perceptions, and Engagement*" (2022) shows that a significant portion of Armenia's population is unable to accurately define the concepts of "civil society" or "CSO." Citizens often confuse or equate them with political parties, businesses, or even the state. The perception of one's own role within civil society is also low; according to the same study, only a small percentage of citizens are aware of any CSO operating in their community. In this regard, it should be noted that within this small percentage, residents of regional cities, unlike those in Yerevan, are more aware of CSOs operating in their communities.

The information gap generates not only a lack of knowledge and confusion, but also a "contested" space in which any additional discussion about CSOs is often perceived with suspicion. Qualitative data from CRRC – Armenia demonstrate that this confusion becomes a context for the reinforcement of narratives such as "grant consumption," "serving foreign agendas," or "politicization." Thus, the first layer of public perception is characterized by inaccurate or distorted understandings, which subsequently exert a profound influence on analytical and attitudinal processes.

Trust mechanisms as the foundation of perception: Trust toward CSOs is likewise formed through a combination of objective and subjective factors. The same study identifies three key conditions necessary for citizens' trust:

1. visible and tangible results,
2. clear, structured, and understandable communication,
3. needs-based activities.

These factors imply that trust is built not on the basis of ideological sympathy or antipathy, but on practicality. Citizens trust organizations that have brought real and positive change into their lives or have enabled them to see such change. When these factors are absent, particularly transparent communication, , trust quickly turns into distrust; for example, a lack of awareness regarding funding sources (“I don’t know where the money comes from”) reinforces skepticism. Thus, every missed communicative step, every invisible result, or every unclear initiative can reinforce, at the public level, the perception that CSOs operate “on the sidelines,” “outside official structures,” or in a manner “not serving society.”

However, the issue of trust toward CSOs in Armenia is not only perceptual; it also has a measurable, data-based dimension. Studies conducted by the “People in Need” (PIN) organization (2024) show that public attitudes remain contradictory and tend toward public skepticism. On the one hand, the growth of CSOs and the activation of the sector are largely driven by international donor support; on the other hand, misconceptions and negative labeling continue to circulate within society. The presentation of secondary data included in the study shows (Caucasus Barometer 2021) that 37% of respondents do not trust NGOs, while only 25% trust them (PIN 2024). Negative attitudes are particularly evident in rural communities, where perceptions and representations are often shaped not by the substance of organizational activities, but by the influence of traditional authorities, personal experience, or local opinions. Mixed perceptions deepen the trust gap and hinder the formation and effective use of communicative bridges between CSOs and society.

Pressures of the socio-political environment. Perceptions of civil society are not formed in isolation; they exist within a broader socio-political context. The results of a 2025 nationwide survey conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) highlight that *the primary concerns of Armenia’s population are related to security, unemployment, inflation, and the quality of governance.*

Under such conditions, citizens’ expectations toward CSOs become concrete and substantive: people expect CSOs to address specific social and economic problems, rather than engage in systemic reforms. As a result, CSOs working in fields that do not have a direct impact on people’s everyday lives are often perceived as having “no real agenda” or as “foreign agents.” The IRI study also reveals a crisis of institutional trust in Armenia: citizens trust the armed forces the most, and trust the National Assembly, the Government, and the courts the least. When

institutional trust is generally low, attitudes toward CSOs are also viewed through the same lens.

Perceptions of civil society in Armenia are also shaped by the real limitations of the institutional environment. The CSO Sustainability Index report (2024) emphasizes that although the state ostensibly makes certain efforts to create platforms for cooperation with CSOs, there is no separate policy or strategy for state-CSO cooperation or for the development of CSOs.

Thus, the vulnerability of the institutional environment not only constrains the operational capacities of CSOs, but also creates structural foundations for declining public trust, affecting both the visibility of CSOs and the quality of public perceptions of them.

The media environment as a lens shaping perceptions. In recent years, the structure of media consumption in Armenia has undergone profound changes. The CRRC – Armenia study *“Media Consumption and Media Coverage of Reforms”* (2021) indicates that the internet and social media have become the primary sources of information, reaching a daily usage rate of 67%. However, this digital activity has not been accompanied by an increase in media literacy. Forty-four percent of respondents never verify the source of information, while 80% do not respond in any way to questionable information.

These trends demonstrate the predominance of passive information consumption. When people primarily consume information without verification or in-depth reading, complex or substantive topics related to CSOs are easily replaced by simplified, and sometimes even manipulative, narratives.

The 2022 study *“Media Consumption in Armenia”* further deepens this picture, noting that 75% of social media users remain passive observers, while only 14% visit news websites on a daily basis. Levels of trust are also clearly polarized: public radio enjoys the highest level of trust, while internet sources have the lowest. These realities are critically important for understanding the dynamics of interaction with civil society: CSOs’ communication efforts take place in an environment where information is abundant but trust is scarce, and where voices are many but the capacity to listen is limited.

Public participation: an open space, but limited engagement. CRRC – Armenia’s research also shows that public engagement in CSO initiatives remains low. Although people value the role of civil society, they generally do not participate in meetings, discussions, or programmatic activities. When community engagement is low, citizens do not perceive themselves as part of civil society, regardless of actual activities. In other words, this situation leads to the continued vagueness of

civil society's role for citizens; the absence of participation undermines the CSO-society relationship and deepens the perception that CSOs operate "separately from the public" (TIAC 2022).

Narratives as an underlying layer of public thinking. Finally, circulating narratives have a significant impact on perceptions of CSOs. These can be divided into two groups:

- negative narratives: "foreign agenda," "grant consumption," "political influence,"
- positive narratives: "real helpers," "the only institutions that listen," "community supporters."

These data show that such narratives are not random stereotypes; rather, they are psychological responses shaped over years, reinforced within the media environment, and conditioned by socio-political problem framings.

Attitudes toward CSOs within this dual field are shaped not by information sources alone, but by emotional disposition, experience, and the influence of broader social currents.

Thus, all of the above studies collectively reveal the following pattern: in Armenia, perceptions of civil society are formed through the combination of low awareness, fragile and unstable trust, socio-political tension and uncertainty, the complexity of the media environment, gaps in strategic communication, and long-term narrative influences.

PART 2

2.1. CSOs IN THE COMMUNITY SOCIAL ECOSYSTEM: ROLE, IMPACT, AND LIMITATIONS

CSOs AS COMMUNITY ACTORS: SELF-PERCEPTIONS. Focus group discussions conducted in the three regions unanimously indicate that civil society organizations (CSOs/NGOs) occupy a central role in the community social ecosystem, particularly in areas where public services are limited or have functional gaps. Although NGOs are established with diverse missions and orientations, the core focus and dynamics of their activities in these regions converge around supporting vulnerable groups, providing social and psychological services, protecting children and families, working with displaced persons, as well as offering legal assistance, monitoring state institutions, and fostering community empowerment, including through participatory governance processes.

Core Functions of NGOs in Communities. Data from the three regions indicate that the scope of NGOs' influence has significantly expanded in recent years, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic and the forced displacement from Nagorno-Karabakh. Their activities include:

- Supporting individuals and families affected by war, conflict, forced displacement, or traumatic events;
- Providing social, psychological, and legal services;
- Identifying, caring for, and offering rehabilitation and employment initiatives for children and adults with disabilities, as well as implementing child protection programs, including therapy, day care, and ensuring the safety of educational environments;
- Conducting parenting courses to address gaps in parental skills;
- Developing youth skills and promoting their participation;
- Implementing local socio-economic support initiatives to mitigate community problems.

These activities demonstrate that NGOs frequently carry out functions that structurally should be provided by community or state social systems. NGOs often replace or complement services that are either absent, provided only as short-term interventions, or not fully accessible to all community members.

Community Challenges: Insights from Data Across Three Regions: NGO representatives in the three regions identified the same key challenges shaping the socio-economic environment of communities and affecting citizens' development opportunities. Combining the data allows us to highlight the following systemic issues:

1. **Lack of employment, high poverty levels, and socio-economic instability:** This is a recurring challenge across all regions:

- Limited or absent job opportunities;
- Youth migration out of communities;
- Restricted opportunities for professional development and/or retraining.

In this context, NGOs often act as primary active actors in the community, attempting to mitigate the consequences of socio-economic instability. In such situations, NGOs frequently become the main source of education and support for families.

2. Shortage of Specialists and Limitations in Professional Service Quality:

This issue was particularly highlighted in the following contexts:

- Psychologists, social workers, speech therapists, and special educators are either nearly absent in communities or extremely limited in number;
- Available specialists often lack sufficient training;
- Services are frequently short-term and fragmented.

These circumstances hinder sustainable development and impact, even when NGOs demonstrate high motivation and considerable experience.

3. Parenting Challenges and Family Awareness: Across all regions, the lack of parental knowledge, insufficient preparedness, and cultural and educational gaps were emphasized as major issues directly affecting child development, the creation of safe environments, and the effectiveness of the education system. In such cases, NGOs often become the primary source of education and support for families.

4. Transport, Infrastructure, and Road Issues: Transport and infrastructural limitations were also repeatedly reported in all three regions, representing systemic barriers to service delivery and accessibility for both NGOs and community members.

5. Lack of Networked and Coordinated Work at the Community Level: NGOs identified several recurring gaps across the three regions:

- Limited awareness of each other's programs;
- Weak operational coordination;
- Duplication of services;
- Non-structured competition;
- Unstable cooperation with local self-government bodies.

At the same time, it was emphasized that structured and networked collaboration, both locally and inter-regionally, can significantly enhance efficiency and impact.

6. Financial Instability and Short-Term Programs: Changes and reductions in the donor landscape over the past year, as well as the near absence of local funding, have created crisis conditions for many NGOs. As a result:

- Long-term program planning has become difficult;
- NGOs' capacities for fundraising and resource diversification are not sufficiently developed.

7. Gaps in LSG–NGO Collaboration

Although some communities show positive examples of cooperation and development, the overall picture indicates that:

- LSGs often establish cooperation with individuals rather than organizations;
- The intensity of cooperation across different departments and sectors varies, for some areas, especially social issues such as addressing the needs of displaced persons, there is a tendency toward collaboration, while in other areas it is less developed.

NGOs' Self-Perceived Roles. Analysis of data from the three regions shows that NGOs perceive their role in communities as multi-layered and systemic. They position themselves as:

- Supporting and complementary institutions;
- Promoters of social and psychological safety;
- Contributors to community cohesion and stability;
- Providers of educational and cultural environments;
- Protectors of the rights of vulnerable groups;
- Advocates for community interests;
- Influencers of policy change;
- Restorers of community trust.

However, they are also aware of their limitations, including:

- Scarcity of resources;
- Shortage of specialists;
- Program instability;
- Uncoordinated collaboration;
- Limited engagement from state institutions.

Thus, the integrated analysis of the data shows that ***NGOs are key actors in the community social ecosystem, yet they operate under highly limited conditions in terms of resources, specialists, and systemic support. Their work has significant impact, but the sustainability of that impact is often not ensured.***

At the same time, *a substantial portion of community challenges, such as employment, professional care, child protection, inclusive services, parenting, youth empowerment, and social security, cannot be addressed solely through NGO efforts. These issues require more coordinated, predictable, and long-term engagement and collaborative action from both the state and local self-government bodies.*

NGOs' self-perceptions help to understand their role within the community ecosystem; however, this represents only one perspective – the internal view. While organizations characterize their position as central to the community social system, they simultaneously acknowledge certain limitations related to resources, institutional capacity, and sustainability. Despite these constraints, their role remains indispensable. To gain a full understanding, it is also necessary to examine this picture from the perspectives of local authorities, state institutions, and various professional communities.

Assessments from LSAs, state bodies, media, and professional and expert communities not only complement this picture but often reframe it, revealing the depth of collaboration, the extent of systemic engagement, the presence or absence of mutual trust structures, and the perceived boundaries of roles and responsibilities.

These multi-layered perspectives allow for the development of a well-founded map of NGO roles, clearly identifying both the areas where their impact is most practical and visible, and the gaps where more systemic and long-term engagement is needed.

NGOS IN THE CROSS-SECTION OF LOCAL AND STATE AUTHORITIES AND PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES. Focus group discussions show that perceptions of NGOs among local and state actors are dual in nature. On one hand, NGOs are seen as essential partners for community life; on the other hand, they are perceived as actors limited by resources, sustainability, and systemic engagement. Observations from state and local self-government bodies indicate that NGOs in Armenian communities effectively perform functions of the state's social "invisible hand," often being the first responders in crisis situations. At the same time, it is emphasized that these responses are not always coordinated and, in some cases, may create additional organizational and technical burdens for state and local government institutions.

Across all three regions, representatives of LSGs, regional administration offices, and the Unified Social Service (USS) agree on one key observation: without NGOs, managing post-war social crises would have been practically impossible. The influx of displaced persons, the sharp increase in vulnerable populations, and the intensification of psychological and social consequences required rapid, flexible, and targeted responses, which were primarily provided by NGOs.

NGOs quickly addressed the needs of displaced persons, vulnerable groups, and families by providing material, social, and psychological support, as well as developing new tools such as flexible service models, rapid response schemes, and professional capacity-building programs. At the same time, state actors emphasize that these interventions were mainly

carried out through short-term programs, limited funding, and donor resources, which often prevented their impact from being translated into long-term and sustainable results.

The Social Role of NGOs from the Perspective of State and Local Authorities. From the perspective of state and local authorities, the main strength and comparative advantage of NGOs are concentrated in the social sector. According to their assessments, NGOs operate on the “front line” of social support, carrying out interventions aimed at the care of older persons and persons with disabilities, child protection and therapy, the provision of inclusive education, the management of domestic violence cases, mental health maintenance, the social integration of displaced persons, the provision of legal assistance, as well as the development of youth civic participation and media literacy.

In other words, from the viewpoint of public authorities, NGOs are perceived not as an auxiliary component, but as an institution without which everyday community life would be difficult to imagine.

Lack of Institutionalization in State-NGO Cooperation: Against the backdrop of the positive assessments outlined above, a serious structural contradiction in cooperation becomes evident. On the one hand, state representatives acknowledge that the role of NGOs has long exceeded the boundaries of the traditional “NGO” format; on the other hand, cooperation with them largely remains person-based rather than institutionalized. In practice, many instances of cooperation are built on the initiative of specific individuals, personal networks, and mutual trust, rather than on clearly defined mechanisms and formal procedures.

At the same time, forums initiated by the Unified Social Service, NGO-led mapping of support services (particularly in the Lori region), and regular meetings involving NGOs are assessed as important and necessary steps. However, these initiatives remain fragmented and have not yet resulted in a coherent, comprehensive, and sustainable model of cooperation, including within the framework of the recently established and functioning social commissions.

Gaps in Comprehensive Needs Assessment as a Barrier to Programmatic Impact. State actors highlight another systemic challenge: the predominantly donor-driven nature of program design. During the discussions, it was noted that programs are often developed around strategic priorities set by donors, with attempts made only afterward to adapt them to the specific conditions and local context of particular communities. According to research participants, however, community needs should shape the content and logic of programmatic interventions from the outset.

When assessments of beneficiary and community needs are conducted in an incomplete or unsystematic manner, program impact remains fragmented. As a result, some community needs are addressed through program interventions, while other critical issues remain outside their scope. Representatives of state institutions participating in the discussions emphasize that in-depth and comprehensive needs assessments conducted at the initial stage of programs should become a mandatory procedure rather than a

voluntary or formal step. “Only in this case can NGO contributions fully correspond to real community needs and local priorities,” they note.

At the same time, NGO representatives point out that in practice municipalities often do not provide comprehensive information on community needs, or that data sharing occurs with delays. Taken together, these observations point to a lack of strategic and continuous communication between NGOs and municipalities, which hinders both high-quality program planning and the full realization of program impact.

Limits of NGO Interventions and the Need for State Policy. At the same time, representatives of local self-government bodies and state institutions in all three regions clearly identify a range of issues that NGOs objectively cannot address, or can address only partially, due to limitations related to their mandates, resources, and functional capacities. The most frequently highlighted community challenges include ensuring employment and creating opportunities for decent work, housing and living conditions, the absence of systemic socio-economic security policies, the lack of effective waste collection and waste management mechanisms, the shortage of green spaces, as well as the risks associated with excessive chemicalization in the agricultural sector.

Particularly acute are the systemic gaps in the field of mental health, including the near absence of services for children with autism and their families, the shortage of rehabilitation centers, and the limited and fragmented provision of long-term care services for older persons. In this context, state authorities effectively acknowledge that there exists a layer of problems that cannot be resolved solely through NGO interventions. Such issues require solutions at the level of public policy, sustained budgetary commitments, and long-term investments.

Against this broader backdrop, another especially telling observation emerges: a significant portion of citizens still do not perceive themselves as active participants in community processes, but rather as “recipients of assistance.” This “passive and dependent” attitude substantially limits the long-term impact of both state and NGO activities. Programs often fail to translate into sustainable cultures of public participation, self-organization, and community initiative, remaining instead within a logic of short-term support.

Lack of Clear Understanding of NGOs’ Roles and Functions. On the other hand, representatives of local self-government bodies note that communities often lack a comprehensive and clear understanding of NGOs’ roles, mandates, and functions. As a result, NGOs are predominantly perceived not as actors in community development, policy shaping, or the complementing of the social system, but mainly as charitable organizations.

This limited perception reduces recognition of the strategic value of NGOs’ work, constrains the full utilization of their potential, and may hinder the development of deeper and more institutionalized cooperation at the community level.

Recognition of NGOs' Roles and Systemic Constraints. By consolidating observations from the three regions, it can be concluded that, in the shared perception of local self-government bodies, regional administrations, state institutions, and professional communities, NGOs currently serve as key providers of social, psychological, educational, and legal support in Armenian communities. They respond rapidly and effectively to crises, emergencies, and the consequences of displacement by creating new services, models, and tools in areas where the state has not yet managed to establish comprehensive and systemic solutions.

At the same time, alongside this high level of recognition, the same actors clearly point to the vulnerability of the system: cooperation with NGOs often remains non-institutionalized, programs are predominantly short-term and dependent on donor funding, and needs assessment processes are not always comprehensive or systematic.

In this respect, the discourse of state actors effectively aligns with the findings of NGOs' self-assessments: the role of NGOs in communities is large and significant, yet the social burden placed solely on them is disproportionate and, in the long term, unsustainable. Without clear coordination, political will, and continuous investment at the state level, NGO engagement and participation will remain high, but structurally fragile.

At the same time, it is important to examine perceptions of NGOs not only at the institutional level, but also at a broader community level. For this purpose, it is necessary to include the perspectives of community residents, youth and students, representatives of vulnerable groups, local activists, and other stakeholders. Such perspectives allow the role of NGOs to be assessed within a more comprehensive social context. This multi-layered approach is a key prerequisite for a balanced analysis of the community ecosystem, enabling an assessment not only of NGOs' formal contributions, but also of their social capital, levels of trust, perceived impact, and public value.

Key Drivers of Positive Perceptions: Experience, Visible Results, and Practical Benefit. Discussions recorded during community meetings indicate that across all three regions, positive attitudes toward NGOs are formed primarily on the basis of personal or direct experience. Citizens are more inclined to trust organizations whose results they have observed in their own lives or within their immediate social environment. *In particular, the work of NGOs operating through long-term and continuous programs, rather than short-term and fragmented interventions, is highly valued.*

In this context, NGOs' professional capacities are frequently emphasized, including sector-specific expertise, legal and programmatic skills, diverse partnership networks, and

experience in working with vulnerable groups. The latter is viewed as one of NGOs' main competitive advantages, shaping both their clearly defined role within communities and the perceived practical value of their activities at the community level.

Overall, the analysis of this section shows that a multidimensional field of perceptions has formed around the role of civil society organizations, characterized by both clear convergences and significant divergences. *NGOs' self-perceptions and the assessments of community and state actors align around a core observation: NGOs have become key and often indispensable actors within the community social ecosystem, particularly in the areas of social protection, support for vulnerable groups, psychological services, and crisis response.* In this context, NGOs are perceived as the functional link that fills structural gaps in the state system and ensures the continuity of community life in times of crisis.

At the same time, the analysis reveals differences in perceptions regarding NGOs' roles, the boundaries of their responsibilities, and the sustainability of their impact. While NGOs define their role as complementary institutions that promote community resilience and restore trust, while also recognizing their own resource-related, professional, and institutional limitations, state and local authorities often perceive NGO activities as effective but accompanied by certain systemic shortcomings. While acknowledging NGOs' indispensable contribution, these actors simultaneously point to the uncoordinated and non-institutionalized nature of cooperation as a key factor limiting long-term impact. This typically applies to situations where there are mutually inflated expectations between the two sectors, unclear boundaries of authority and responsibility, and communication challenges that are both a cause and a consequence of these ambiguities. There is often an implicit perception of one another that is stereotypical and insufficiently grounded.

At the intersection of these converging and diverging perceptions, one key reality becomes evident: *the current impact of NGOs is largely driven by individuals, personal initiative, professional commitment, and crisis-response capacity, rather than by stable institutional mechanisms.* As a result, the social burden placed on NGOs is often disproportionate to their available resources and mandates, while the continuity of their impact remains fragile, dependent on donor funding and situational forms of cooperation.

Consequently, strengthening the role of NGOs within the community social ecosystem requires a qualitative shift, from personalized and ad hoc cooperation toward clearly delineated, institutionalized, and complementary partnership models. The systematic structuring of State–LSA-NGO relations, the clarification of roles and responsibilities, and the provision of long-term political commitment and resources can enable the currently high impact of NGOs to be transformed into sustainable, predictable, and systemic outcomes, in the interest of community development and the strengthening of public trust.

2.2 PERCEPTIONS AND TRUST-BUILDING TOWARD CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

DOMINANT NARRATIVES AND STRUCTURES OF PERCEPTION FORMATION. The outcomes of the trilateral discussions indicate that public perceptions of CSOs are shaped not by a single source, but through the interaction of multiple, overlapping layers, including *lived experience, the quality of communication, the media environment, political discourse*, and the institutional context. These perceptions have both structural and emotional dimensions and often do not stem from the actual activities of CSOs, but rather from the narratives circulating around them. According to observations shared by participants across all meetings, the most sustainable foundation of trust in CSOs is their long-term and consistent engagement. Organizations that have worked in the same field over many years and have delivered relevant and in-demand services are perceived as credible actors. In this context, trust is built through sustained presence and tangible results. Sustained presence, in turn, leads to greater visibility, which is often not the result of direct organizational efforts but rather of word-of-mouth dissemination or engagement through collaborative platforms.

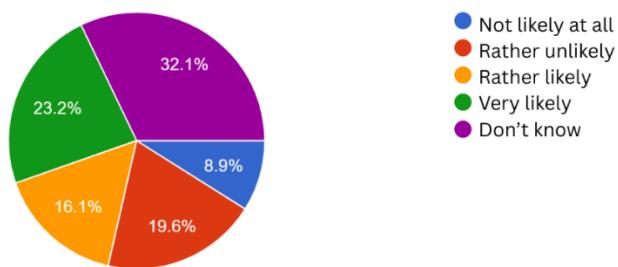
Formation of “Initial Trust” Toward CSOs and Conditions for Its Sustainability. According to community representatives, particularly in Lori and Shirak, there is a prevailing perception that “if an organization is a CSO, it already possesses a certain level of credibility and capacity.” However, this initial trust remains stable only when it is reinforced through visible programs, continuity, and tangible results. Participants repeatedly emphasized that trust is strengthened when initiatives are not limited to short-term interventions but instead have a long-term orientation and clearly defined targeting.

Across all regions, one of the key mechanisms of trust-building is experience transmitted through beneficiaries, primarily via *word-of-mouth narratives*. Success stories and personal experiences circulating within the community emerge as some of the most influential drivers of trust. As participants described it, beneficiaries often act as “walking advertisements” through their stories and demonstrated results. This, in turn, encourages already engaged beneficiaries to participate more actively in future initiatives, to navigate available opportunities more effectively, and to seek support again from the same or similar CSOs.

These qualitative findings align smoothly with the results of the quantitative surveys. In all three regions, a significant proportion of respondents indicated that they would turn to CSOs when facing social problems, as well as in situations involving issues with state institutions or law enforcement bodies. At the same time, the high percentage of “Don’t know” responses points to communication gaps, reinforcing the earlier observation that a considerable share of citizens lack a clear understanding of what a CSO is and therefore hesitate to seek their support.

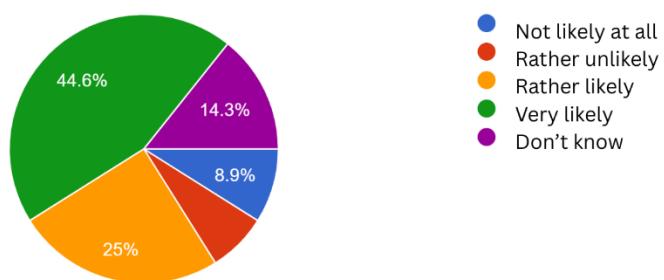
If you experience problems with state institutions or law enforcement bodies, how likely are you to turn to CSOs for assistance?

56 responses



Similarly, when considering the likelihood of turning to CSOs when facing social problems, another finding recorded in this report becomes evident: CSOs in communities are primarily associated with addressing social issues. This is particularly pronounced in the Syunik region, where around 80% of respondents are inclined to turn to CSOs when facing social problems, but only 30% are likely to seek their assistance in cases involving problems with state institutions or law enforcement bodies. The regional pattern in Lori and Shirak is closer to the overall trend.

If you face social problems, how likely are you to turn to CSOs for assistance?



Overall, the data from the three regions indicate that trust in CSOs in Armenia is built not on ideological affinity, but on concrete experience, visible results, and communication. In this context, trust is primarily enjoyed by organizations that provide continuous, particularly social, support in communities and whose activities are more predictable and understandable. In contrast, the work of CSOs focused on advocacy or oversight of state institutions and democratic structures is often not easily understood by the broader community, and therefore these organizations are less trusted. *Distrust arises from information gaps, fragmented or non-targeted communication, negative narratives circulating in the media, and weak institutional connections.* These observations are important not only for describing perceptions but also for drawing strategic conclusions: *strengthening public trust in CSOs requires not so much more programs as it does more systematic communication, targeted access to beneficiary groups, institutional visibility, and the conscious building of social capital at the community level.*

The Gap Between the Actual and Perceived Roles of CSOs. Although participants in community discussions clearly stated that a CSO can “partially assist, act as a supporter or intermediary”, in other words, serve as a “bridge or problem-raiser rather than an institution that solves all problems”, they also noted that communities often lack a clear understanding of what a CSO is, or mistakenly perceive it as an organization that addresses every problem. Despite these common perceptions, CSOs cannot solve all issues, not only because problems in communities are diverse and not all fall within the scope of CSO activities, but also because each CSO has its own strategic priorities. While it may be “permissible” to go beyond these priorities in exceptional situations, doing so under normal circumstances can negatively affect the CSO’s effectiveness. When certain problems remain unresolved, these expectations inevitably lead to disappointment, and the CSO may be perceived as ineffective or as pursuing an “external agenda.”

The Basis for Generating Disinformation About CSOs and Mechanisms of Negative Perception Formation. In public discourse, negative and labeling narratives about CSOs are continuously reproduced, forming the basis for flows of disinformation. These include terms such as “grant seekers,” “Soros-backed,” “serving a foreign agenda,” as well as expressions implying “money laundering” or “political connections.” Participants in community discussions noted that such perceptions are primarily spread among groups with no direct contact with CSO activities and are shaped by secondary information, particularly through simplified and often manipulative messages circulating in the media and political discourse. These negative narratives generally do not rely on personal experience but are fueled by broader social uncertainty and information gaps, making them especially entrenched among groups that have never directly engaged with CSOs. This process is further deepened and reinforced by the frequent absence of a clear understanding in communities regarding the institutional role, functions, and areas of responsibility of CSOs. Many citizens do not differentiate between the substantive and legal frameworks of CSO activities, resulting in an informational “vacuum” that is easily filled with distorted and politicized interpretations. In this

context, participants also highlighted the role of low legal awareness and limited media literacy, which make the public particularly vulnerable to labeling and one-sided, disinformation-driven narratives.

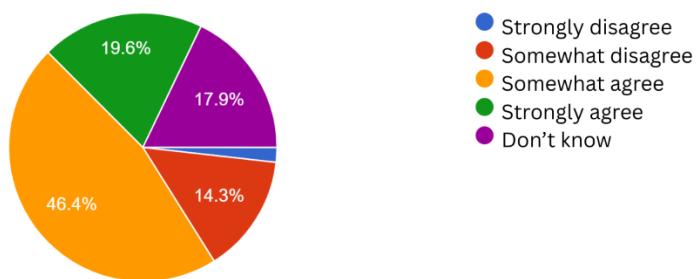
Mechanisms of Disinformation Generation as a Factor Undermining Trust in CSOs.

The disinformation component in this context functions not merely as a background element, but as an independent and influential factor that systematically intensifies the labeling of CSOs and contributes to the stabilization of negative public perceptions. During discussions, it was repeatedly noted that disinformation messages are often constructed around simplified and polarizing contrasts (“insider – outsider,” “local – donor-driven”) and are disseminated through highly emotional phrasing, selective or decontextualized facts, generalized examples, and claims circulated as “news” or “heard from others.” Through social media platforms, such content is rapidly reproduced, creating an illusion of credibility even in the absence of verifiable sources or factual evidence.

This process is particularly dangerous in contexts where a significant portion of the public lacks sufficient media literacy and critical thinking skills to evaluate information. As a result, CSO activities are frequently perceived not on the basis of facts, results, or impact, but within pre-existing frameworks of suspicion, distrust, and devaluation. Gradually, this reduces the public legitimacy of CSOs, limits their opportunities for collaboration with local actors, and may hinder beneficiary engagement, especially in cases where citizens fear being “labeled,” publicly criticized, or having their personal data misused.

Although qualitative findings, which allow deeper insight into the logic behind expressed opinions, identify the main motives for distrust toward CSOs (as discussed in other sections of the report), the results of the quantitative survey present a positive outlook: the majority of respondents consider CSO activities to be transparent and accountable. This provides a strong basis for further communication efforts, while simultaneously taking into account the manifestations of trust erosion described above.

Do you agree that CSOs operate in a transparent and accountable manner?



In this context, discussion participants emphasized that trust formation and maintenance cannot be considered solely in terms of communication intensity or the number of programs. Building resilience against disinformation is a necessary component of the “architecture” of trust. This entails not only more transparent, open, and predictable communication by CSOs, but also a systematic increase in public media literacy, early identification of disinformation narratives, and timely, evidence-based, and clear responses to them. Only through such a comprehensive approach can the influence of labeling be limited and stable, fact-based, and conscious public trust in CSOs be ensured.

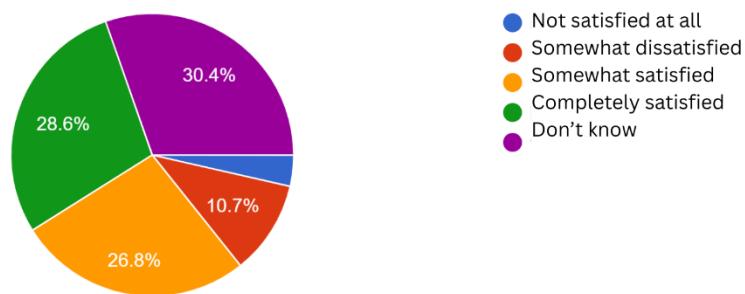
Misconceptions Regarding the Concept of “CSO”. During meetings in all regions, participants noted that a significant portion of the community lacks a clear understanding of the concept of “CSO” or “NGO.” CSOs are often recognized not institutionally, but through specific individuals, resulting in the organization being identified with a single person or initiative. This may also explain the “Don’t know” responses in the quantitative survey regarding the likelihood of turning to CSOs when facing problems. Such perceptions weaken the institutional credibility of organizations and hinder the development of stable public legitimacy.

Lack of Media Literacy as a Factor of Public Vulnerability. Another important layer of the analysis is the widespread lack of media literacy, which participants noted as having a mass-level impact. The absence of critical information evaluation leads the public to respond not to facts, but to emotional or political cues, falling into what is often referred to as the “outrage trap.” This is particularly risky for CSOs, as negative narratives can spread easily, while countering them requires resources, skills, and a systematic approach. Participants in community meetings emphasized that although CSOs implement programs aimed at increasing media literacy, these initiatives are still insufficient and need to be continued, with an expanded reach of participants. It is important to ensure the inclusion of groups that are typically excluded from capacity-building activities due to factors such as employment, competing priorities, accessibility, or other barriers. To engage these groups effectively, programs need to be adapted to the needs of all segments, including the elderly, homemakers, and residents of remote areas.

Individualized and Reactive Communication as an Obstacle to Perception Formation. Discussions indicate that CSO communication is often conducted at the individual level, primarily targeting current or former beneficiaries. While this approach is effective for direct engagement, it limits the public visibility of organizations and does not foster broader community perception. Beneficiaries are typically selected using, in sociological terms, a “convenience sampling” method due to resource constraints, meaning those who are easiest to engage, including through cooperation with local self-governing bodies (LSGs), are prioritized. As a result: a) some potential beneficiaries remain uninvolved in programs, and b) the visibility of the CSO is confined to a limited group. Consequently, awareness about CSOs is largely restricted to engaged groups, while other segments of the community remain outside the information sphere.

This finding is also supported by the quantitative survey, which shows that citizens with prior engagement with CSOs rate their satisfaction with these organizations noticeably higher.

If you have previously turned to CSOs, how satisfied are you with their response?



At the same time, participants in community meetings noted that CSOs *are perceived as reactive rather than proactive* in their communication. For example, on social media platforms, completed programs and past meetings are more frequently showcased, while preliminary information or invitations about these activities are largely absent.

Beneficiary Experience as a Driver of Trust and a Risk to Inclusivity. Discussions reveal that this trust-building mechanism operates mainly within closed circles and does not replace systematic public communication. Although information circulates through various channels, social networks, state institutions, and local municipalities, it is often practically limited to existing databases and networks of the same beneficiaries. As a result, a “closed cycle” is formed, where the same groups continuously benefit from different programs, while potential new

beneficiaries remain outside the information sphere. Participants noted that information is primarily disseminated through social media or websites; however, these platforms are not always accessible or appropriately targeted for different groups. This raises questions such as, “Why is one person engaged while I or others are not?”, further deepening distrust and forming stereotypical perceptions.

In this context, information circulated through word-of-mouth, while effective at the individual trust level, cannot ensure inclusivity or broad access without a purposeful, strategic, and targeted communication system.

Fear of Providing Personal Data. Across all regions, participants also highlighted a fear of providing personal data, driven both by fears circulating in the media and by the perceived lack of transparency. These fears often lead people to avoid participating in programs, even when they need support.

Resource Inequality as a Limitation on Communication Quality. A clear distinction in the communication field is the inequality of resources. CSOs with substantial or stable resources often have dedicated communication specialists and strategic communication plans for activities and events. In contrast, in smaller organizations, a single person may simultaneously handle multiple functions, programmatic, administrative, and communication-related. This leads to communication that is non-strategic: reactive, unsystematic, non-targeted, and dependent on individual capacities rather than on an institutional strategy.

The Impact of the Human Factor on Communication and Trust. Participants also emphasized the importance of *selecting the right experts and program implementers*. In cases where the person implementing a program does not share its values or lacks sufficient belief in its objectives, this directly affects the quality of communication and trust, ultimately undermining the CSO’s overall public credibility.

Conditionality of Trust and the Role of Perceived Fairness in Communities. Results from community discussions indicate that, since public attitudes toward CSOs are shaped by multiple, often conflicting factors, *trust in these organizations is conditional*. Citizens often view CSOs primarily as providers of material or social support, which limits their role to that of a “source of assistance.” Within this framework, trust becomes conditional: it is reinforced when specific needs are met and quickly undermined when expectations are not fulfilled or support is not accessible to everyone, according to community meeting participants.

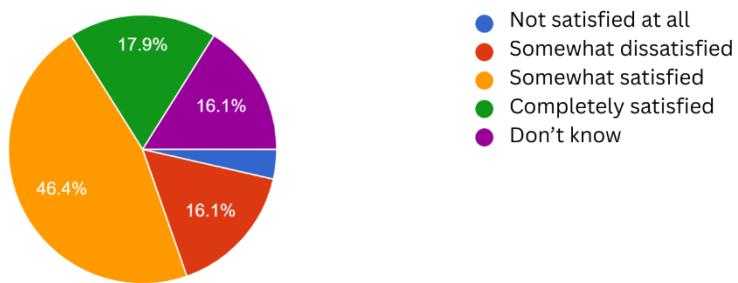
At the same time, public attitudes are significantly influenced by perceived fairness. When programs, due to limited resources, target narrow beneficiary groups, those who are not included often perceive discrimination or unequal treatment. This perception is exacerbated when the criteria and limitations for program selection are not clearly communicated. As a result, even effective programs can generate

negative reactions, not because of the program's content or impact, but due to gaps in the communication of processes and inclusion.

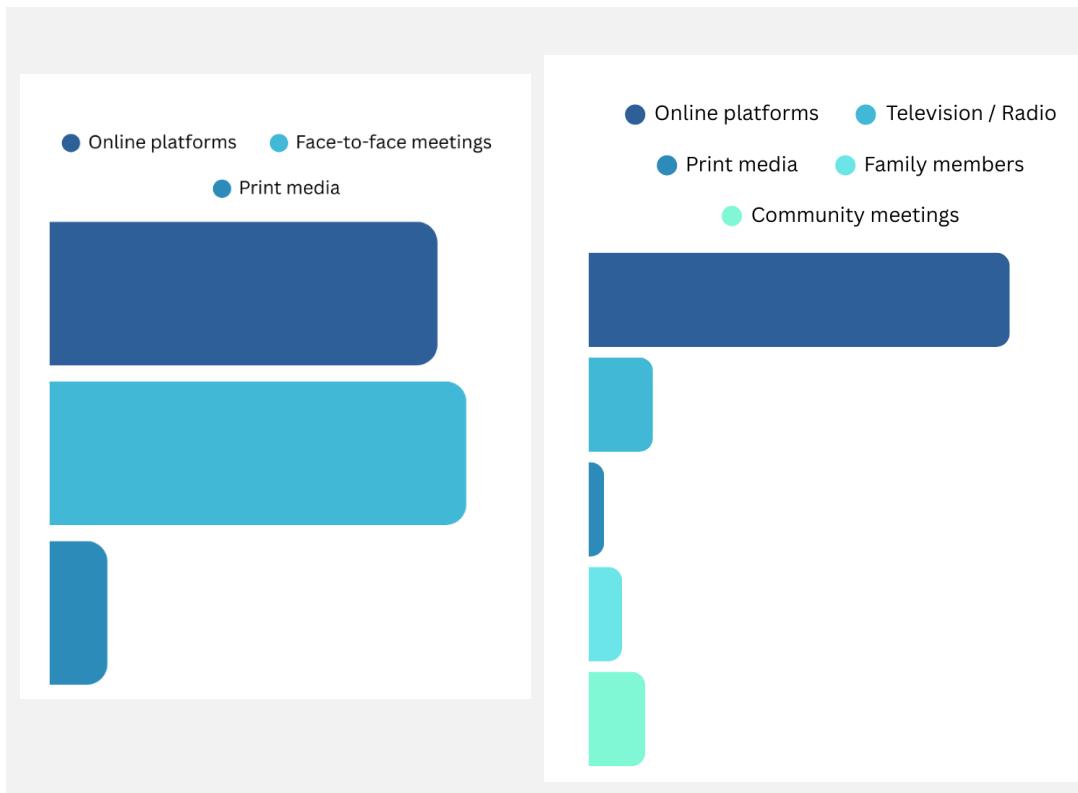
The Role of the Media Environment and Information Flows in Shaping Public Perceptions of CSOs. The influence of the media environment on public perceptions of CSOs is considered significant and often negative. Politicized media tend to present CSO activities in line with their own agendas, shaping labeling or one-sided perceptions. Participants noted that media coverage is frequently driven by financial or political interests, while in-depth, balanced reporting on CSOs is limited.

In this context, CSOs rarely act as active participants in the information space and are primarily featured on the agenda through external triggers. Nonetheless, it should be noted that survey respondents rated their experience with CSO communication, particularly regarding service provision, highly. The majority reported that information about CSOs and the procedures for engaging with them is clear and accessible.

Is information about CSOs and the procedures for engaging with them clear and accessible?



When this is considered alongside the finding from the same study that citizens prefer face-to-face meetings (left side), it becomes clear that CSO activity on online platforms is perceived as a source of visibility rather than trust-building. Nonetheless, as a source of information, online platforms continue to remain predominant (right side).



Institutional and Political Context as a Factor in Trust Formation. The trust deficit toward CSOs is not viewed in isolation but rather within a broader institutional and political context. Declining trust in state institutions, socio-economic tensions, and political polarization indirectly affect perceptions of CSOs as well. For some citizens, CSOs are associated with donors or political actors, which undermines perceptions of their independence and reduces their legitimacy in the eyes of the public. At the same time, it is emphasized that the public behavior of CSO leaders or individual representatives can have a direct impact on the credibility of the entire organization.

Local Presence as a Key Factor in Trust Formation. Discussions with local self-government bodies (LSGs) and state institutions highlighted another important layer: trust toward CSOs. The approach can be summarized as follows: CSOs that are locally based and have become an integral part of community life are perceived by residents as “their own” or “familiar”, more understandable, approachable, and trustworthy for both beneficiaries and LSGs. Trust in these CSOs is higher because they have been present for years, know the people, and build relationships not only through projects but also through sustained, long-term presence. In contrast, organizations coming from outside are often seen as temporary partners, whose programs do not always fully align with local needs and priorities.

CSO Resilience as a Public Value. Despite existing challenges, discussion participants emphasized the *stability, flexibility, and resilience* of CSOs. They specifically noted that even under crisis conditions, such as the pandemic, war, or reductions in donor support, CSOs continued to operate and remain alongside communities, reorganizing themselves, reassessing their resources, and adjusting their strategic directions.

This is an important point alongside the prevailing negative narratives, as it can serve as a basis for strategic communication, allowing *CSOs to present their public role not only in responding to problems but also in demonstrating stability, continuity, and public value during crises.*

Thus, despite these challenges, the discussions also highlight clear mechanisms for restoring trust. *Beneficiary stories, visible demonstration of program impact, transparent accountability, and consistent communication are all viewed as effective tools for strengthening trust. These findings confirm that public trust in CSOs is variable and sensitive but can be cultivated and managed through targeted, strategic approaches.*

Perceptions and Self-Reflection of CSOs in the Process of Trust Formation. Observations shared by the CSOs participating in the discussions indicate that trust in their activities is shaped through a combination of interrelated factors, ranging from public perceptions and the media environment to the organizations' own communication practices and institutional maturity. CSOs clearly note that negative narratives circulating around them, such as labels like "grant seekers," "Soros-backed," "serving a foreign agenda," "undermining the family," and similar stigmatizations, significantly affect the level of public trust. According to their assessment, these perceptions are often formed not through direct experience, but through external information sources, including political rhetoric, the media sphere, and broader public discourse.

Institutional and Resource Constraints as a Risk to Trust. At the same time, CSOs also note in a self-critical manner that the spread of such disinformation narratives is sometimes facilitated by the organizations' own closed or insufficiently transparent practices, as well as by existing resource limitations. It is important to note that these constraints, in turn, lead to unmet expectations among beneficiaries, which then become a source of new disinformation narratives. Here again, a communication challenge is evident: with more effective communication, inflated expectations could have been mitigated.

Trust as a Function of Outcomes, Transparency, and Institutional Performance. According to CSO representatives, mismatched perceptions of budgets and outcomes among citizens and beneficiaries, the limited or unstable continuity of programs, and unclear communication about the actual scope of activities and the limits of CSOs' roles and responsibilities toward target groups can undermine trust, even in cases of effective performance. In this regard, CSOs emphasize that trust cannot be built solely on good intentions or a strong value base; it requires visible results, open communication, and institutional discipline.

Trust-Building Through Face-to-Face Engagement: A Strong but Limited Model.

The discussions indicate that one of the strongest tools for building trust remains direct engagement with communities. This view is shared by both CSO representatives and community members themselves. CSO representatives emphasize that day-to-day, face-to-face interaction, individualized support, and communication via phone or in person are often more convincing than any form of online engagement. Although both CSO and community representatives note that social media pages are generally active, these platforms tend to serve primarily an informational function and are less effective for trust-building. With regard to television, CSOs note that broadcasters are generally willing to provide coverage only on a commercial basis, operating under the assumption that project visibility budgets are allocated for such activities. This is not always the case; nevertheless, entrenched stereotypes persist in this area as well. Satisfied beneficiaries emerge as key intermediaries in the diffusion of trust, sharing their positive experiences within their communities and encouraging the involvement of new participants. At the same time, CSOs acknowledge that this model is resource-intensive and limited in scope: individualized communication cannot substitute for systematic, long-term, and targeted communication, particularly in a context where most organizations lack sufficient human and financial resources.

The Need to Transition from Individualized to Strategic Communication. CSOs' self-assessment in the field of communication is realistic: they note that communication functions are often combined with programmatic and administrative responsibilities and are frequently handled by a single individual; in some cases, communication is carried out by volunteers or by the organization's leadership. Despite this, CSOs also observe that even short-term engagement of a communication specialist can significantly increase effectiveness, provided the work is conducted with a professional and strategic approach. Particular emphasis is placed on the need to differentiate communication content: the same message does not resonate equally with different audiences, yet this principle is not always observed.

Awareness of Boundaries: A Prerequisite for Maintaining Trust. CSOs also emphasize the importance of being aware of the boundaries of their own activities. When an organization operates beyond its area of expertise or attempts to address issues for which it lacks sufficient experience or resources, this can damage not only the specific initiative but also the organization's overall public credibility. This observation highlights that trust is closely linked to professional self-awareness, accountability, and clear institutional functioning, as well as to the provision of continuous feedback to beneficiaries.

Crisis Response as a Factor in Restoring Trust. Discussions with CSOs, particularly in the Shirak and Syunik regions, showed that a decisive factor in building and strengthening trust in CSOs is their performance during crises visible to the public. Participants noted that rapid response programs implemented after the war, work with displaced persons, and continued presence in communities had a positive impact on how CSOs are perceived, demonstrating their practical value in addressing real-world challenges.

Overall, CSOs' reflections indicate that trust is not viewed as a given or spontaneously arising resource, but rather as a dynamic, fragile, and manageable process. *It requires simultaneous efforts in several areas: open and differentiated communication tailored to different audiences, visibility of tangible results, long-term relationships with beneficiaries, institutional clarity, and awareness of organizational boundaries.* According to CSOs, only under these conditions is it possible not only to withstand negative narratives but also to build sustainable public trust, which serves as a strategic foundation for their activities.

We can conclude that the “core” of trust in CSOs is the same across all groups: *it is built on real experience, visible results, long-term presence, and the quality of communication.* However, perceptions and expectations of trust vary significantly across different layers. In communities, CSOs are often seen primarily as “providers of aid,” which leads to excessively high or misaligned expectations, whereas state and local actors tend to have a clearer view of CSOs’ role as “supportive intermediaries.” At the same time, media and political labeling, gaps in media literacy and legal awareness, and unequal access to information create fractures in trust, especially among groups lacking direct experience with CSOs. Against this backdrop, CSOs’ self-reflection aligns with these observations: trust is a dynamic and manageable process that requires making results visible, ensuring transparency, and engaging in proactive communication tailored to specific audiences. Only then can “closed-loop” trust expand into broad public legitimacy and sustainable social capital.

2.3 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND COOPERATION DYNAMICS: FROM SYSTEMIC GAPS TO EFFECTIVE SOLUTIONS

FROM MOTIVATIONAL LIMITATIONS AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION TO OPPORTUNITIES: CSO REFLECTIONS. Observations from community meetings indicate that residents' engagement in CSO initiatives remains unstable and is largely driven by individual motivation. Participants noted that a significant portion of community members link their participation not to civic responsibility, public engagement, or the perception of creating long-term value, but primarily to the presence of material or financial incentives. In cases where such incentives are not offered, participation levels drop sharply, highlighting that a culture of community engagement is still underdeveloped. This motivational model significantly limits CSOs' ability to build sustainable, trust-based relationships with communities and to transform programmatic interventions into processes rooted in participation, shared responsibility, and co-creation. As a result, community members often act not as co-authors and partners of initiatives, but as beneficiaries receiving support, an outcome that negatively affects both the deepening of trust and the long-term impact of CSO activities.

Institutional and Cross-Sectoral Collaboration Limitations. The discussions revealed another important dimension of collaboration: the limitations of institutional and cross-sectoral connections. Participants noted that, although some collaborative formats exist among CSOs at the regional level, these are mostly passive or ad hoc in nature. Inter-regional, inter-community, and intra-community collaboration, as well as experience sharing and joint programmatic planning, remain underdeveloped. At the same time, crisis situations, such as war, forced displacement, or sudden increases in social burdens, have demonstrated that such collaboration is not merely desirable but a strategic necessity.

State-CSO Collaboration: From Individual Connections to Systematic Models. The discussions particularly emphasized the need to deepen collaboration between the state and CSOs. Participants noted that the absence of systematic and intensive cooperation becomes especially evident during crises, *often resulting in delayed, fragmented, or repetitive responses*. In this context, it was highlighted that interaction between the state and CSOs should move beyond individual connections toward a system of clear mechanisms, regular communication, and well-defined role allocation.

Impact of Community and Inter-Regional Collaboration on Trust and Effectiveness. Discussions indicate that the lack of community and inter-regional collaboration directly affects CSOs' public trust and overall impact. The government also plays a role in this dynamic, as it often commissions programs directly within its frameworks without involving local self-governance bodies (LSGs) in the decision-making phase. As a result, LSGs develop dissatisfaction toward CSOs; research participants from LSGs noted that they often feel sidelined in the process, positioned more as service recipients than as decision-makers.

In contexts where organizations operate in isolation, without coordinated approaches and a shared vision, it becomes difficult for the public to perceive CSOs as actors driving systemic change. Conversely, when inter-regional, cross-sectoral, and state-CSO collaboration is activated, it is seen as a key factor that simultaneously enhances program effectiveness and CSOs' public legitimacy.

INSTITUTIONAL GAPS IN COLLABORATION AND “TRUST FRAGILITY”: REFLECTIONS FROM COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES.

Community discussions in the regions, as well as meetings with representatives from local self-governance bodies (LSGs), professional communities, youth, students, and vulnerable groups, indicate that CSO-LSG-regional body collaboration encompasses both practical success stories and systemic limitations. Effective collaboration is often grounded in the logic of social service provision, particularly in work with vulnerable families, persons with disabilities, displaced persons, and survivors of domestic violence.

In these cases, CSOs are perceived as supportive and complementary actors, contributing to case management, mediation, and in some instances preventing duplication of support for the same beneficiaries, provided that communication and collaboration are organized in a three-tiered format.

At the same time, data analysis shows that a significant portion of collaboration remains non-institutional. It is often based on ad hoc initiatives, personal connections, and situational arrangements, without unified approaches, procedures, or clear mutual expectations. LSGs and regional structures note that some CSOs maintain intermittent contact with the community or implement programs without prior agreement, failing to fully consider community needs, resource burdens, and local priorities. This not only reduces the visibility of results but, in some cases, creates additional organizational burdens for community governance.

Data Exchange and Needs Assessment: Systemic Vulnerabilities. One of the most sensitive aspects of collaboration is the exchange of data and information. CSOs often expect access to beneficiary lists or data on target groups to make their programs more targeted, while state and local authorities view data sharing as a process fraught with legal, resource, and personal data protection risks. As a result, mutual misunderstandings arise, driven by communication gaps and the absence of unified databases or statistical systems.

The discussions also reveal a general principled agreement around “needs assessment,” but in practice, mechanisms are lacking. Although tool-based opportunities exist (for example, platforms like e-social.am), their deployment and localization remain incomplete and do not cover the diverse sectoral requirements. Consequently, the “needs–program–results” chain is often incomplete, and LSGs’ and regional authorities’ involvement in program evaluation and feedback phases is limited.

This situation has also generated an undesirable tendency: in all regions without exception, some LSG representatives have developed expectations that CSOs should be subject to oversight mechanisms as a means of regulation and transparency. This approach

contradicts the principle of CSO independence and may undermine the development of civic participation. Instead, there is a need to establish stable, institutionalized strategic communication mechanisms that ensure mutual accountability and transparency without imposing supervisory functions.

Collaboration Gaps in Crisis Situations. A systemic challenge is the vulnerability of the collaboration culture during crises. Data analysis shows that in conditions of war, forced displacement, or emergencies, CSO collaboration may temporarily intensify but often remains fragmented. Organizations working in the same sector sometimes operate in parallel without mutual awareness, and resource scarcity can foster competitive rather than cooperative behavior. This is particularly risky during crises, when coordination is a critical necessity. Although all communities highlighted the work carried out during the 2023 displacement as one of the best examples of LSG–CSO–state collaboration, especially notable in Syunik, such cases are exceptions rather than the rule in terms of systematic collaboration.

The combined observations indicate that CSOs, LSGs, and state institutions largely share common views regarding community engagement and collaboration. All actors clearly agree that without collaboration, neither effective non-crisis responses nor sustainable management of social issues is possible, and that data exchange, joint needs assessment, and coordinated program planning are essential prerequisites for effective interventions.

At the same time, differences are most apparent in perceptions of collaboration forms and tools. CSOs emphasize the need for institutionalized, trust-based, and non-oversight collaboration, whereas some LSG and state representatives predominantly expect regulatory and controllable mechanisms, due to gaps in coordination and unclear boundaries of responsibility. As a result, a situation emerges where the goal of collaboration is shared, but understandings of the mechanisms to achieve it often do not align. This gap not only limits program effectiveness but also hinders the deepening of mutual trust and the development of a stable culture of civic participation, demonstrating that the development of community collaboration requires not isolated initiatives, but a unified, institutionalized, and long-term approach.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS AND THE CONTOURS OF COLLABORATION.

A combined analysis of the discussions allows us to outline several solutions that could significantly improve the quality of CSO–state–LSG collaboration, reduce systemic risks, and enhance community impact. Potential directions include:

- **Institutional Clarification and Definition of Responsibilities:** It is important to establish clear mandates for role allocation: who is responsible for what, which data can be exchanged and under what procedures, and what mechanisms ensure mutual accountability. This will allow CSOs and state institutions to operate within a predictable and coordinated framework, avoiding oversight-driven or non-purposeful interventions.
- **Joint Planning and Localized Approaches.** CSO engagement with communities should be treated as a coordinated process based on joint needs mapping, assessment of local resources, and alignment of priorities. This approach will help shift perceptions of programs from “externally imposed” labels toward locally grounded, co-created interventions recognized by community members and local structures.
- **Coordination Platforms and Networked Collaboration.** It is necessary to establish or strengthen multilateral platforms that provide mutual visibility of programs, secure data exchange structures, and regular formats for collaboration. Networked approaches are particularly important when CSOs operating in the same sector can complement rather than duplicate each other’s efforts. These platforms should be regularly updated with new, relevant data and transformed into genuinely practical tools.
- **Development of Service Delegation and Partnership Models.** An effective approach is to integrate CSOs’ strengths into the provision of state or local services through a partnership logic, or to have certain CSOs deliver delegated services on behalf of the state, as is done in the case of services for survivors of domestic violence. This approach reduces ad hoc interventions.
- **Capacity Development.** For CSO sustainability, it is a priority to develop professional capacities, particularly in crisis response, communication, and data management. In this context, joint CSO–state–LSG programs and reciprocal learning visits can be effective, allowing actors to understand each other’s operations and procedures, as well as to form personal networks, which, according to research participants, play a crucial role in facilitating collaboration.

Overall, the discussions in this section indicate that the “problem” of local collaboration is not merely a lack of will or willingness; it is systemic, linked to gaps in data management, role definition, joint planning, and accountability structures. Establishing these structures can become a key factor not only for improving effectiveness but also for strengthening trust.

CONCLUSION

The overall analysis shows that CSOs operating in Armenian communities are key actors within the social ecosystem, yet they face multilayered limitations. ***CSOs' self-perception, their roles and significance, and the reinterpretations of these roles by community and state structures together shape the current framework of collaboration, trust, and systemic development.***

On one hand, CSOs see themselves as complementary, flexible, and rapid-response actors capable of addressing issues that the state system cannot fully cover, such as social vulnerability, disability, displacement, domestic violence, mental health, special educational needs, eldercare, and more.

However, observations from community and state structures indicate that this role does not translate into a systemic, sustainable impact due to a combination of objective and subjective factors.

Presence of Institutional Gaps. The analysis highlights that the majority of CSO–LSA–state cooperation is built on informal, personal, or situational relationships. Although there are successful practices, such as close CSO, Unified Social Service cooperation in Lori, and examples in Syunik of rapid response and joint coordination following displacement, these have not been translated into institutionalized modes of operation.

The Collaboration Gap Is Particularly Visible at the Following Levels:

- **Data Exchange.** Data on children, persons with disabilities, or other vulnerable groups are often not shared due to legal, technical, and risk-related concerns. As a result, CSOs rely on informal mechanisms, personal connections, previous experience, local networks, or CSO-led needs assessments, which does not support the sustainable development of CSO–LSG–state collaboration.
- **Needs Assessment.** Although there is broad agreement that programs should be based on joint needs assessments, in practice the mechanisms in use are partial, fragmented, or often absent altogether. Systems such as e-social.am do not yet cover multisectoral needs, and the involvement of LSA and regional staff throughout the program cycle (monitoring, feedback, completion, and evaluation) remains largely insufficient.
- **Culture of Collaboration.** Analysis of the discussions shows that an undesirable tendency often emerges in communities to view CSOs as entities subject to control. Some LSG representatives even referred to the need for “oversight instruments.” This approach runs counter to the fundamental principles of civil society and needs to be replaced by trust-based practices grounded in strategic communication and clear role definition.

Community Participation and Motivation Challenges. Much of CSOs' work is built around resident participation; however, community members are often engaged not by a motivation to create long-term value, but by expectations of material incentives or short-term benefits. Accordingly, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- a culture of civic participation in communities is not yet fully established;
- residents often see themselves as “recipients of assistance” rather than as co-creating partners;
- low levels of trust hinder the development of sustainable forms of collaboration.

Although this reality is largely driven by resource scarcity in communities, it nevertheless limits both the impact of programs and the legitimacy and public perception of CSOs.

Shortcomings in Crisis Response. The analysis confirms that in crisis situations (war, displacement, heightened social burdens), collaboration between CSOs and state/local bodies often intensifies but remains:

- irregular in terms of human and financial resources;
- unsystematic;
- prone to parallel actions and duplication of assistance.

Under these conditions, ***coordination becomes not merely desirable but a vital necessity, requiring the development of a partnership-based culture.***

The “Anatomy” of Data, Relationships, and Trust. Gaps in clearly defined roles, trust, and communication create what can be described as a fragile and unstable “architecture” or “anatomy” of trust. Transforming communication into strategic communication is necessary for the system to stabilize.

Thus, the role of CSOs in community development, social protection, crisis response, and the inclusion of vulnerable groups is undeniably significant. They operate in areas where the state system is limited, inaccessible, insufficiently available, or overburdened.

However, this role and impact can be further strengthened if the system undergoes the following strategic shifts:

- **Establishing institutionalized collaboration:** clarifying communication channels, data-sharing procedures, regular coordination meetings, and joint discussions across program cycles.
- **Developing a participatory culture:** revising approaches to community engagement by moving from a logic of “providing assistance” toward one of “co-creating value through collaboration.”
- **Strengthening trust:** ensuring mutual accountability, transparency, and partnership-based cooperation in place of control-oriented approaches.
- **Expanding community-level and inter-regional networked collaboration:** strengthening ties among CSOs, including across regions, promoting knowledge exchange, and fostering multisectoral teamwork.

Today, CSOs in Armenia are not only providers of social support but also carriers of trust, change, and community resilience. Their effectiveness now depends not solely on their internal capacities, but also on the quality of **sustained, systemic, and trust-based collaboration** built with state and local authorities. This assessment underscores that ***the sustainable development of civil society requires not only programmatic support, but also systemic planning, institutional interaction, and a shared strategic vision.***

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CSOs: STRENGTHENING STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

Based on the findings of this analysis, strategic communication recommendations have been developed for civil society organizations. These recommendations aim to address existing challenges related to public perceptions of CSOs, trust-building, and communication gaps, while also supporting a clearer, more coherent, and systemic presentation of CSOs' roles, mandates, and impact to different audiences. As highlighted throughout this report, achieving this is possible through strategic communication, with particular attention to the following points:

- **Reframe CSOs' public positioning:** Present CSOs with the full scope and range of their functions, avoiding association with only specific programs.
- **Develop communication aimed at building trust, in addition to awareness-raising activities.** When engaging with target audiences, focus on building a 'loyal audience,' rather than limiting communication to beneficiaries alone."
- **Build trust-focused communication:** In addition to awareness-raising, emphasize cultivating a "loyal audience" rather than limiting communication to beneficiaries alone.
- **Apply audience-centered communication:** Tailor messaging and channels to each target audience. Listen to audiences to understand their preferred communication formats and adjust accordingly.
- **Engage with the media:** Beyond CSOs' own online platforms, maintain regular collaboration with local and national media, including TV and online press.
- **Link results communication to systemic impact:** Present each result not only as an activity but as part of solving community problems or mitigating risks, showing the bigger picture.
- **Clearly communicate CSOs' roles and boundaries:** To avoid inflated expectations and resulting disappointment, regularly inform audiences about the organization's operational scope, even if it temporarily shifts during crises, and ensure beneficiaries understand these limits to prevent misunderstandings.
- **Use preventive communication against misinformation:** Proactively explain CSOs' mandates, funding logic, and objectives in a neutral tone, avoiding defensive or justificatory language.
- **Avoid defensive responses to negative labeling:** Replace emotional rebuttals with calm, fact-based, structured communication.
- **Simplify and clarify language:** Avoid donor, technical, or narrow sector-specific terminology, especially in community communication.
- **Ensure communication continuity, not episodic activation:** Avoid only communicating during crises or program phases. Maintain reliable, ongoing engagement with communities, covering all program stages, not just completion or beneficiary selection.
- **Emphasize collaboration with state and LSG bodies:** Present CSOs as partners rather than opposing or replacement institutions, avoiding sharp criticism and using constructive feedback instead.

- **Develop a unified internal communication approach:** Ensure consistent messaging, language, and approach across the organization, especially when multiple representatives engage with external audiences.
- **Avoid person-centered communication:** Present the organization as a whole rather than associating its work with individual staff members or program leads. While trusted faces matter to the community, the organization itself must remain the primary representative.

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