Report of research
(survey and consultations)
CIVIC INCUBATOR

WP1_D1.1_D2

Łódź

FEBRUARY 2025

CONTENTS

CIVIC INCUBATOR

INTRODUCTION

A social activity is considered an individual activity undertaken in the public interest. The analyzed involvement, whether independent or in collaboration with like-minded individuals, aims to enhance the social conditions of the immediate environment. The researchers confirm the power of informal activities based on voluntariness and mutual trust. This sphere is not fully researched, which contributed to the research undertaken in the CIVIC INCUBATOR project.

The public consultation was embedded in the *Design Thinking* (DT) method. They gathered the opinions of members of informal groups about their values and motivations. The first stage of the CIVIC INCUBATOR project aimed to understand **who informal groups are, why they are formed, and why they chose to remain informal.** An online survey and a public consultation were intended to help with this. According to the DT methodology, we call this first stage empathy. The results were a good starting point for the second stage, the needs diagnosis. Through a participatory consultation, we gathered residents' opinions on their needs for support for their informal groups.

The survey aimed to learn the perspective of representatives of informal groups on the functioning of such groups.

The consultation aimed to learn the perspective of representatives of informal groups on the functioning of such groups. **The participants shared their observations on the role of leaders in informal groups and presented expectations towards local governments, state authorities, and NGOs.**

The expected results were:

- to characterize the informal group members,

- to learn about the differences and similarities in the activities of informal groups in partner countries.

METHODOLOGY

Methodology of the survey

In the WP1 research, a quantitative method was used to explore the characteristics of informal group members and NGO members. The explanatory variables will include sociodemographic variables, subjectivity, interest in local/national/international issues, level of generalized trust, and level of vertical trust. As a first step, we conducted **online surveys** with representatives of informal groups and NGOs in Romania, Greece, Hungary, Poland, and Spain. The sampling was a purposive quota.

The research questions are:

- What are informal groups?
- What motivations and values do they have?
- Why are they formed?
- Why do they choose to remain informal rather than becoming NGOs?
- Is there any difference between participants in informal groups and participants in NGOs?

The survey was consulted by all partners to ensure that it considered country-specific conditions. Every partner had the same poll. The Partners translated the survey from English into their native language.

The survey targeted members of informal groups and NGOs on the reasons for civic engagement and factors preventing citizens from formalizing.

The survey includes open and closed questions. There are 4 parts of the survey:

- Participation (from question 1 to question 8)
- Informal group (from question 9 to question 17)
- Motivation and values (from 18-28)
- Socio-economic status of respondents.

The online survey was available on free online platforms including Google Forms. IASIS used the Zoho tool provided by the organization, ensuring it was easily accessible and well-organized for participants.

Partners promoted the survey using a targeted and structured approach to ensure meaningful participation. The primary outreach tactic involved extending direct invitations to members of informal groups already familiar to the researchers—for instance, those participating in social campaigns, applying for funding, or collaborating with the institution. These groups were chosen based on their active engagement in community initiatives.

The invitation to participate in the survey was published on the project partners' websites and shared across social media platforms. To maximize its reach, the survey was promoted through various methods, ensuring it reached as many people as possible. By targeting specific groups, the researchers were able to engage individuals likely to be interested in the survey's topic. Additionally, the survey was posted on the organization's official Facebook page, further expanding its reach to a broader and more diverse audience. This approach helped ensure the survey was widely publicized and easily accessible.

Respondents could share the survey link on their profiles and send it via Messenger, WhatsApp, or similar platforms. Each participant was allowed to complete the questionnaire only once, and their responses remained anonymous to the researcher. The study employed a self-selection survey method, utilizing volunteer non-probability panels.

It is worth noting that while online surveys are increasingly used in both academic and commercial research—and are recognized as a legitimate methodology on par with traditional approaches such as postal, in-person, or telephone surveys (Siuda 2016, 28)—their use remains relatively controversial. According to the literature, the choice of this method involves weighing its benefits against its limitations.

Methodologists agree that this approach offers significant time and cost savings for researchers while also providing respondents with the convenience of choosing when and where to participate. A major advantage is the so-called "disinhibition and self-disclosure" effect, which encourages more honest responses due to the anonymity of the online environment. This makes the method particularly effective for sensitive research topics (Forster and McCleery 1999; Mider 2013). Additionally, it eliminates the potential influence of an interviewer or third-party presence, reducing response bias. As per the project indicators, it was expected that at least 300 people would be surveyed. We've achieved this number. In total, the survey was conducted with **330 respondents:**

Partner	Country	Time of survey	Female	Male	Non-binary	No answer
CISE	Poland	18.11.2024 to 31.12.2024	50	12	0	1
SSF	Spain	20.11.2024 to 07.01.2025	48	15	0	0
PACT	Romania	15.01.2025 to 26.02.2025	36	21	2	0
IASIS	Greece	06.12.2024 to 31.01.2025	51	16	1	1
ACA	Hungary	21.11.2024 to 4.12.2024	50	24	2	0
TOTAL			**235**	**88**	**5**	**2**

Table 1. The time of the survey, and number of respondents.

Consultation process overview

Each consultation session lasted **2.5 hours** and was divided into **five rounds**:

- **Round 1**: Participants define the characteristics of an average informal group representative.
- **Round 2**: Discussion focuses on the motivations for joining informal groups, the benefits of participation, and the challenges faced.
- **Rounds 3 & 4**: These rounds address the expectations of informal group members toward local governments, non-governmental organizations, and central authorities. Participants first document their expectations individually and then prioritize them collectively.
- **Round 5**: The final stage involves formulating common demands applicable at the national level.

All project partners followed the same methodological framework. The key methodological instructions are outlined below.

Conditions for organizing consultations

- Maximum **20 participants per session** (as per project indicators). If needed, sessions may be divided into:
    - 4 meetings of 4-5 participants each
    - 2 meetings of 10 participants each, etc.
- Small group discussions (4-5 people per table).
- Participants must be representatives of informal groups.
- Each table is moderated by a designated facilitator.
- Discussion takes place in multiple stages, each lasting 15-20 minutes.
- The consultation duration remains consistent: 1.5 – 2 hours, regardless of group size.
- The consultation process begins with an introduction to its objectives and principles.
- Facilitators are responsible for moderating the discussions and ensuring structured engagement.

The research questions were:
- Who is the Persona? (Background, occupation, role in informal activism)
- What values guide the Persona?
- Why does the Persona operate in an informal group rather than an NGO?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of operating within an informal group?
- What challenges do informal group members face?
- How can we support the Persona in operating effectively within an informal group?
- What expectations do informal group members have from local governments, NGOs, and central authorities?

Using the **CANVAS model**, each participant completed a profile of an "average" informal group member (Persona). This exercise helped visualize the characteristics, motivations, and values of informal group participants.
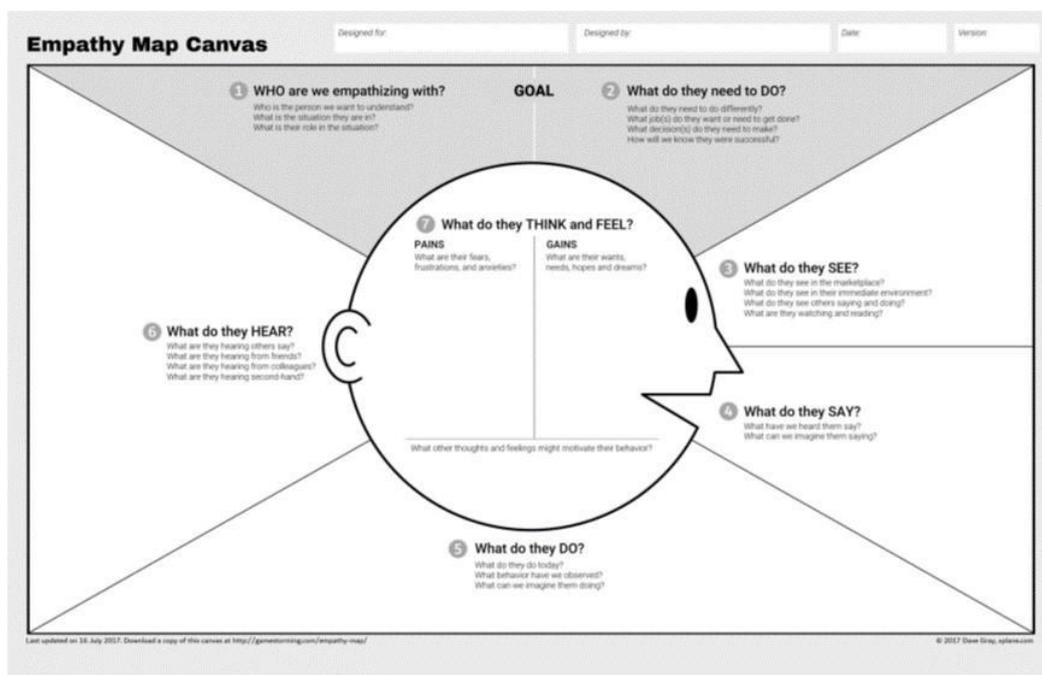
The public consultation with participants from informal groups took place between December 2024 and February 2025. The meetings gathered socially active individuals, offering them a platform to share their experiences and collaboratively develop solutions to enhance the capacity and impact of informal groups.

Partner	Country	Date	Female	Male
CISE	Poland	13 December 2024	15	6
SSF	Spain	30 January 2025 31 January 2025	7 12	1
PACT	Romania	8 February	8	6
IASIS	Greece	30 January 2025	12	8
ACA	Hungary	28 January 2025 3 February 2025	15	5
TOTAL			**69**	**26**

Table 2. The time, place, and number of participants of consultations.

ANALYSIS OF INFORMAL GROUPS - A COMPARATIVE STUDY

Empirical research has demonstrated a **significant degree of similarity among informal groups operating in Spain, Poland, Greece, Hungary, and Romania**. Engaged citizens within these countries **exhibit analogous socio-economic characteristics and adhere to comparable value systems**. Variations in their operational needs are minimal and predominantly stem from differences in the legal frameworks governing their activities.

Definition of informal groups

According to the CIVIC INCUBATOR project, an informal group is defined as a voluntary and spontaneously organized collective of individuals who share common objectives. These groups, typically composed of three to five individuals, collaborate to address specific social issues in a non-hierarchical manner. Their activities contribute to the enhancement of social conditions within their immediate environments. Informal groups are characterized by:

- A flexible and dynamic structure,
- The predominance of personal relationships,
- The absence of formally defined responsibilities,
- The reliance on informal mechanisms of social control.

Structure and membership trends

The survey results indicate considerable variability in the number of informal group members. In Poland, Hungary, and Romania, most groups have no more than ten members. Conversely, in Hungary and Spain, some informal groups boast significantly larger memberships, reaching up to 700 in Spain and 100,000 in Hungary. Notably, most survey respondents identified as "active members", while Poland and Hungary reported a relatively high proportion of individuals assuming "leadership roles" within these organizations.

Informal groups engage in both periodic and ad hoc activities. In Poland, the distribution of groups conducting either spontaneous or cyclical initiatives is nearly equal. Despite their unstructured nature, these groups exhibit a strong commitment to the continuation of their social efforts. Predominantly composed of women with master's degrees, these collectives function as grassroots initiatives, fostering flexibility and responsiveness to community needs.

Areas of activity and target groups

Informal groups address a wide range of social concerns, including:
- **Integration**,
- **Culture**,
- **Sports**,
- **Ecology**,

∞

- **Education**.

Their initiatives primarily target the following populations:

- **Youth**,
- **Elderly individuals**,
- **LGBT communities**,
- **Local communities**.

These groups arise in response to unmet community needs that formal organizations often overlook. Their activities range from organizing cultural events and offering emotional support to advocating for local causes. The findings indicate that informal groups emerge naturally from shared concerns, focusing on collective action and immediate impact rather than bureaucratic structures.

## Motivations for remaining informal

Informal groups are formed to address specific community needs or interests that formal organizations may not effectively cater to. These could include organizing cultural events, offering emotional support, or advocating for local causes. The survey data suggests that these groups regularly come together organically to respond to shared concerns or collective interests, with no formal bureaucratic structure, making them more accessible and immediate in their actions.

They have a similar value system, and care about the common good, being interested in their social environment.

Participants in the informal groups prefer to remain informal because it allows for greater autonomy, flexibility, and ease of operation. Becoming a registered NGO could introduce bureaucratic hurdles, such as the need to adhere to formal regulations, undergo audits, and ensure legal compliance. By staying informal, these groups can operate more flexibly and address the community's immediate needs without the constraints of NGO structures. The informal status also allows them to maintain a more inclusive, less hierarchical structure that encourages the active participation of all members.

Reasons to work in informal group
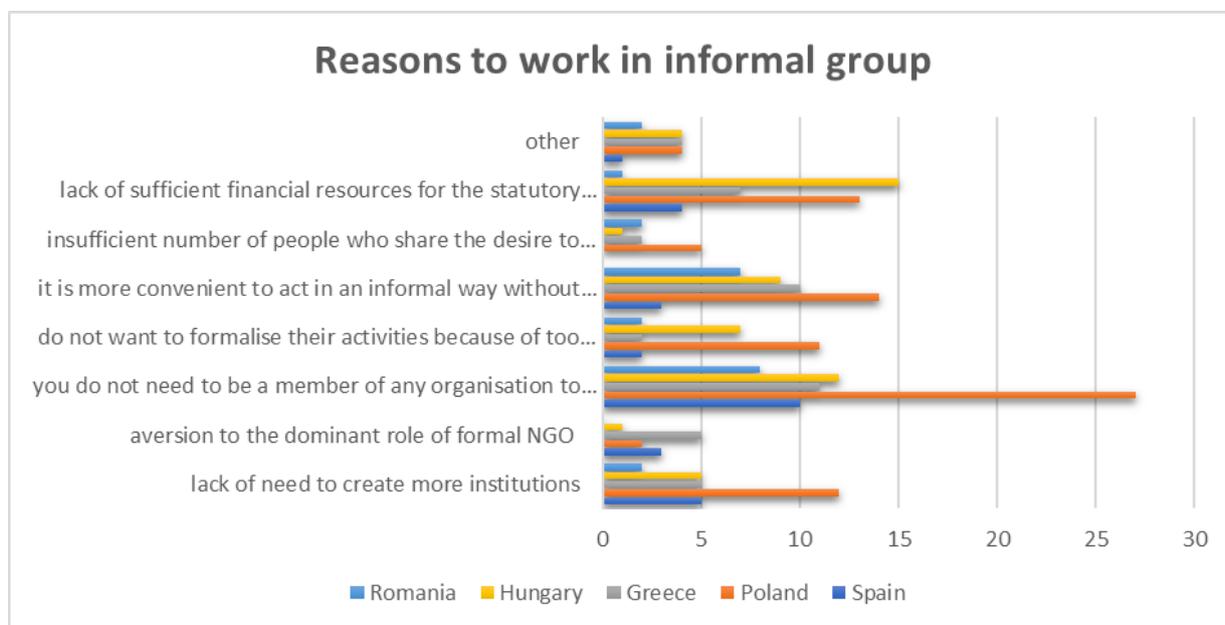
The survey of participants highlighted several reasons for maintaining the informal status of their groups:

1. The belief that meaningful social contributions do not necessitate formal organizational membership (Spain, Poland, Greece, Romania, Hungary).
2. A preference for flexible and non-continuous engagement (Greece, Poland, Romania).
3. Insufficient financial resources to establish a formal non-governmental organization (Poland, Hungary).

Remaining informal allows these groups to maintain autonomy, adaptability, and ease of operation while circumventing bureaucratic obstacles such as regulatory compliance, financial audits, and administrative oversight.

Problems in informal group
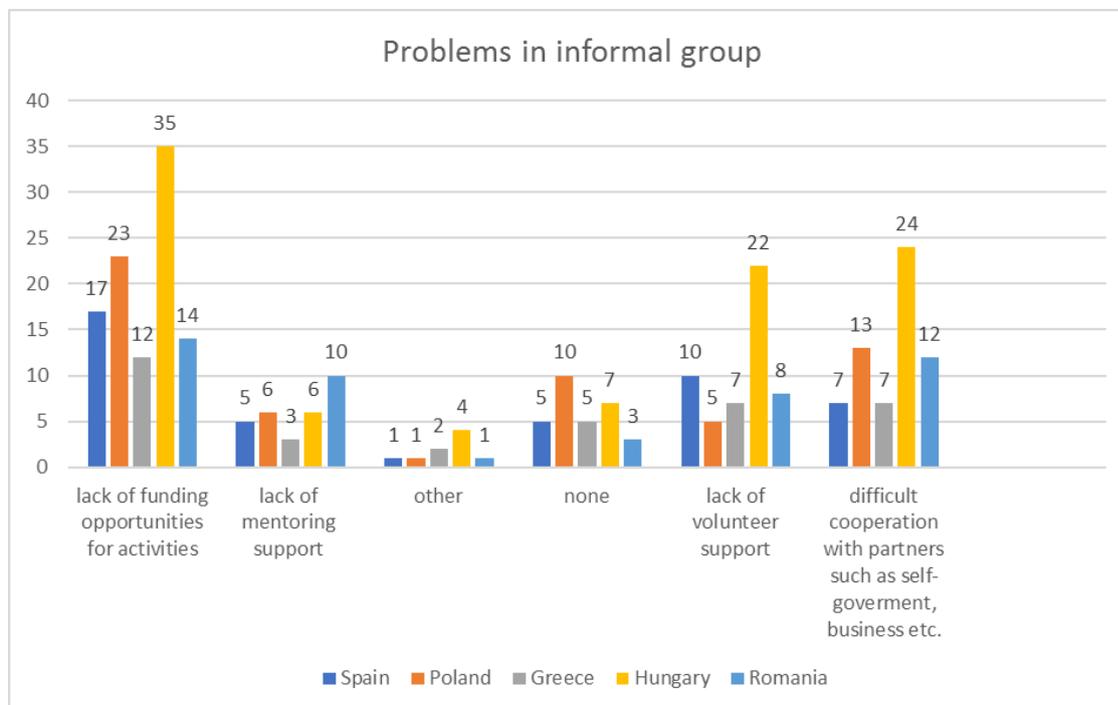
Challenges faced by informal groups

The biggest issue for every informal group surveyed under CIVIC INCUBATOR is the **lack of funding opportunities for activities.** Another challenge is **difficult cooperation with partners such as local government, business, etc**. according to groups from Poland, Romania, Hungary, and Greece. Lack of volunteer support is an issue for informal groups from Spain, Greece, and Hungary. For the Greeks, the problem is also a lack of mentoring support.

According to consultation, participation in informal groups is closely linked to several **structural and operational challenges** faced by their members. The primary difficulties can be categorized into four key areas:

1. **Bureaucratic and organizational barriers** (challenges related to external administrative processes)
2. **Lack of institutional support** (difficulties in obtaining external assistance and recognition)
3. **Internal operational difficulties** (challenges in managing group dynamics and sustainability)
4. **Psychological impact and risk of burnout** (individual challenges related to prolonged engagement).

11

Institutional support and expectations

Analyzing the results of the questionnaire regarding the support received and expected from the institutions, we can see a parallel. Informal groups, due to their often incidental, ad hoc activities, do not have financial backing or professional staff. It is precisely the question of financing their activities that is most important to them.

Participants in the survey received financial support in the past 12 months and expect this form of support above all. Most informal groups also received support in the form of:

- networking and meeting with other informal groups (Romania, Spain, Hungary, Greece)
- possibility to organize a group meeting (Romania, Spain, Greece, Poland)
- free training (Hungary, Greece, Poland).
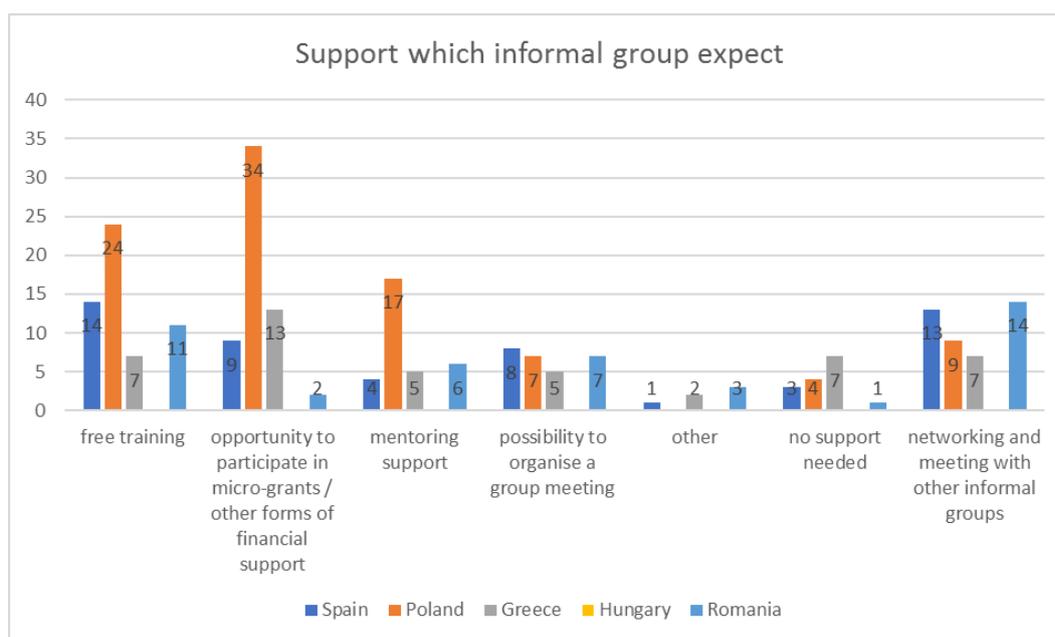
As informal groups consist of people with different professions and professional backgrounds, it is of great benefit for them to participate in specific and tailor-made training courses. Such support is expected by respondents from Poland, Romania, and Spain. Informal groups also see the importance of networking, and sharing experiences with people in the third sector. Such support is expected by respondents from Romania, Spain, and Greece.

So, **informal groups expect support from institutions in their activities. This includes financial support as well as training and networking support.**

During the consultation, participants were allowed to express their expectations regarding the role of local government, NGOs, and central authorities in supporting informal groups. At every discussion table, participants listed as many postulates as possible, which were then evaluated for their importance.

The role of NGOs in supporting informal groups

Across all participating countries, NGOs were recognized as key intermediaries facilitating the growth and development of informal organizations. The core expectations regarding NGOs can be categorized into three primary areas:

1. **Cooperation and network creation**

   - NGOs play a crucial role in fostering collaboration between informal groups and civil society organizations.

   - Establishing networks to enhance coordination and joint initiatives is a priority.

   - Shared goals between NGOs and informal groups lead to the development of sustainable partnerships.

2. **Capacity building and advocacy**

   - NGOs provide critical training, including financial management, legal compliance, and communication skills.

   - Advocacy efforts by NGOs help informal groups gain visibility and credibility within the broader civil society sector.

   - Public relations and promotional activities contribute to raising awareness about informal groups' contributions.

3. **Financial and logistical assistance**

   - Support in securing and managing grants is essential for informal groups, which often struggle with administrative complexity.

   - NGOs can simplify financial reporting procedures and facilitate access to funding opportunities.

   - Participants from Poland particularly emphasized the necessity of increasing financial aid for informal initiatives.

In conclusion, NGOs serve as key facilitators and trusted partners for informal groups. These groups rely on NGOs for support across various aspects of their operations. Through collaboration with NGOs, informal groups seek to create robust support networks and enhance their organizational capacity.

Strengthening networks among informal groups

Networking among informal groups was widely recognized as a fundamental strategy for enhancing its operational efficiency. The development of platforms for contact and communication enables experience-sharing and institutional partnerships. NGOs can play an instrumental role in fostering these networks through:

- **Organizing integration meetings**: Providing opportunities for informal groups to interact and exchange best practices.

- **Facilitating institutional links**: Helping groups establish relationships with policymakers and stakeholders.

- **Promoting collaborative campaigns**: Strengthening joint awareness initiatives to increase public engagement.

Another significant issue raised was the difficulty of accessing public audiences due to limited promotional resources. Therefore, launching cooperative campaigns and ensuring better media visibility were identified as key priorities.

Local government's role in supporting informal groups

Local authorities hold varying degrees of influence across different countries. However, consultation participants exhibited a shared expectation of increased engagement and recognition from local governments. Their primary demands include:

1. **Recognition and inclusion**

   - Participants stressed the need for formal acknowledgment of informal groups' contributions.
   - Increased participation in decision-making processes, such as delegation to advisory councils, was widely supported.
   - Safeguards against the appropriation of informal groups' ideas by local governments were emphasized.

2. **Financial and material support**

   - Many informal groups rely on local governments for funding and logistical assistance.
   - Essential support mechanisms include grants, subsidized meeting spaces, and legal aid.
   - Polish participants suggested the establishment of umbrella organizations within local authorities to streamline aid distribution.

3. **Reduction of bureaucratic barriers**

   - Simplification of application procedures for municipal grants was a prominent demand.
   - Greek participants particularly highlighted the need to reduce bureaucratic hurdles when applying for public support.

o Transparency in funding assessments was seen as crucial, with concerns that evaluators often lack awareness of informal groups' unique characteristics.

Expectations from central authorities

At the national and supranational levels, consultation participants expressed distinct expectations concerning legislative and structural reforms:

1. **Legal framework adjustments**

   o Inconsistencies in legal provisions hinder the formal recognition of informal groups.
   o Legislative amendments should focus on streamlining tendering processes and removing regional funding restrictions.
   o Hungarian participants advocated for appointing civil affairs officers to facilitate group coordination.

2. **Civic education and skills recognition**
   o Romanian participants highlighted the importance of integrating civic education into school curricula to foster long-term engagement.
   o Participants recommended official recognition of competencies acquired through informal group participation, particularly in academic and professional settings.

3. **European-level support**
   o Hungarian participants underscored the need for direct access to EU funding for smaller community initiatives.
   o Expansion of EU training programs for informal group members was proposed to enhance their capacity and international collaboration.

The most significant differences in the postulates directed at institutions pertain to the level of government involved. A notable disparity exists between the high number of demands from Hungary and the relatively few from Spain. A key focus is the recognition of informal groups as partners with the right to influence political decisions. In this context, they seek legislative capacity and reduced bureaucracy, including the adoption of regulations that formally support the creation and development of civic and initiative groups, facilitate their access to resources, and publicly acknowledge their value in a democratic society.

Members of informal groups perceive government authorities as institutions with limited awareness of their needs and expectations. They expect to be included in social research and encouraged to participate in public consultations, which is crucial for tailoring support measures to their specific requirements. This aligns with their demand for improved access to information, consultation opportunities with politicians, and greater accessibility to policymakers. In summary, **as highlighted by Greek participants, they seek formal recognition of informal groups as an essential component of democracy.**

Consultation participants also pointed out inconsistencies and inadequacies in legal provisions regarding informal groups. They propose legislative improvements, simplification of regulations, and the streamlining of government tendering processes to enhance operational efficiency. A significant recommendation is the modification of funding mechanisms, particularly the removal of regional restrictions on financial support for activities, which would provide substantial assistance.

Polish participants suggest the implementation of national projects for the establishment of sectoral umbrella organizations. Such initiatives could lead to the creation of umbrella entities within local authorities or other public offices, aimed at facilitating and simplifying the operations of informal groups. Members of informal groups also advocate for the official recognition of competencies acquired through participation in informal organizations. This includes acknowledging their activities in academic or professional contexts, such as counting their involvement toward scholarship eligibility for students.

For Romanian participants, the most critical aspect is civic education. They propose integrating activities that foster civic engagement into school curricula to instil an understanding of the importance of active citizenship and collective responsibility.

A demand at the European Union level was also raised. Hungarian participants emphasized the need for the "direct availability of EU funds for smaller communities," ensuring that resources reach those who genuinely need support. Additionally, they advocate for the inclusion of informal group members in various training programs at the European level, fostering their participation in global civil society initiatives.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PARTICIPANT IN INFORMAL GROUP AND PARTICIPANT IN NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATIONS (NGOs)

Civic engagement manifests in various forms, with individuals participating in both informal groups and NGOs to address social, political, and environmental issues. While both forms of participation contribute to civil society, there are some differences in the sociodemographic characteristics, motivations, structures, and modes of engagement of their members.

Sociodemographic characteristics of participants from the survey

Despite some similarities, key distinctions exist in the backgrounds of individuals engaged in informal groups versus those in NGOs:

- **Gender and age**: Both groups are primarily composed of women aged 35–54 with higher education. This demographic reflects individuals who, due to relative stability in their professional and personal lives, can engage in social initiatives.

- **Educational background**: NGO participants tend to have higher levels of education, often holding postgraduate degrees. This suggests that NGO involvement is more common among professionals seeking structured opportunities for civic participation. In contrast, informal groups attract a broader range of individuals with varying educational backgrounds.
- **Occupational diversity**: Informal groups include professionals such as teachers, healthcare workers, freelancers, students, and retirees who prefer flexible engagement. Conversely, NGO participants are more likely to be employed in public institutions or corporate environments, where civic involvement is often aligned with professional development.
- **Geographical distribution**: Both groups are active in rural and urban settings, though NGOs tend to be more concentrated in metropolitan areas where access to institutional support is greater.

Motivations for participation

The primary reasons for civic engagement in both informal groups and NGOs are similar and include:

- A commitment to community well-being.
- The desire to enact social change.
- The belief is that collective action is more effective than individual efforts.

However, differences arise in how these motivations are expressed. Members of informal groups tend to be driven by grassroots activism and direct problem-solving, often focusing on immediate community needs. In contrast, NGO participants engage in structured advocacy, long-term policy influence, and institutional partnerships.

Members of informal groups have a social motivation to participate in them. They attach little importance to the individual benefits that this participation may bring them; they participate primarily because "it is important for the community", "because of its social nature" and because they "want to create a social change". This social nature makes them very interested in the decisions and plans of local administration. In general, they trust most people. Most people take a middle position on the question of whether people are acting in their self-interest or helping others.

The most of responders agree that:

- Acting with others you can achieve more than alone
- One should not criticize other people because of their differences and views.
- Democracy is the best form of government.

17

Structural and organizational differences

A comparison of informal groups and NGOs reveals fundamental structural distinctions:

Dimension	Informal Groups	Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)
Organizational structure	Decentralized, flexible	Hierarchical, regulated
Decision-making	Autonomous, rapid	Procedural, consensus-based
Engagement approach	Direct, grassroots-driven	Institutionalized, strategic
Resource availability	Limited, self-funded	Access to external funding
Scope of impact	Immediate, small-scale	Long-term, systemic
Professional benefits	Community engagement, personal fulfilment	Career advancement, professional networking

Informal groups operate with flexibility and autonomy, allowing for immediate action without bureaucratic constraints. In contrast, NGOs function within institutional frameworks that require adherence to formal procedures and regulations.

People in informal groups come from a variety of working backgrounds, such as freelancers, students, retirees or those with flexible jobs. They prefer to take action based on immediate needs without having to deal with bureaucracy. In contrast, NGO participants are more likely to have structured jobs in the public or corporate sectors, and their involvement is often linked to their career or professional goals.

In addition to social support, informal groups often engage in advocacy and political activism. Many see their participation as a means to challenge existing power structures, push for human rights, and promote environmental sustainability. Unlike NGOs, which frequently require legal and bureaucratic compliance, informal groups maintain their autonomy, allowing them to remain more adaptable and grassroots-oriented.

NGO representatives tend to think more systematically, are more critical of democracy, have less long-term motivation, feel powerless, and believe they lack sufficient information. However, both groups strongly believe in community-based activities and cooperation.

Participants in informal groups are usually more grassroots, issue-driven, and temporary, while NGO members tend to be part of a structured, long-term civic engagement. However, both play a crucial role in civil society—informal groups initiate change and mobilize

communities, while NGOs provide sustainability and institutional support.

Even if both groups' values and beliefs are quite similar, since the members of informal groups are closer to, or affected by the problems they perceive or want to solve, there are some key differences that this survey highlighted:

Proximity to issues influences perspective

Members of informal groups often emerge from communities directly affected by specific problems. Their hands-on experience makes them more pragmatic and action-oriented but also more likely to accept trade-offs, such as temporary restrictions on individual rights for what they perceive as the greater good. This contrasts with NGOs, which may be more guided by structured principles and legal frameworks, and emphasize rights protection.

Trust and power dynamics with authorities

A significant distinction between the two groups lies in their relationship with political and administrative authorities:

- **Informal groups**: Participants typically perceive themselves as overlooked or marginalized by local governments due to their lack of formal recognition. This perception fosters engagement in direct action, protests, and grassroots mobilization as primary strategies for advocacy.
- **NGOs**: Due to their institutional legitimacy, NGOs benefit from greater access to decision-making processes, funding, and legal resources. This allows them to influence policy and institutional reforms more effectively than informal groups.

The differences in power dynamics influence their modes of civic engagement: informal groups rely on direct activism, whereas NGOs adopt a more strategic, long-term advocacy approach.

Impact on civic engagement and potential for collaboration

Despite differences, both informal groups and NGOs contribute significantly to civil society. Informal groups excel in mobilizing communities and addressing urgent social needs, while NGOs provide stability, resources, and legal advocacy. A synergistic collaboration between the two could enhance civic engagement through:

- NGOs offer strategic guidance, legal support, and financial assistance to informal groups.
- Informal groups provide NGOs with grassroots perspectives, direct community representation, and innovative solutions.

Conclusion

The distinction between participants in informal groups and NGOs is shaped by differences in structure, motivation, and interaction with authorities. While informal groups emphasize immediate action and grassroots activism, NGOs function within structured, institutionalized frameworks to drive long-term change. Recognizing these differences can help enhance collaboration and strengthen the impact of civic engagement in fostering social transformation.

COUNTRY-SPECIFIC OBSERVATIONS

Hungary

Informal groups in Hungary consist of at least three individuals working voluntarily towards a common goal. While the Civil Act provides a legal framework for "civil societal companies", most groups operate without formal registration. Due to their informal nature, they lack access to specific policies or funding, requiring collaboration with legally recognized entities. They are typically small, local, and active in youth engagement, advocacy, community development, cultural initiatives, and charity work. Some large movements function as nationwide networks addressing systemic issues.

Since informal group participants are relatively new to the civic arena, their perspectives on society tend to be harsher, more radical, and more skeptical than NGO members.

When analyzing responses related to trust, honesty, and altruism (helping others vs. prioritizing self-interest), NGO participants exhibited a more optimistic view of people. In contrast, informal group members overwhelmingly placed their responses on the more negative end of the spectrum. Additionally, NGO participants showed significantly greater interest in local decision-making and planning than informal group members.

Based on responses regarding participation, the following trends emerged:

- Informal group members were more active in political campaigns than NGO participants.
- NGOs were more engaged in all forms of civic activities than informal groups.
- Informal groups focused more on art and culture.

Consultation participants emphasized the need to end the stigmatization and polarization of civic initiatives. Recently, Hungary's civic sector has faced political harassment and media campaigns that have targeted CSOs involved in community-building and advocacy. These challenges have also affected informal groups, restricting their ability to operate freely.

Greece

Participation in informal groups has significantly increased in Greece, particularly following the 2009 financial crisis. Many people relied on informal networks for survival and collective resilience, leading to a surge in grassroots initiatives. Studies indicate that informal civic engagement nearly tripled between 2008 and 2013, as more people joined local efforts to provide food, healthcare, and emotional support in response to inadequate state intervention (Chrysostomou, 2013).

Informal groups in Greece are deeply rooted in principles of inclusivity, cooperation, and direct action. Many operate within social solidarity networks that promote alternative economies, mutual aid, and community-driven support. By 2012, at least 22 social solidarity groups were active in 17 Greek cities, offering essential resources and services to vulnerable populations (Sotiropoulos, 2013).

Social media presents both opportunities and challenges for informal groups. While it enables rapid communication, mobilization of supporters, and event coordination, it can also create internal conflicts, attract individuals with diverging agendas, and lead to power struggles. Some well-intentioned informal groups have been co-opted by individuals seeking personal gain, eroding trust among members.

Spain

Informal groups in Spain are unregistered, self-organized collectives without a legal framework or hierarchy. They typically consist of 8-15 active members, with additional participants engaging in specific activities. These groups operate independently and are not generally supported by public institutions, although some may gain access to council premises for meetings. Their flexibility allows them to respond quickly to local needs, though the lack of official recognition limits funding and institutional collaboration.

Spanish participants identified two major challenges with broad consensus:

- The need for some degree of formal structure to ensure effective operations. For example, during the DANA climate disaster in Valencia (October 2024), a lack of accountability created uncertainty regarding responsibility for key actions.

- Unequal levels of involvement and commitment among group members. Some participants expressed frustration that a lack of engagement from certain individuals slowed progress and hindered the achievement of objectives: *"The (low) level of involvement of some people slows down the work of others."*

21

Poland

Poland has a strong culture of informal civic engagement, with 44% of citizens involved in social activities in 2023 (CBOS, Aktywność w organizacjach pozarządowych, 2024). However, the exact number of informal groups is unknown due to their unregulated nature. These groups operate in various sectors, including culture, sports, ecology, and education. The high level of voluntary participation highlights the importance of grassroots initiatives, though their lack of formal status presents challenges in securing funding and institutional cooperation.

Civic engagement is strong in both rural and urban areas of Poland, though opportunities for involvement are more accessible in larger cities. In rural areas, organizations such as Rural Housewives' Circles and informal neighborhood support networks play a crucial role. Older adults are particularly active in Universities of the Third Age.

A major issue faced by informal groups in Poland is legal regulation. Unlike formal organizations, informal groups often encounter significant barriers when applying for funding, making it difficult—if not impossible—to access financial resources. Participants stressed the urgent need for tailored legislation that accommodates the specific characteristics of informal organizations.

The NGO provides significant support to informal groups, offering microgrants, financial assistance, meeting spaces, and extensive training. Positive evaluations of the competition procedures and cooperation with the CISE, as well as the relatively few problems experienced by the respondents during the implementation of the microgrants, resulted in numerous outcomes, significant for the communities in which and for which the activities were undertaken. According to the respondents, the communities first of all integrated (59 out of 63 people, i.e. 94% of the respondents) and became more strongly involved in activities carried out for their benefit (55 people, i.e. 87% of the respondents), which translated into intensified cooperation between various entities operating in the community (50 people, i.e. 76% of the total) and the initiation of further undertakings of this type (46 people, i.e. 73% of the total) and a reduction in the scale of some local problem (42 people, i.e. 67% of the respondents). („Wpływ działań informacyjnych, doradczych i animacyjnych realizowanych przez Centrum OPUS na wzrost aktywności obywatelskiej" Raport z badań ewaluacyjnych, 2023 p.18).

Romania

In Romania, informal groups, also known as initiative groups, are unregistered civic collectives focused on local issues, advocacy, and community development. They cannot directly apply for funding or sign official agreements, often partnering with NGOs for support. Many informal initiatives later transition into formal organizations. Their areas of activity include environmental activism, human rights, education, and civic engagement.

While civil society participation is growing, challenges such as limited funding, bureaucratic barriers, and burnout among volunteers persist.

Informal groups in Romania are particularly effective in addressing urgent local issues, benefiting from their flexibility and ability to respond swiftly without bureaucratic constraints. However, their impact is regularly limited by resource shortages, lack of legal recognition, and difficulties in institutional collaboration. Romanian participants called for the establishment of a legislative framework that provides legal protection and support for grassroots initiatives.

Some organizations, such as the PACT Foundation, the Romanian-American Foundation, and Fundația pentru Dezvoltarea Societății Civile (FDSC), provide microgrants even to informal groups, along with facilitation and mentoring. Platforms like Comunitatea Resilience Lab and CeRe offer workshops on community organizing and advocacy.

Comparative summary of informal groups in Poland, Spain, Romania, Hungary and Greece similarities across countries:

1. **Grassroots engagement**
   o Informal groups across all five countries function as voluntary, community-driven collectives.
   o They operate in response to local social issues, focusing on integration, education, environmental activism, and cultural development.
   o A strong emphasis on **mutual aid, community engagement, and social activism** is observed.
2. **Reasons for remaining informal**
   o Groups prefer autonomy, flexibility, and ease of operation, avoiding **bureaucratic barriers** associated with NGOs.
   o The **lack of financial resources** is a common constraint that discourages formalization.
   o Informal structures allow quick decision-making and action without hierarchical constraints.
3. **Challenges faced**
   o **Limited funding** is the most significant issue across all countries.
   o Cooperation with local governments and institutions is often **complicated due to the lack of legal status**.
   o Groups struggle with **volunteer retention**, organizational sustainability, and visibility.
4. **Expectations from NGOs and governments**
   o Financial support and training programs are widely requested.
   o Groups expect **recognition and inclusion in policy-making** processes.
   o They seek networking opportunities to exchange experiences and collaborate on initiatives.

Key differences between countries:

Country	Group Size & Structure	Primary Activities	Main Challenges	Government & NGO Support
Poland	Mostly **small groups** (up to 10 members)	Social integration, education, culture	Legal barriers to funding	NGOs provide **microgrants, training, and meeting spaces**
Spain	Groups range from 8 to 15 **members**; some larger ones exist	Community events, ecology, youth programs	Low volunteer engagement. Funding difficulties.	Some **access to municipal spaces**, but limited institutional support
Romania	Small-scale **initiative groups**, often transitioning into NGOs	Advocacy, local activism, environmental issues	Bureaucratic barriers, funding difficulties	Some NGOs provide **microgrants and mentoring**
Hungary	Diverse, from **small collectives to massive movements** (up to 100,000 members)	Youth engagement, political activism, social campaigns	Political and legal pressures	High expectations from the EU and national governments for **legal recognition and funding**
Greece	Grew significantly post-2009 crisis; strong emphasis on **social solidarity**	Mutual aid, alternative economies, disaster response	Lack of mentorship, social media conflicts	NGOs provide **training and networking opportunities**, but bureaucracy remains a barrier

Notable insights:

1. **Hungary and Spain** have the **largest** informal groups, sometimes reaching thousands of members.
2. **Poland and Romania** have strong NGO networks supporting informal groups, unlike **Spain**, where government and institutional support is weaker.
3. **Greece's informal groups** emerged as a response to financial instability and emphasized **solidarity economies**.
4. **Hungary's informal groups** are **politically active** and face more **institutional scrutiny** than other countries.

Despite operating in different socio-political contexts, informal groups in Poland, Spain, Romania, Hungary, and Greece share a common commitment to social change and grassroots activism. While challenges like funding and bureaucracy persist across all nations, their ability to mobilize communities, adapt to local needs, and operate outside formal structures underscores their resilience and importance in civil society.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Centrum Innowacji Społecznych Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego (2023). Wpływ działań informacyjnych, doradczych i animacyjnych realizowanych przez Centrum OPUS na wzrost aktywności obywatelskiej. Raport z badań ewaluacyjnych. Łódź.
- Bojar H. (2013). Rodzina w małym mieście. Z socjologicznych badań terenowych lokalnych społeczności obywatelskich we współczesnej Polsce. IFIS PAN, Warszawa.
- CBOS (2011). Aktywność społeczna Polaków – poziom zaangażowania i motywacje.
- CBOS (2024). Aktywność w organizacjach obywatelskich.
- CBOS (2024). Czy chcemy pomagać innym?
- Chrysostomou A. (2013). When the State Fails: The Rise of Informal Civil Society Organizations in Greece. Lund University.
- Forster E., McCleery A. (1999). Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing: A Method of Capturing Sensitive Information, IASSIST Quarterly 23,2, s. 26–38.
- Gumkowska M. (2022). Kondycja organizacji pozarządowych. Trendy 2002-2022. Stowarzyszenie Klon-Jawor, Warszawa.
- Kwaśniewski J. (1976). Pozytywna dewiacja społeczna. „Studia Socjologiczne" nr 3.
- Lasocik Z. (1994). Kilka uwag o roli organizacji pozarządowych w państwie demokratycznym. Fundusz Współpracy/Cooperation Fund BORDO, Warszawa.
- Martela B. (2011). Aktywność obywatelska w ramach inicjatyw nieformalnych. Przyczynek do refleksji. "Acta Universitatis Lodziensis. Folia Sociologica" 38.
- Mider D. (2013). Jak badać opinię publiczną w Internecie? Ewaluacja wybranych technik badawczych, „Przegląd Socjologiczny" t. 62, nr 1.
- Murawska A. (2020). Aktywność obywatelska mieszkańców Łodzi i Iwanowa - struktura i uwarunkowania. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź.
- Murawska A. (2022). Społeczeństwo obywatelskie podczas pandemii model liberalny versus model komunitarny, [w:] Wzory obywatelskości. Gry salonowe czy zwyczaje domowe?, (red.) W. Misztal, A. Kościański. IFiS PAN, Warszawa.
- Murawska A. (2024). Aktywizacja społeczności lokalnych metodą design thinking. „Centrum Ekspertyzy Lokalnej" OPINIA nr 13/2024, Fundacja Rozwoju Demokracji Lokalnej https://frdl.org.pl/opinie-frdl/aktywizacja-spolecznosci-lokalnych-metoda-design-thinking
- Parlament Europejski (2006). Zalecenie Parlamentu Europejskiego i Rady nr 2006/962/WE z dnia 18 grudnia 2006 r. w sprawie kompetencji kluczowych w procesie uczenia się przez całe życie. Dz.U. L 394 z 30.12.2006.
- Siuda P. (2016). Ankieta internetowa: zalety i wady – rekapitulacja, [w:] Metody badań online, (red.) P. Siuda. Gdańsk, s. 28-81.
- Sotiropoulos D. A. (2013). Civil Society in Greece in the Wake of the Economic Crisis. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

CIVIC INCUBATOR

the main author

Agnieszka Murawska, PhD
CENTER OF SOCIAL INNOVATION (CEIN)

Institute of Sociology,
University of Lodz

the co-author

Inga Kuźma, PhD, DSc, Associate Professor
CENTER OF SOCIAL INNOVATION (CEIN)

Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology,
University of Lodz