**Civil Society Organizations’ Experiences and Capacity to Involve Newcomers, People with Diverse Linguistic and Cultural Backgrounds, and Returnees**

**Mapping Analysis**  
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Praxis | Civil Society Organizations’ Experiences and Capacity to Involve Newcomers, People with Diverse Linguistic and Cultural Backgrounds, and Returnees

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**Introduction**

A changing migration environment has brought an increasingly diverse population to Estonian society, including newcomers, people with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and returnees. At the same time, civil society organizations (CSOs) play an important role in supporting community cohesion and social participation, including through volunteering. CSOs often act as bridge-builders in their communities, providing space for participation, cooperation, and a sense of belonging. It is therefore crucial to understand the readiness, experience, and capacity of these organizations to involve people from diverse backgrounds in their activities.

The aim of this mapping analysis is to provide a substantive and multifaceted overview of how Estonian CSOs involve newcomers, people with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and returnees in their activities. The analysis focuses on organizations’ experiences so far, their competencies in inclusion, barriers encountered, and supportive practices. The study is based on three data layers: document analysis, an online survey, and two focus group discussions. This combined approach allows for the integration of quantitative patterns and qualitative insights, offering a rich picture of actual practices and needs.

The mapping analysis sought to answer the following research questions:

* What has been the experience of CSOs in involving people with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds?
* What competencies do organizations currently have for inclusion, and what additional competencies are needed?
* How and in what roles are target groups involved in CSOs’ activities?
* To what extent have discrimination or exclusionary practices been present in CSOs’ activities?
* What international practices could be applied in the Estonian context—both at the organizational and national level?
* What motivates organizations to involve these groups, and what are the main barriers to doing so?

The report addresses these questions through six analytical categories. Each category is explored in detail in separate chapters (Chapters 2–7):

CSOs’ past experience of involving target groups;

* Competencies for inclusion (existing and those in need of development);
* Inclusion practices;
* Manifestations of discrimination or exclusion;
* International good practices;
* Motivation and barriers to inclusion.

While each category has its own defined focus, many themes are interconnected—for example, barriers to inclusion may stem from a lack of competencies, organizational limitations, or structural support conditions.

The mapping analysis was commissioned by the National Foundation of Civil Society (NFCS) to gain an overview of the involvement of newcomers, people with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and returnees in CSO activities. The results of the analysis will inform more systematic activities during the period 2026–2029, enabling CSOs to develop their competencies in this field.

## **Summary: Conclusions and Recommendations**

In this report, we mapped the experiences and competencies of Estonian civil society organizations in engaging newcomers, people with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and returnees. In the final chapter, we summarize the main conclusions of the mapping analysis regarding the current situation and present recommendations for supporting civil society organizations, drawing on academic literature, good practices from other countries, and the perspectives of NGO representatives.

**Conclusions**

* **High openness, but engagement is ad hoc rather than strategic**  
  Civil society organizations see themselves as open, but lack deliberate and consistent strategies for engaging people from diverse backgrounds. Engagement often happens through personal contacts and coincidences, rather than systematic approaches. Most roles are voluntary rather than paid, and the engagement process is rarely consciously managed.
* **Good practices exist but are not widespread**  
  Some organizations use methods such as face-to-face recruitment, language mentoring, and visual aids, but these practices are not widely established. Many organizations have not yet taken concrete steps to strengthen engagement with target groups.
* **Networks and collaboration are functioning, motivation is high**  
  NGOs maintain active networks and collaborations, and there is a clear willingness to exchange experiences and good practices. Several organizations (including some participants in this study) have years of experience in engaging target groups and are willing to share their knowledge.
* **Language skills and personal initiative shape the scope of involvement**  
  NGOs typically engage target groups in simpler support activities that do not require advanced Estonian language skills. Organizations have also developed ways to overcome language barriers, such as pictogram-based communication, local volunteer “language buddies,” support for attending language courses through flexible arrangements, etc.
* **Target groups reach NGOs mainly through referrals from institutions**  
  Many NGOs build cooperation with state authorities, municipalities, universities, schools, vocational institutions, and other NGOs. This indicates that the foundation for broader cooperation already exists.
* **Motivations are diverse, but barriers remain**  
  Engagement is driven both by values and by funding mechanisms. At the same time, several constraints shape practice: qualification barriers, caregiving responsibilities, rural settlement patterns, and language requirements.
* **Engagement of foreigners and Estonians is not so different**  
  The main distinctions for foreigners are language barriers and (for refugees) the adaptation curve, which NGOs need greater awareness and capacity to support.

**Recommendations**

1. **Support collaboration and peer learning among NGOs**
   * *Mentorship and knowledge exchange:* Establish a mentoring system where experienced organizations support smaller or less experienced ones, with a focus on practice-based learning.
   * *Create opportunities for exchange:* Encourage workshops, informal discussions, e-learning, videos, podcasts, opinion pieces, and case stories.
   * *Develop and share modern tools:* Promote the use of multilingual and visual tools (pictograms, translation services, simplified guides).
   * *National knowledge hub:* Collect and centralize information and materials supporting engagement on an online platform, developed in cooperation with NFCS, Integration Foundation, and volunteer support centers.
2. **Strengthen NGOs’ capacity and motivation through funding schemes**
   * *Flexible and sustainable funding:* Enable long-term funding, including core funding or support for key roles (e.g., project managers, volunteer coordinators).
   * *Accessible calls for proposals:* Adapt schemes so smaller or less experienced NGOs can participate (simplified forms, advisory support).
   * *Consider regional specifics:* In rural areas, planning and funding should account for smaller target groups and logistical challenges (e.g., transport and catering costs should be eligible).
3. **Develop NGO competencies in engagement and recruitment**
   * *Promote positive attitudes:* NGOs can serve as role models by sharing stories of how engagement has enriched their activities and communities.
   * *Address unconscious exclusion patterns:* Provide training and forums to discuss barriers like “us vs. them” thinking or closed networks.
   * *Support systematic volunteer engagement:* Develop tools and materials for planning and reflection (see e.g. Ireland’s Volunteer Centre materials).
   * *Offer co-vision and supervision:* Provide regular peer and supervisory support to prevent burnout and maintain motivation.
4. **Enhance cooperation between NGOs and other institutions in recruitment and support**
   * *Promote information exchange and awareness:* Encourage institutions supporting newcomers (e.g., Settle in Estonia, NGOs, municipalities) to introduce civil society opportunities and link newcomers with NGOs—while being mindful not to pressure them.
   * *Support language learning through cross-sector cooperation:* Share resources with employers and the Integration Foundation.

Short, web-friendly English summary