

# Peculiarity of development of non-formal education in Belarusian non-profit sector\*



Ulad Vialichka

Ulad Vialichka, executive director of Public Union "Education Center «POST»" (Minsk); member of Coordination Bureau of Belarusian non-formal NGO network "Association for Civic Education".

*Independent Belarus has already been existed on the map of Europe for more than 14 years. It is almost impossible to count and name all these new, modern, unusual, creative things that have come to our life during this period of time. Education and social activity didn't stay aside this process as well. Thanks to basic political, economical and social changes that took place in post-Soviet countries, both education and social activity met each other and started active interaction within the frames of non-formal education, which is realized thanks to the efforts of a number of Belarusian non-governmental organizations (NGO).*

*It is the first time in our society when we have some conditions for real using education as a tool of democratic development. It has happened so that Belarusian non-profit sector starting its development from almost "zero point" has become the most active and flexible subject in this process. Public associations were not afraid of to learn something new, to "import" some interesting ideas, to re-interpret something they new before, to refuse from some old concepts and choose more perspective and modern ones. And as a result of that — everybody has got benefits from that.*

*In this article author tries to make a short review of development of non-formal education in particular in NGO sector and analyze modern situation in this sphere.*

Despite of the fact of existing during Soviet Union times both developed, extended and formalized system of educational and enlightening work with population (out of the frames of secondary and higher education), the system of non-formal education nowadays is still at the stage of constructing.

Together with reaching national independence by our country in the beginning of 90-s of the last century non-formal education in Belarus has got its new reference point. There was no any common plan of development of this educational sphere so it has started its chaotic, spontaneous and even sometimes painful process of growing. Various representatives of state, business and public sector took part in this development. That is why the ways of development of such a wide sphere as non-formal education varied depending on aims and functions of this or that sector: from addition to formal educational system, liquidation of its gap to satisfying new requirements aimed at effective competition on labor market etc.

This article is not aimed at analysis of non-formal education in Belarus at large. First of all it is oriented on particular segment of non-formal education that is realized within the frames and thanks to efforts of non-governmental organizations (NGO) during the last 10–15 years.

Before starting the dialogue about non-formal education it is necessary to clarify the definition, otherwise we take the risk to be misunderstood. First of all we have to admit that definition "non-formal education" is extremely capacious but in the same time it hasn't still got its clear single meaning. Thus there is a number of different versions of this definition.

Non-formal education is very often defined as creation of conditions and opportunities for getting by people appropriate educational experience aimed at raising the level of their social, professional and civic competence.

\* Вялічка У. Нефармальнае адукацыя дарослых у беларускім трэцім сектары: асаблівасці развіцця // "Адукатар", №1, 2004 — С. 2–6.

According to another point of view non-formal adult education is “educational system that helps to liberalize people and strengthen their abilities and positions on market and modern economy and provide possibilities of governing and changing situation in the society”.<sup>1</sup>

According to this understanding there are the following functions of non-formal education defined:

- **Social function** – providing equal social opportunities for people for their development.
- **Economical function** – permanent (regular) raising professional and individual competence of a person, raising quality of his/her activity and economical mobility, strengthening his/her positions on labor market.
- **Cultural function** – raising understanding and knowledge about the world and society, forming esthetic and moral values.
- **Political function** – assisting to development of pluralism of ideas and participating of people in decision-making processes, assistance in establishing and development democratic institutes of power, development of political culture”.<sup>2</sup>

It is also necessary to admit that the word “non-formal” used for defining this educational sphere pays attention to some opposition of this kind of education to traditional one (secondary, higher and professional education) implemented in the frames of formal educational system. In the same time non-formal education is not so much as an alternative but more like addition and development of existing educational systems.

It is also possible to meet in the literature such a definition as “civic education”. This definition is very often used among Belarusian NGO. In its wide sense (in a narrow sense civic education is explained as aimed at forming knowledge about political system, specter of political parties, participation of citizens in political decision-making etc.) civic education is defined as rather close to non-formal education. In particular civic education is very often defined as “preparing citizens for realization of their rights and responsibilities with the aim to support and strengthen self-governing as a basis of citizens' participation in the life of community, nation or state. The main aim of civic education in this case is educating citizens (independently of their age) to values and norms of life in democracy, in other words civic consciousness as we call that”.<sup>3</sup>

According to this aim there are three main objectives of civic education defined:

- Gaining and adjusting **knowledge** about society and its elements, those are important for achieving adequate level of social and civic competence.
- Acquiring **skills** of self-realization as an independent and autonomous social subject as well as skills of organizing optimal type of social communication.
- Individual forming **values and attitudes** that principally define a model of democratic social behavior.<sup>4</sup>

It is necessary to mention that such understanding of objectives of civic education is a great extent correlates with vision of role of non-formal education worked out and suggested by UNESCO. It suggests four main objectives: to educate in order to know, to act, to exist and to co-exist.<sup>5</sup> It confirms once again synonymous using described above definitions both in literature and in various professional communities.

In the same time it is impossible to tell about absolute equivalent sense of all these terms as they characterize the phenomena from different perspectives. Definition “civic education” mostly appeals to educational aims - educating citizens, forming active life position. Definition “non-formal education” is first of all oriented on paying attention to way of organizing the process of education that is rather different from traditional (formal) education.

It is also possible to meet in some books other definitions which are more or less accordant to described phenomena of non-formal education (for instance life-long education, adult education, folk education etc.). Accepting using these definitions in synonymous sense we nevertheless intend to use in this article definition “non-formal education” as it is the most adequate to the analyzed phenomena.

**What is seen as expected result of non-formal education realized by non-profit organizations?** Non-formal education is so many-sided that it can hardly have any fixed frames or limits. A person gets the opportunity to develop himself/herself through learning with others some economical issues or foreign language, to realize his/her personality through handcrafting or analysis of situation with human rights.

Whatever participants do during their education, independently of some particular content of education, there is an idea, dream uniting the majority of NGO realizing the process of non-formal education in Belarus. It is increasing number of people sharing democratic values and having appropriate skills and attitudes that are necessary for life in modern society. Some researches of social processes define a number of key skills important for forming democratic model of behavior:

<sup>1</sup> H. Veremeichik, T. Poshevalova. Adult Education: German Experience For Belarus, Minsk, 1999 (in Russian) – p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> H. Veremeichik, T. Poshevalova. Adult Education: German Experience For Belarus, Minsk, 1999 (in Russian) – p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> I. Bugrova. Educating a Citizen // Counterpart Alliance For Partnership Bulletin “Novy Resurs”, #2 (17), February 2003 (in Russian) – p. 5. [WWW document]. URL <http://cap.iatp.by>

<sup>4</sup> Civic Education: Foreign Experience, Problems Of Development / Responsible Editors A. Mikhailov, V. Dunaev. – Minsk, Propilei, 1999 (in Russian) – p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> Y. Zinchenko. Some Thoughts About How We Are Lucky With Non-Formal Education // “Sodejstvie” youth magazine, #5, 2003 (in Russian) – p. 5.

- Skills of life in dialogue environment, understanding of sense and role of dialogue in the society.
- Development of critical thinking skills.
- Decision-making skills and skills of taking and holding responsibilities and foreseeing possible outcomes of taken decisions.
- Skills of problem-solving and conflict-solving, skills of making a choice.
- Skills of organizing civic initiatives and formulating positions and requirements.
- Skills of creating co-operative and solidarity environment (situations).
- Skills of projecting and foreseeing future events and changes etc.<sup>6</sup>

This list may and must be continued. In the same time the success in achieving the goal is directly dependant not only on dissemination of knowledge and information about social processes but also on how the process of accepting and adjusting this knowledge is organized. In other words it is not enough only to have all information about democracy as a system of building the society. It is much more important to reach democratic model of behavior of people in their real everyday life. So the way of organizing educational process in the system of non-formal education is able to provide such a result.

Some researches define five basic pedagogical processes – learning, education, training, upbringing and enlightening. Results and outcomes of each of these basic processes are principally different. In that way if the result of learning process is accepted knowledge, then the result of education process is the way of thinking, reflection and understanding etc.<sup>7</sup> If to have a person with democratic model of behavior as a result of non-formal education then it worth paying the main attention to organizing the education process. In this case all other processes are not less important but have other specific functions.

For implementing any of basic pedagogical processes it is used some particular toolbox of educational methods. That is why when we speak about preparing a person to using democratic norms and values in everyday life, about active life position; it means that educational means and methods should be selected in accordance to the aims. In other words it is more effective “to develop” an active citizen through such a type of organizing educational process where he/she takes an active and key role in this process.

**So what have helped non-formal education in Belarus to reach some progress during rather short period of time?** This question is hardly to be answered in one sentence. Of course there were a number of factors. First of all there were new opportunities to try

something new in other educational environment, higher interest of population to the questions of social development, establishing and evolution of NGO sector, craving for changes...

Keeping in mind peculiarities of social and political life of Belarus in the first half of 90-s it is possible to say that NGO sector have become a great arena of personal self-realization, providing some ideas and values in the society for a large number of active, creative people who are not indifferent to destiny and future of our country. So there is not a surprise that organizations, which were established at that time (Leu Sapieha Foundation for Supporting Democratic Reforms, National Youth Organization “Next Stop – New Life”, National Council of Youth and Children Organizations “RADA”, Public Association “United Way” and many others) play active and significant role in social processes initiated by Belarusian NGO up to now.

**From our point of view non-formal education has become one of the priorities for Belarusian NGO sector from year 1994. Exactly at that time non-formal education started to be recognized as a mean of strengthening democratic principles and values in the society as well as a tool for wide dissemination of knowledge about democracy.**

Keeping in mind a lack of previous experience of such activity it was rather evident that most of activities held in the very beginning by non-profit organizations were based on some emotional enthusiasm and provided first of all informational and enlightening functions. Efforts of number of NGO were concentrated around establishing some structures of non-formal education which would be able to fill in existing niche and satisfy require on additional (mostly social) knowledge and skills. This task was tried to be solved by different projects of Public Association “United Way” (NGO trainers club), Sapieha Foundation (group of trainers), Center of Social Innovations (courses for adults), Public Association “Foundation «Open Society»” (Philomath movement), cooperative project of several NGO “Folk University”, “Belarusian Calehium” etc.

The results of this work have come rather soon. Within rather short period of time there was trained rather significant number of specialists, who were able to organize and hold educational process in different NGO projects in the sphere of non-formal education.

**From our point of view there was also a great importance of foreign experience that was accumulated by other countries for several tens of years and later came and was spread in Belarus very quickly.** Having strong deficit of financial and intellectual resources Belarusian NGO have taken leading position in establishing international contacts and development of cooperation with their partners abroad. For the last

<sup>6</sup> I. Bugrova. Educating a Citizen // Counterpart Alliance For Partnership Bulletin “Novy Resurs”, #2 (17), February 2003 (in Russian) – p. 6. [WWW document]. URL <http://cap.iatp.by>

<sup>7</sup> S. Krupnik. Stop-Signal For Civic Education // The Assembly of Belarusian Pro-Democratic NGO Bulletin, February-march 2003 (in Russian) – p. 6.

10 years non-profit organizations have implemented great number of partnership projects, including project in the sphere of non-formal education. There was organized a huge number of seminars, trainings, roundtables, conferences etc. A large amount of foreign specialists have visited Belarus and made great input into development of non-formal education in our country. Rather significant part of our activists and members of NGO took part in various educational programs, internships, courses, study tours organized for them abroad. The highest activeness in development of partnership with our NGO belongs to European specialists — first of all from Poland, Germany, Great Britain, Sweden and Netherlands as well as some organizations and specialists from USA.

That is why it is not surprising that foreign experience have filled the gaps of our system of non-formal education. It is not a secret that most of our methodic and technical components of educational process in this sphere are “imported” from the experience of different countries where non-formal education has much deeper history and traditions.

On the other side quick and spontaneous meeting with foreign experience very often was not used in the most appropriate way. Sometimes senseless copying of something seen or heard took place without any tries to adopt and adjust foreign experience to our modern Belarusian situation. From time to time foreign specialists took the function of “missioners” that teach “not educated” Belarusians the basics of “right” way life. All these facts to some extent influenced the effectiveness of using foreign experience, leaded to losing some sense of it, formed resistance to get deeper in further analysis of this experience.

Thus it is possible to say that potential of work with foreign experience in the field of non-formal education was realized only partly. This lets us look at it as at one of the main sources for development in the nearest future as well.

**One of the main prerequisites for development of Belarusian non-formal education at present time is appearance of a new type of request for educational results.** Socio-economic conditions, which changed significantly in the 90s of the 20th century, have adjusted the people's needs for the content and quality of education. This brought about a need for a strongly articulated practice-oriented approach. In other words, before starting education, its participants have or, at least, try to formulate a certain vision of why they need this type of education, where and how they can possibly implement it in their activities. In spite of the fact that this approach is invariably repeated in traditional education, its practical realization was subject to well-grounded doubts. Thus, the non-formal education, being more flexible and mobile than formal educational system, at a certain moment started to pay its attention to the newly appeared educational request of people, that is, getting and implementation of practical social, civic and communicative abilities and skills in social and professional activities.

Unfortunately, in the same time modern non-formal education within Belarusian NGO sector has a limited capacity of satisfying educational needs of wide range of its target groups. NGOs working in this field are still not able to provide broad groups of population with a respective quantity and quality of educational services due to a number of reasons. Such a situation limits participation in various seminars, trainings, programs, etc. to a small quantity of people. Therefore, we may not say about serious influence of non-formal education upon the Belarusian society. Thus, creation of conditions for broad participation in non-formal education should become one of the priorities for educational and instructive NGOs in the near future.

**The process of development of non-formal education was and is all the time provided with training own pedagogical specialists (trainers, experts, lecturers etc.) who are better than other specialists able to organize effective educational process in this sphere. This tendency also may be recognized as a basic precondition for development of non-formal education in Belarus.**

In this context it is necessary to admit time period between 1996 and 1999 when training trainers for non-formal education was really massive and comprehensive. It was explained on one hand by high demand for such specialists, on the other hand — by position of a number of donors that found training trainers one of the priorities for their activity.

Of course, a lot of trainers from non-profit organizations who were trained and educated and got a great experience at that period of time are active in non-formal education up to now. In the same time such “conveyor production” have shown a number of serious problems which haven't solved till today and provoked some negative outcomes. For instance, as a result of such approach, professional standards of trainer's work were not formulated and a number of trainers educated at that time left non-formal education and NGO sector as such. The word “trainer” started to be used in some ironic sense.

One of the key problems, connected with preparing specialists for non-formal education is the absence of a system of upgrading qualification of such specialists. Very soon the time came when it was already not enough just “to name” yourself a trainer and “somehow” organize some study. There was actual question about quality of educational services provided for people. And this quality directly depends on qualification of educator (trainer, lecturer etc.) providing these services. It is surely possible to admit that among NGO trainers and educators there is a wide circle of people who have gone through qualitative first stage training but now have strong need in upgrading their qualification and achieving new professional level to be able to solve actual educational tasks.

**Together with what was said above it is also necessary to admit a number of problems from solving which very much dependant the future of non-formal education development in Belarus:**

- **Inadequate acknowledgement of value of educational activities of NGO by the state, lack of their integration into the educational sphere of Belarus.** One might say that a significant quantity of organizations of non-formal education and their offices work with permission of the state, rather than due to the interest of the state in such activities. In this regards the situation in Belarus differs from the situation with our neighbors, Ukraine and Russia, where state bodies at various levels openly declare their interest in development of non-formal education, and in participation of the broadest range of people in various educational activities.
- **Lack of developed cooperation among educational and instructive NGOs and initiatives.** Due to the hardships connected with existence of NGOs they have focused their efforts on survival. Such a position does not permit them to view and utilize to their ends the opportunities, which are offered by developing active cooperation with other NGO educational organizations in particular and in Belarus on the whole. NGOs have not quite learned to combine their resources, to invite colleagues to take part in their projects, to lobby and protect their common interests, etc.
- **Inadequate institutionalization of educational civic organizations and their services, lack of professional management in this field.** Unfortunately, for a number of reasons, Belarusian NGO sector does not have an example of a certain organization, which provides with educational services via development of the very educational establishment. Most of the educational activities of civic organizations remind of "the flying Dutch": it is impossible to anticipate where, when and for whom education will be held in a week or in a month. NGOs themselves decide who should be targeted by their activities and means of management of such activities. Thus, the potential participants have the only choice to agree to the worked-out strategy with virtually no chance to influence or alter it. Such approach multiplied by regularly changeable mode of activities does not allow common citizens to enter non-formal education. It does not allow them to choose the most suitable time and place for it. Besides, the NGO sector at present does not have a sufficient quantity of management professionals able to manage effectively not educational activities but an educational institution.

**It is also necessary to mention some latest tendencies presenting in relations between Belarusian NGOs of non-formal education and state policy for the last 2 years:**

The importance of supporting and development non-formal education in conditions of modern Belarusian socio-political and economical situation is even getting higher. It is possible to admit some tendencies of monopolizing the sphere of adult and non-formal education by state educational institutions, unequally competing with independent organizations

that are rather active on this field and high pressure on NGO sector at large. In these circumstances educational NGOs as a rule have problems with wide entrance to their target groups and have to limit specter of their programs and services because of financial and technical reasons.

Majority of organizations face numerous difficulties at various aspects of their activities. First of all these difficulties are connected with organizational (financing, sustainability, promotion of programs, search for relevant forms of education) and professional (level of training, accompaniment of education, lack of standards in civic education sphere etc.) issues. Secondly, the state provides too much regulation and control of activities and development of educational NGOs. Belarus does not have a corresponding legislation; there is lack of non-formal education tradition. Thirdly, the system of training and retraining of highly qualified trainers, multipliers and other educators is insufficiently developed. The system of management training for non-formal education is practically missing.

Such activities are held on irregular basis within the framework of international projects and only under the condition of participation of a large number of foreign specialists. It makes such programs much more expensive. On the other hand, this situation does not promote establishment of a permanently acting self-financing system. Such initiatives usually die away with stopping external assistance.

Other than that, some organizations are afraid of advertising their courses despite of the fact that education is their main activity. They hold courses only with the help of financial resources of sponsors and on a volunteer basis. However, there is virtually no opportunity of a broad advertising campaign.

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**Non-formal education in Belarus already has significant positive results despite of the fact that its modern history is rather short. NGO sector has already reached some satisfying level of coordination and unification in the sphere of non-formal education that may be seen through activity of Belarusian network "Association for Civic Education" uniting today 14 organizations having rather reach experience of work in this sphere. These organizations have their own programs, specialists, methods, target groups, literature and coordinate their activities.**

In the same time the level of educational services in the field of non-formal education and circle of people involved into it require further increasing development as well as mentioned problems require their quick solving. We want to hope that understanding by Belarusian non-formal education organizations and their partners perspectives of development in this sphere will let all of us to achieve new and better situation, liquidate all disadvantages and be much more effective on the way to achieving over-all aim — stimulating building democratic society in Belarus.

