

# Analysis: Civic Awareness, Engagement and Literacy Four Year Trends and Lessons

## Introduction

In the time since the end of the Revolution of Dignity and the dismantling of the Yanukovich regime and the war conflict with Russia, Ukrainian civil society has faced significant changes, both positive and negative, in its operating environment. Among the positive developments was the citizen response to the aggression, their readiness to transform the country according to European values and to push the reform agenda. Active citizen engagement increased, which facilitated the entry of many new passionate and courageous actors into the civil society sector. Simultaneously, many civil society activists entered Parliament and government positions. The state, in response to this influx, has reached out to civil society organizations for assistance in reforms. Citizens' expectations regarding the country's transformation and the desire for positive consequences of reforms were so high that neither the government nor the civil society sector were able to meet these expectations. The process of decentralization has initiated an important and effective ongoing trend of improved citizen engagement in public affairs.

Citizen disappointment with the speed of the country's transformation led to the full power reset during the elections in 2019-2020. It was a time when we recorded a new increase of citizens' expectations for a change in politicians; a new era for civil society organizations began. The first year was largely spent building trust and dialogue between CSOs and the new government at all levels. Being a key driver of democratic reforms in Ukraine, CSOs invested a lot of their efforts in increasing the awareness of Ukrainians regarding civic participation and civic literacy. Their efforts brought invaluable fruits – civic awareness has increased over the years. However, civic participation on the whole still tends to be rather low, motivated primarily by personal or family-related interests and directed to local issues of concern. Accordingly, CSOs should citizens when and where they most motivated and ready for engagement. These realities require from CSOs the need to change their approaches and strategies, and it seems that decentralization reform provides the needed entry points for such changes.

As ENGAGE's initial five-year journey nears its end, we are taking stock of overall lessons on civic awareness and participation in Ukraine over the project's lifetime. Our discussion is based on the USAID/ENGAGE Civic Engagement Poll (CEP). The survey serves ENGAGE's Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning system; it is foremost an instrument to help monitor and assess program outcomes, in order to facilitate and adapt strategies that increase citizen awareness of and engagement in Ukrainian civil society actions. With the help of the CEP, we are also able to compare the civic

behaviors and attitudes of Ukrainian citizens at large with those who participated at ENGAGE-sponsored civic action events. This juxtaposition is useful in understanding whether and how participation in CSO action leads to democratic attitudes and increases citizen input in Ukraine's pro-European reforms.

Organized around three interconnected queries, we discuss key trends in citizen awareness of and engagement in civil society actions, compare beliefs and opinions of ENGAGE participants with those of a national representative sample population. Our analysis is based on the latest CEP data (collected in winter 2020-2021)<sup>3</sup> for comparing national and ENGAGE-participant samples<sup>4</sup>, and on previous waves of the same survey conducted since the inception of ENGAGE. Our discussion also tracks the influence of civic awareness and engagement on civic literacy, the fundamental knowledge and mindset on which democratic societies are built. For this analysis on civic literacy, we rely on data from the summer 2020 CEP, which collected the most recent civil literacy results. Below, we note only the key take-aways from this separate study, also referenced in the activity description of the subsequent activity report. The full study is attached to this report as Annex #5.

The conclusion of the present analysis concentrates on our advice to Ukrainian civil society organizations and those who provide direct development assistance to them. Our recommendations stress the need to: bolster CSO constituency outreach, build trust among citizens, and – being the cornerstone of sustained democratic progress – press the need for increased presence and engagement on the grassroots community level. For Ukrainians to continue to demand change for the country's further democratic progress, we contend that CSOs and practitioners should find effective ways to capitalize on Ukraine's widespread civic awareness, turning it into applied knowledge and dynamic civic participation and engagement.

## General population: more aware, less engaged, and disillusioned about reform

Since the early 2000s, Ukrainian citizens have proved time and again their desire for liberties, freedom, and their European commitment, and have exhibited their heroism and sacrifices for the country's prosperous democratic future. Since the beginning of USAID/ENGAGE activity, Ukrainians have significantly increased their level of civic awareness, and, despite the recent negative influence on mutual trust due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they are ready to unite for important causes. Their increased awareness, however, does not automatically lead to increased actual civic participation.

Participation in CSO activities is daunting to the overwhelming majority of Ukrainians, but they report a relatively high level of general engagement in community life. Approximately every fifth citizen participates occasionally in CSO activities, but a noticeably higher proportion takes active part in their community life that they define as such. And while engaging in CSO activities has remained steady over time, active community life is reportedly growing (from 25% in 2017 to 33% in 2021). The 2019 Presidential and Parliamentary elections which reflected unprecedented optimism and enthusiasm from the electorate<sup>5</sup> may explain the uptick in community engagement in that year, but this electoral "honeymoon period" is clearly over. The larger time span that we cover in our analysis points more to the welcome impact of decentralization on community-level activism than a one-off electoral cycle.

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<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this analysis, the trendlines on civic awareness, participation, attitudes to reforms and main values are built on time-series data from eight waves of the CEP (from 2017 through 2021) and two samples (general population and ENGAGE participants).

<sup>4</sup> ENGAGE participants refers to all Ukrainian citizens who participated in any ENGAGE-sponsored events and consented to be recorded as a participant.

<sup>5</sup> Opportunities and Challenges Facing Ukraine's Democratic Transition, Nationwide Survey, NDI, September 2019, [https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI\\_September%202019%20survey\\_Public\\_vf.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI_September%202019%20survey_Public_vf.pdf)

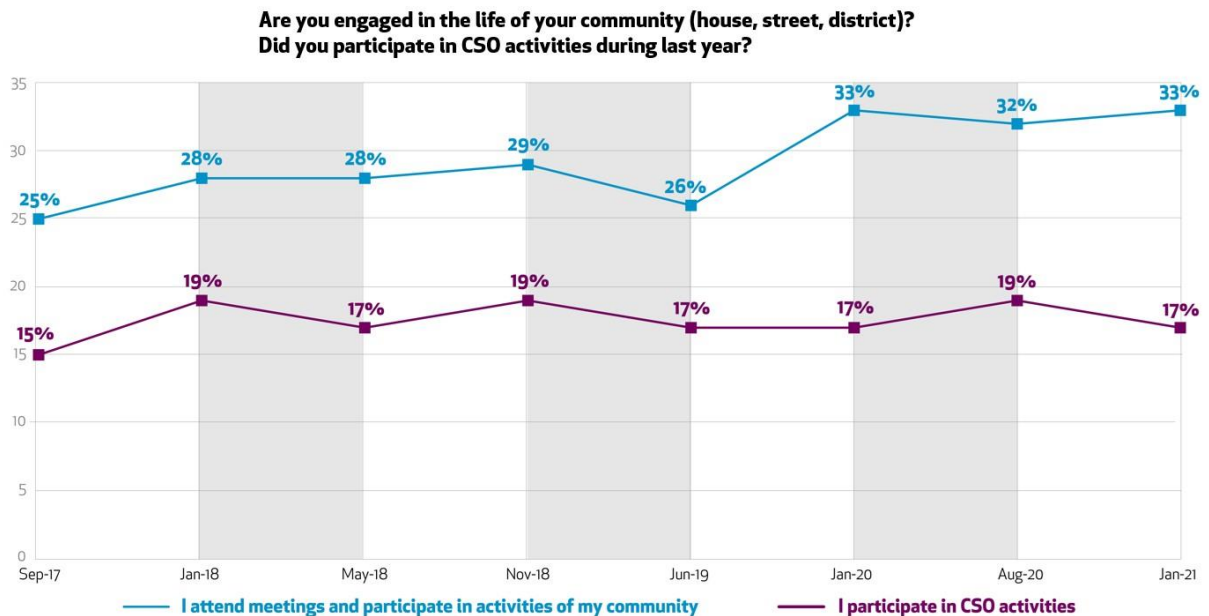


Figure 1. Participation in Community Life versus Participation in CSO Activities

Decentralization appears to be making a positive mark on civic awareness, albeit not specifically mobilizing citizens for institutional participation. The level of awareness of the ways that Ukrainians can engage in the lives of their communities has grown significantly over the past years: awareness of the creation of a housing, street, or block committee or participation in their activities grew from 38% in 2017 to 71% in 2021, and awareness of reporting on infrastructure issues to the local administration has risen from 42% to 69%. However, actual participation in these civic activities lags wildly and steadily behind awareness. Only 8% of Ukrainians were engaged in the creation of a housing, street or a block committee, and only 5% reported on damaged infrastructure.

Most concerning in the fight against local corruption is that Ukrainians do not themselves address perceived corruption. CEP records the lowest level of actual participation on reporting on corruption. Virtually none of the respondents have taken even anonymous effort that protects their identity in this regard.

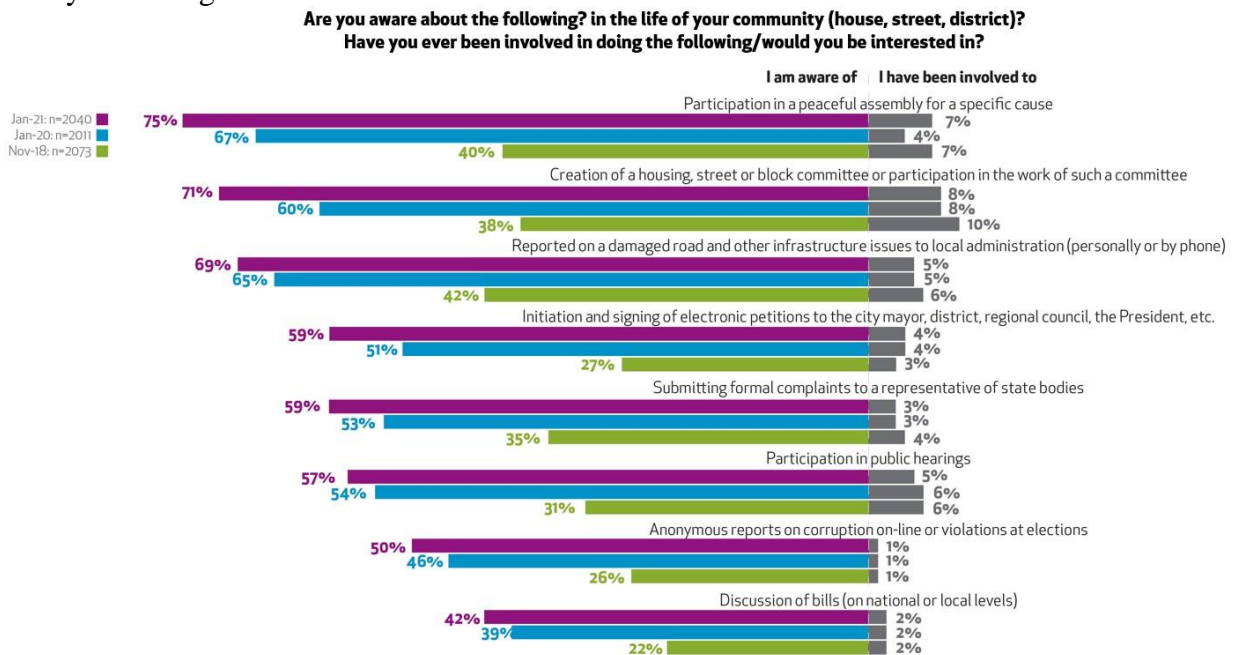


Figure 2. Awareness About the Types of Participation Versus Actual Participation

That Ukrainians are not stepping up against corruption is often due to lack of sense of security. According to a report on human rights defenders and activists<sup>6</sup>, opposing corruption is the riskiest among civil activities, which identified that intimidation and violent attacks on activists (and their property) is widespread. Activism on the grassroots level cannot yet mount an effective challenge to the incumbent elite. Contesting deeply entrenched local elite structures – as evidenced by the 2020 local elections – would require more concerted and consolidated efforts. In addition, a lack of trust in government in general, and anti-corruption bodies in particular, further inhibits Ukrainians from assertively challenging corrupt power holders.

Moreover, COVID-19 restrictions seem to have decreased trust among citizens. Half of the respondents (51%) agree that other people cannot be trusted. The opinion that everyone should take care of mutual interests is shared only by 33% of Ukrainians, with 40% convinced in the primacy of their personal interests.

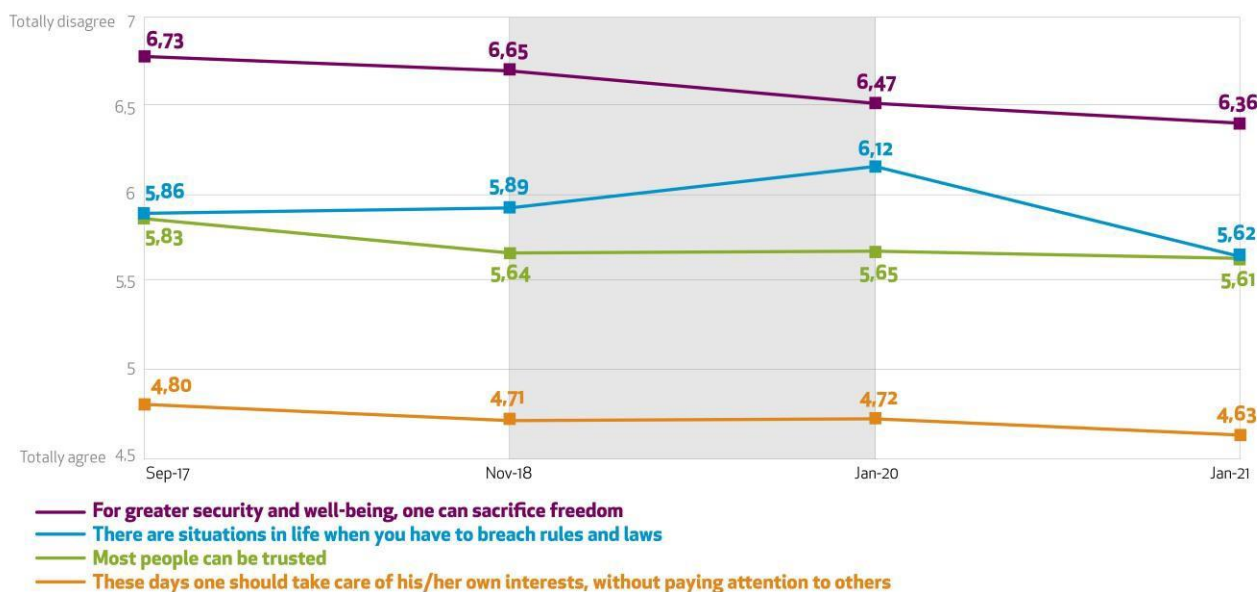


Figure 3. Trust, Security, Interests Comparison of CEP data

## ENGAGE Participants: Optimistic, Self-Reliant and Ready to Take Action

Although the overall Ukrainian public does not participate in CSO activities, the investment in raising citizen awareness and engagement in civic actions through supporting Ukrainian CSOs do bring to bear important fruits. Our current analysis comparing ENGAGE participants with the national CEP sample provides compelling evidence that ENGAGE partners are on right path in engaging active and informed constituents. The section below underlines key differences that participants of ENGAGE activities exhibit, compared to the general population.

ENGAGE participants assign more importance to democratic reforms than simply their own well-being. They also associate the signs of development more with reforms rather than purely materialistic impact. Roughly half of the Ukrainians (47%) continue to consider corruption the most important issue for the state. Poverty (41%), the crisis in Donbas (33%), and unemployment (32%) are other big problems Ukraine is facing, according to respondents, whereas for ENGAGE participants, corruption (53%), the lack of the rule of law (44%), and the crisis in Donbas (30%) are the chief concerns. On the personal level, Ukrainians take a different perspective: respondents identify poverty (48%), unemployment (35%), and access to healthcare (34%) as the most important issues for them and their families. In contrast, for ENGAGE participants, access to healthcare (35%), corruption and the lack of rule of law (28%) are named as household problems.

<sup>6</sup>The situation of human rights defenders and civil activists in Ukraine in 2020: Analytical report / O. Vynogradova, A. Moskvychova, T. Pechonchuk, L. Yankina; ZMINA Human Rights Centre. – Kyiv, 2020. [https://zmina.ua/content/uploads/sites/2/2021/04/stateofhumanrightsdefenders2020\\_reporten\\_final.pdf](https://zmina.ua/content/uploads/sites/2/2021/04/stateofhumanrightsdefenders2020_reporten_final.pdf)



Figure 4. Top Three Important Issues for Ukraine and For Me

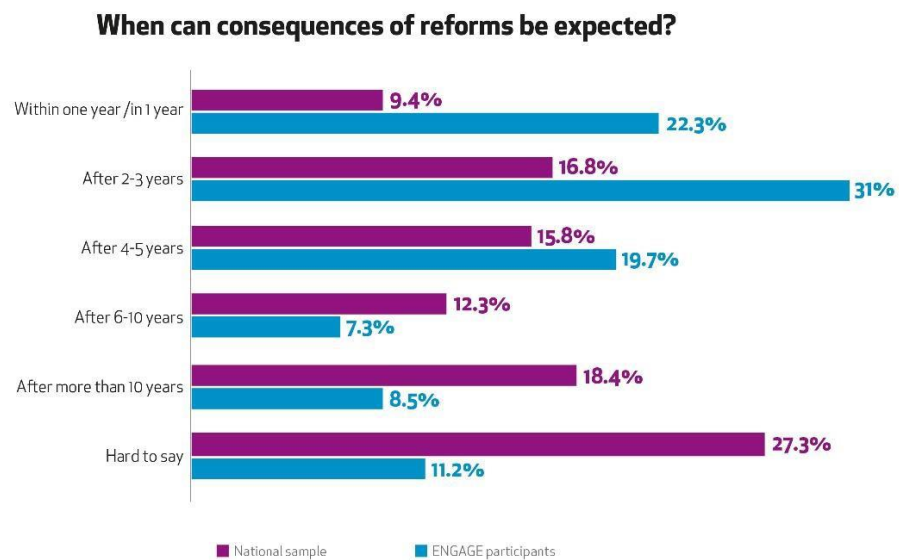
Similarly, for the general population, increased personal and family income (50%) could be the first sign of the sustained reforms, while for ENGAGE participants the quality of services received from the state (50%) and the growth of Ukraine's economy (55%) will be the first signs of sustained reforms.



Figure 5. First Signs of Irreversibility of Reforms

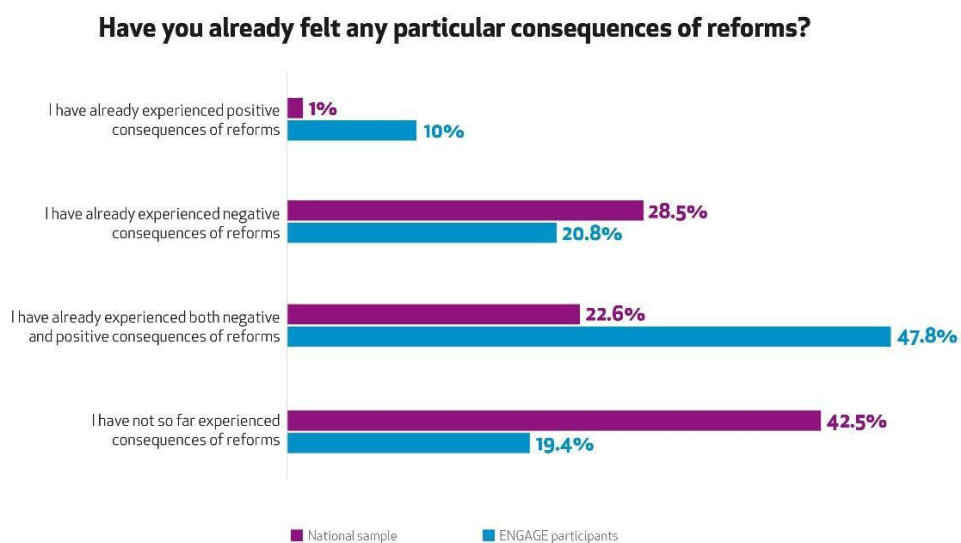
ENGAGE participants are also more optimistic about the pace of reforms. They believe that the fruits of reforms will be seen in one year, when compared to the general population (22% vs 9%). One-third of ENGAGE participants (31% vs 17%) expect the results of reforms in 2-3 years. While almost one-third of citizens has trouble predicting their expectations on when reforms would yield results, only 11% of ENGAGE participants are undecided.





*Figure 6. Perceptions Regarding Time to Expect Consequences of Reforms*

ENGAGE participants associate positive changes with the implementation of critical reforms. Every tenth (10%) participant versus virtually no one (1%) in the national sample felt positive consequences of reforms. Almost half (48%) against one-quarter (24%) claim to have experienced both positive and negative results of reforms. On the other hand, the share of those who had only negative experiences is less among ENGAGE participants (21% vs 29%).



*Figure 7. Perceptions about the Impact of Reforms*

The historically ramshackle state of post-soviet public health services in Ukraine, exacerbated by the COVID-19 outbreak and perceived mismanagement<sup>7</sup> to address it nationwide, led to the fact that both ENGAGE participants and the general population do not fully rely on the state when it

<sup>7</sup> “Dissatisfaction with the government is particularly high in terms of coronavirus crisis management in Ukraine, the United States, the United Kingdom and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where more than two-thirds of respondents report dissatisfaction with their government.” *Almost A Year With The Pandemic: The Results Of An International Gallup Research*, December 2020. In Ukraine, the study was conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in collaboration with Democratic Initiatives Foundation.

comes to their own healthcare. Most Ukrainians (62%) and roughly half of ENGAGE participants (54%) believe that their health entirely depends on their own efforts. A similar inclination to self-reliance is reported regarding education and employment.

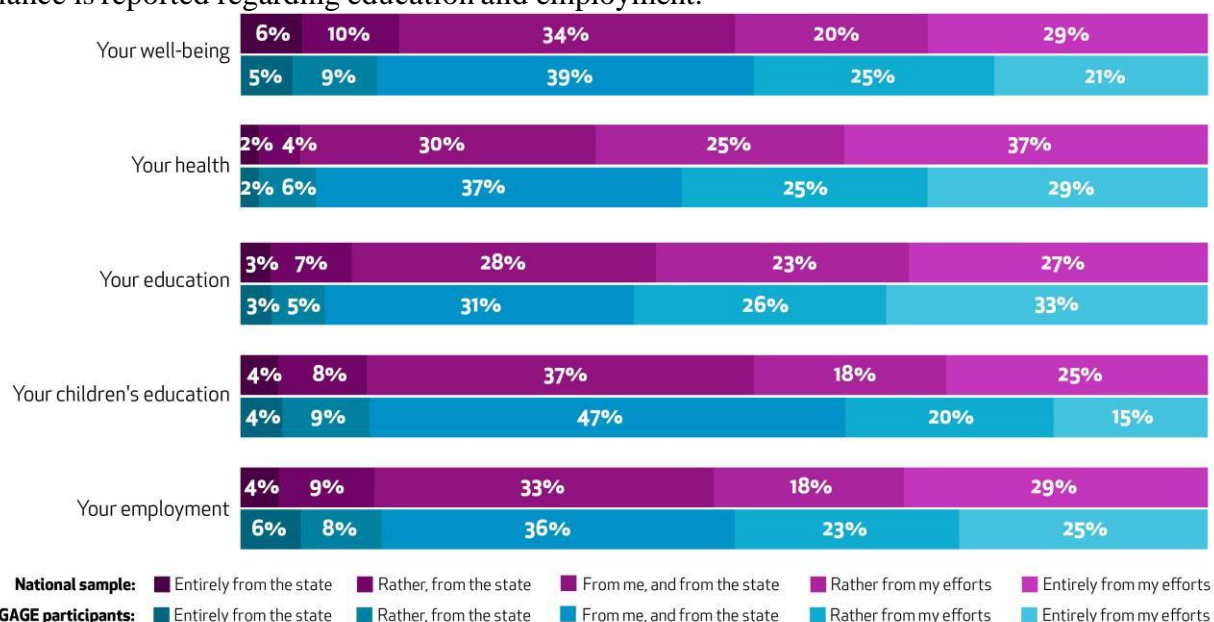


Figure 8. ENGAGE Participants and the General Population Do Not Fully Rely on the State When It Comes to Personal Healthcare

Ukrainians do not feel that they have power to change the state of things in the country. ENGAGE participants, however, believe that they have power to influence events. Being a part of CSO activities increases self-confidence and belief in the ability to move the country further in a democratic direction.

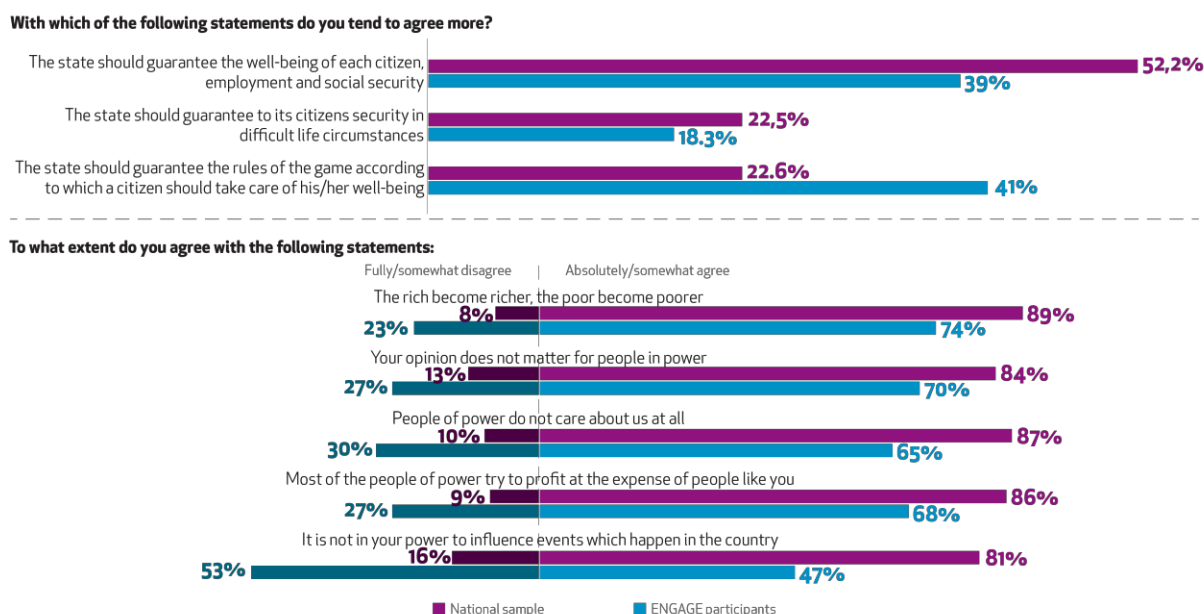
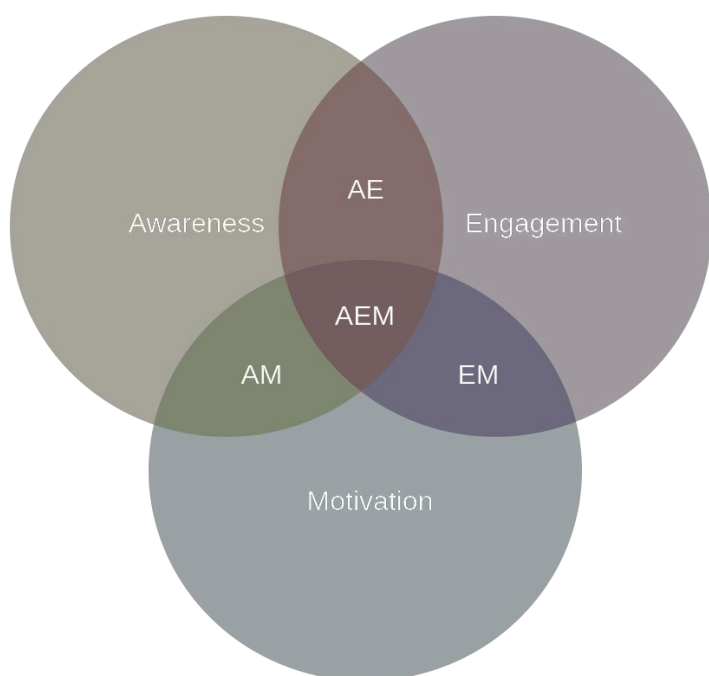


Figure 9. ENGAGE Participants Have the Power to Influence Events in the Country

## Civic Literacy: Where Engagement Meets Motivation

We also traced the impact of three chief factors (civic awareness, civic engagement, and motivation to participate in civic activities) on the level of civic literacy among the general population and ENGAGE participants<sup>8</sup>. Our hypothesis was that a higher level of awareness, engagement and motivation among respondents results in better Civic Literacy Test (CLT) results, as such respondents have a greater interest in and therefore a greater need for civic knowledge. All three factors are crucial for the transformation of the ordinary citizen, who primarily cares about income, into the consummate citizen, who not only has a materialistic approach and follows the rules and laws, but also monitors the government and participates in civic life for better change in the country.

The basic assumption of our theoretical departure point is that motivation along with awareness and engagement are the three core elements of civic activism (Figure 10). Lack of awareness might mean that the potential of civic engagement is not utilized to its full extent because neither individuals nor organizations use all available instruments and means of leverage. Demotivated individuals tend to abandon activism, channeling their efforts into achieving alternative goals. Without engagement, motivation and awareness can hardly lead to any result at all. If all three factors (awareness-engagement-motivation) are maximized for every activist, active citizens' activities would lead to the greatest possible public benefit, making local and national governance processes more representative, participatory, and accountable to Ukrainian society.



*Figure 10: Core Elements of a Theoretical Civic Activism Framework Based on CEP*

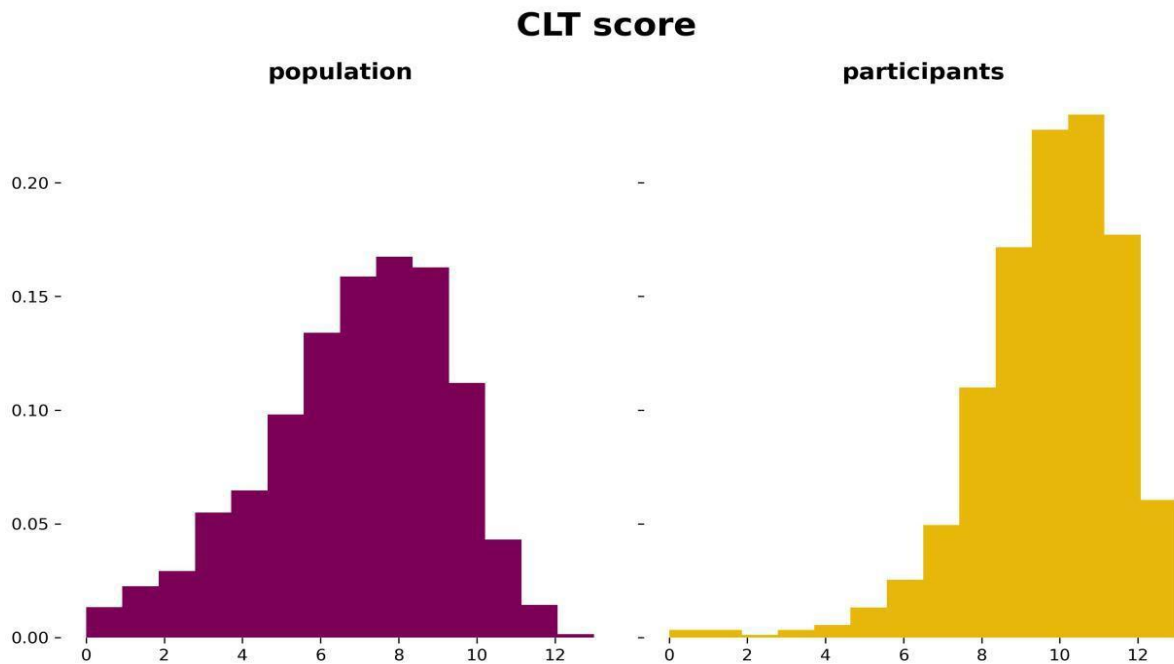
Based on the modelling results, our analysis found that if engagement is a dominant factor, knowledge is considered to be more significant. Conversely, the prevalence of the awareness factor in CLT scores would indicate instead the respondents' general familiarity with social and political processes in the country, which does not necessarily lead to civic actions.

Participants of the USAID/ENGAGE activities demonstrate a higher level of civic literacy than the general population; the mean CLT score for participants is 2.97 points higher than the results of the general population (9.94 vs 6.97 out of a maximum score of 13). Only 16% of the general population had a score of 10 or higher against 64% of respondents from the participants' sample.

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<sup>8</sup> The data for this part of analysis is from the summer 2020 CEP.





*Figure 11: Distributions of CLT Scores*

Further, our analysis found that civic literacy depends on the respondent's social background, but not on his/her personal choices. Having general knowledge is crucial for better civic literacy but basic education is not enough to turn awareness and knowledge into participation.

Demotivation variables are responsible for most of the motivation factor's impact. The strongest negative predictor of the CLT score is when respondents were not able to state the reasons regarding what exactly prevents them from civic engagement. Absence of knowledge about existing possibilities and distrust in CSOs are two additional significant demotivators. In contrast, the strongest motivation is the absence of legal repercussions for a respondent in the case of engagement in civic activities.

The most important difference between the general population sample and the ENGAGE participants sample is that, for the latter, the engagement factor is significant. Higher levels of civic literacy among ENGAGE participants correlates with more active civic engagement, while for the Ukrainian population, civic literacy is driven by general knowledge and mere awareness of existing participation options.

## Conclusion

Since 2017, USAID/ENGAGE activities aim to increase Ukrainian citizens' awareness of and engagement in civil society activities at both the national and sub-national levels. Our stocktaking at the dusk of our nearly five-year journey imparts lessons that both Ukrainian CSOs and their domestic and international backers can internalize and build upon in future programming efforts. Looking at civic engagement behavioral and attitudinal trends of the whole of society and among those the program had directly reached reveal both encouraging results and areas in which more robust and concerted intellectual and material investment could help cement budding democratic participation, governance, and progress.

That assisting Ukrainian CSOs in their drive to pull the country further on its Euro-Atlantic path delivers more engaged and more democratic constituents is the foremost takeaway of our data analysis. This progressive stratum of society with direct contact with, participation in, and support of CSO activities, however, is only a small fraction of Ukrainian society. The majority observe civil society actions from a distance. There are, however, ways to involve them in managing their immediate communities, and many exhibit readiness and interest to learn more of CSOs' efforts.

For CSOs to expand their reach to this vast potential but less active strata of Ukrainians, they will need to listen to these citizens' demands, observe their habits and attitudes, and adapt their outreach to the venues and means where and by which they can directly interact with them.

For citizens to feel that they have an influence on governance, a safe space for engagement is more important than an institutional setting. CSOs should help citizens develop trust not only vis-à-vis state institutions but also in their other fellow citizens in their daily interpersonal relations. This is a significant challenge in the current pandemic environment and will likely take time, determination, and innovative approaches in the post-COVID political-economic context.

Ukraine's most prominent advocacy groups are based in Kyiv and large regional centers. Their innovative methods and advocacy achievements are known beyond the country's border. However, they too should cast a wider net than just on policymakers or citizens in their immediate vicinity. They undoubtedly are able reach 'the converted' but a lot more needs to be done not to leave large segments of Ukrainians behind. They need to bring on board marginalized and hard-to-reach populations. Otherwise, they should be wary that those who do not adapt may be lost for good.

Crucial for Ukraine's prosperity and democratic development are the country's rural citizens, who, thanks to decentralization, begin to feel more in the driver's seat of their communities. Lead CSOs should focus on the grassroots, where the level of engagement directly influences income-generation by citizens and their families -the main indicator of the expected impact of reforms.

National CSOs physical presence in the regions is also crucial for cultivating a culture of activism on the grassroots level where it is virtually absent. Effectively supporting activists in hard-to-reach communities is imminent to hold local elites accountable and reinforcing local transparency. However, watchdog groups should also recognize that policy advocacy does not substitute for enforcing and implementing existing progressive laws. Rather, CSOs should also lead by example in promoting anticipated behaviors and legal conformity.

Without democrats there is no democracy, goes the adage. Ukrainians have deep democratic beliefs and attitudes, despite the fact that their expectations of the state exhibit the marks of decades of statist collectivism. Values, identities, and beliefs span generations and change incrementally over time only with the stamina and endurance of civic educators. The current and crucial challenge for all stakeholders who are interested in better civic literacy is not to improve it per se, but rather to stimulate active engagement. To turn cognizance into action, civic education, and awareness-raising should provide the feel and experience of engagement. CSOs should not attempt to teach but to make the audience learn a practical lesson. For this, CSOs themselves need to learn how others acquire active knowledge. Only practical knowledge allows for increased civic literacy, and in turn, active involvement in the reform process yields better-informed and more engaged citizens.