



Civic Organisations. It Works

A coalition to boost the
profile and presence of
civil society organisations
in Poland



Organizacje Społeczne. To Działa (Civic Organisations. It Works) is a coalition of civil society organisations in Poland. The coalition came together in 2017 to consider the narrative used in the media and by the government that had enabled considerable attacks on civil society organisations (CSOs) in the public sphere, alongside growing restrictive legislation.

Overview

Members of the It Works coalition reinvented their communications in order to improve public perceptions of civil society. Rather than use reactive strategies in response to government attacks and smear campaigns, they developed **a long-term approach** rooted in **'hope-based communications'**, designed to reveal the role and added value of the third sector as a **proactive strategy to keep space open for civil society**.





What launched the coalition?

The populist, socially conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party has been in power in Poland since 2015. Whilst in government, the party has enacted numerous measures that have threatened to reverse Poland's democratic progress, and have narrowed the space for civil society. In 2017, there was a series of **attacks against civil society organisations** on public television. Over the course of several weeks stories were released linking those working in certain CSOs to fraudulent activity, though with no evidence of those links provided. The attacks were designed to undermine public trust in CSOs, and to delegitimise their work.

This **smear campaign by the government**, alongside a general worsening of rhetoric and narrative about civil society, triggered a meeting of representatives from a dozen different CSOs.

The group included those who had been verbally attacked, as well as others who were worried about the public image of CSOs in general. They decided that new **proactive communications strategies** were needed in order to underline the need for a free, independent civil society in Poland.

Rather than focus on individual issues, the group wanted to **broaden efforts to promote democracy and civic action** across the country. After several meetings, they agreed to set up a coalition, and selected people with communications expertise from those organisations represented to begin work on a **longer-term strategy** that would span several years.

How does it work?

Over twenty founding members of the coalition **pooled resources** for an initial budget to start the work, beginning with online campaigning which kept costs relatively low. Subsequently, coordination of the group has been funded by Civitates (a philanthropic initiative for democracy and solidarity in Europe).

There is a **core communications group** of 10 people, made up of representatives with communications expertise from member organisations. This group sets the strategic direction for campaigns.

The day-to-day work is supported by a team whose make-up alters according to the coalition's needs. At present, the team includes:

- A **coordinator**, who is based at one of the founding member organisations (Klon/Jawor Association). The coordinator's role is split between the Association, which works to support CSOs in Poland, and the coordination of the coalition and campaigning.

- Two **representatives from other member organisations** who support with **social media** activity.

- **External experts** on PR and media relations, and creative design, who provide consultative support.

The support team and core communications team hold regular monthly meetings (though regularity has altered during the COVID-19 pandemic, with meetings only taking place when needed) where challenges and plans are discussed, and where **decision-making is democratic** in nature. Meanwhile the support team is mandated to take decisions on the day-to-day work.

Who are the members?

The coalition has grown to include over 30 organisations from **across different sectors** including rights watchdogs, LGBT+ groups, climate and ecology groups, child rights groups, and those focused on democracy. There are some international civil society organisations (ICSOs) who engage, including WWF, Client Earth and Amnesty International.

There is also a broader group of CSOs who are not official members of the coalition, but who often **cooperate with and contribute to its work**. They can provide support with resources, materials and expertise, or take part in specific campaigns. For example, since the start of the campaign, there have been over 20,000 uses of the hashtag #ItWorks by the broader group of connected CSOs and individuals.

GRAPHIC

"There are three things that work in Poland - photosynthesis, gravitation, civic organisations"



Coalition in action

The coalition began by assessing the **public's perception of CSOs** in Poland.

They coordinated focus groups in different cities, towns and villages across the country, using a survey (designed with a research agency) to check what people thought of CSOs and what they expected from these organisations.

The results showed that:

- Although public trust in organisations was relatively high, people mainly associated CSOs with more **traditional types of charitable or humanitarian projects** related to health or working with children, rather than with broader topics such as democracy and civic action.
- Also, terms such as 'NGO' or 'non-profit' were associated with the government or were deemed to be quite abstract, whilst **terms like 'social' or 'civic organisations' were perceived as 'made by the people'**, and were thought to be closer to the grassroots of communities rather than being linked to faceless institutions.
- In order to think positively of CSOs, **the public needs proof that these groups have impact** and that they bring about real change.
- And the public wants **positive information** rather than bad news, as well as **human stories**.

These results inspired the spirit and name of the public campaign, 'Civic Organisations. It Works', and fed into the development of a long-term

strategy by the core communications team. According to this strategy, campaigns spearheaded by the coalition consider and include at least one of the following three elements:

- Accessible content that creates an **emotional response**, for example videos and photos that portray **human stories**.
- Opportunities for engagement that **showcase CSOs' expertise**, such as live meetings or talks on specific topics.
- Ways to demonstrate the scale of civil society activity and to **show that it works**, for example sharing the results of the work via certain statistics or through highlighting specific milestones.

Alongside these three elements, there also **needs to be something actionable** or practical that people themselves can take on board. In this way, communications are built around an **idea of hope**, and they demonstrate the efficacy of civil society action, empowering people to feel they can make a difference, and connecting to everyday, human stories.

Initial campaigns have focused on **accessible, universal topics**, such as education. In this way the coalition has created **communications that connect with more people**, to deliver messages about the **value and impact of civil society**.



Example of campaign work

A teachers' strike took place in Poland in 2019, in opposition to damaging reforms and to demand better working conditions; demands which met with government propaganda and insults. The strike provided a natural moment for the coalition to highlight civil society's contribution to the education system. The aim was to stand in solidarity with teachers during the strike, but also to highlight how education, a topic that everyone can relate to and that was present in the minds of many due to the strike, is supported by civil society. **By working on such a universally relevant topic, the campaign aimed to underscore the omnipresence, impact and value of civil society.**

A campaign was planned called 'More than Basics', which aimed to shine a light on teachers who were changing the face of education **with support from civil society organisations**. It highlighted the stories of teachers who go 'above and beyond' in their roles, and who have benefitted from the support of CSOs, for example in the form

of materials, workshops or expertise. Photos of teachers were shared online, with a quotation highlighting how they go the extra mile for students, and how they are supported by organisations in those endeavours. The campaign began with just five examples, but this quickly inspired other teachers to send in submissions, leading to a month-long campaign with over 100 examples focused on the contributions of teachers **supported by civil society organisations**. The campaign included actionable points for teachers, schools and parents around improving education, and included the voices of all stakeholders in education, including children.

Education CSOs reported that the campaign and the support and solidarity that it represented was important, as it came from outside their own usual 'bubble'. The cross-sector solidarity helped to amplify and legitimize their demands, whilst also creating positive perceptions about CSOs that connected to people's everyday lives.



It is hard to imagine a teacher who would love her job more. Agnieszka Maksymiuk works at the Primary School No. 3 in Konstancin. She loves watching children spread their wings. She is constantly looking for methods, techniques and tools to work with children. This is how she discovered the trainings organised by the Anti-Discrimination Education Society and the Institute of Global Responsibility (IGO), thanks to which she conducted classes with children on recyclable materials, saving water and electricity, and separating rubbish. #MoreThanBasics.

There are more such teachers - let's tell them that they are unique. Do you know someone like that? Tell us about him, about her, thank him for what he does and mark with the hashtag #WięcejNiżPodstawa. More information can be found at the link in our bio @todziała.

As well as campaigns focused on education, the group has addressed other topics such as disability rights, culture, community development, sports, environment and equality. They also run sub-campaigns that focus on **empowering people to participate in civic actions**. For example a campaign called 'It Depends on Us' was launched during the COVID-19 lockdown, which aimed to demonstrate ways that people could make a difference as individuals in their communities despite the pandemic.

Outcomes

- ✓ By sharing photographs, films and infographics, the coalition showcases CSO programmes and projects and **demonstrates how they make a difference to the lives of people** in Poland. Interviews and stories have been featured regularly in various publications including Vogue Poland, whilst some of the films produced for the campaigns have been shown in cinemas across the country. So far, campaigns have attracted over 4 million online visitors.
- ✓ Although the impact in terms of a change in public perception is difficult to measure, as is often the case with long-term communication initiatives, **organisations do feel safer** engaging in communications campaigns and advocating for civil society, due to the **protective umbrella of the coalition**. By being part of a collective effort, the risk of raising one's voice is reduced. As the coordinator has highlighted: "We believe we are now stronger in the face of attacks." Meanwhile there are plans to conduct a survey to measure any change in the levels of public trust.

CHALLENGES

Reaching a consensus

Collective decision-making can be a challenge. With a communications team made up of representatives from 10 different organisations, reaching a consensus can sometimes be a long process. However, the principle of democracy is considered important as each group brings different strengths. It also helps to ensure broad buy-in for the strategies taken, and unity of messaging within campaigns.

Representation

To begin with, the coalition wanted to be an umbrella for all CSOs. However, it quickly became apparent that this wouldn't work, as there were certain contexts that required a political stance. For example, members wanted to run a campaign alongside planned gender equality parades, using communications with the slogan 'Love. It Works' to demonstrate solidarity with LGBT+ communities. There was pushback, because such a campaign would inevitably alienate some organisations. In order to enable participation in the parades and to help steer future actions, members took the decision that their actions and strategies must be guided by a set of values centered on freedom, human rights and equality. This would enable them to determine when they could take necessary political positions to stand in solidarity with minority or vulnerable communities. This meant that some organisations would not join the group.

LESSONS LEARNED

Doing the groundwork pays off

It was important to make the difficult discussions at the beginning of the process, to clarify a shared agenda and purpose, to build trust amongst members, and to create a strategy that all members could endorse. As a consequence, there was a heavier time commitment and workload from members in the development stage. But as a result, once a strategy had been agreed on, the day-to-day work was more straightforward and now only light consultation is needed when clarifying next steps on campaigns.

Campaigns grounded in values create solidarity

Hope-based communications are effective. Although the coalition does not yet have the numbers or statistics to fully demonstrate the change in trust amongst the public regarding CSOs, there has been an encouraging response to the campaigns conducted to date. Well-known public figures have endorsed the messages, and the sector as a whole has been keen to be involved. This is because the campaigns are rooted in values rather than just in specific topics, and this has created the space and structure for cross-cutting solidarity.

Solidarity Playbook

Civic Organisations. It Works

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In partnership with

