

A Briefing Paper

THE ORGANIZATION OF COMMUNITIES IN ESTONIA

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General information

After joining EU in 2004, the Estonian civil society began to develop more rapidly and became more active, mainly due to financial support that different EU programs offered. Estonian non-profits are active in all possible fields: most in sport and culture, many in social services, health and environment, equal number in civic rights, education and local development, fewer in philanthropy, policy analysis, etc. Quite many are functioning as business and professional associations.¹

In total 31 581 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) exist in Estonia, from which 813 Foundations; 579 religious associations; and over 10 thousand association which are related with housing (apartments, garage, other buildings, land associations).² Although most organizations are registered in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, the percentage of registered organizations in the 15 counties in Estonia matches the percentage of people living in the counties.

There are three legal forms of NGOs in Estonia: non-profit associations³ (MTÜ), foundations⁴ and associations of persons. The first, MTÜ, is a voluntary, membership based association, the objective or main activity of which shall not be the earning of income from economic activity. A foundation is a legal person in private law which has no members and is established to administer and use assets to achieve the objectives specified in its articles of association. Associations of persons with non-profit characteristics which are not entered in the non-profit associations and foundations register are not legal persons and the provisions for civil law partnerships apply to them. Persons who enter into transactions in the name of such associations are personally and solidarily liable for such transactions.

There is no special type of local level or urban or rural community NGOs in Estonia. Nevertheless, many organizations have stated in their Statutes that their main goal is developing local communities and co-operation with local governments (LG)⁵.

Communities in Estonia: some statistics

7% of all Estonian NGOs define their main aim as developing local/regional life. In the study of Estonian communities⁶ a community has two dimensions:

- 1) it is geographically defined;
- 2) the actions are meaningful.

In Estonia, 76% percent of communities as registered as an NGO, 10% are formally unorganised, 7% are based on association contract and another 7% are under the leadership of the village leader. For

¹ There a concise overview of Estonian civil society on the web-page of Network of Estonian Nonprofit Organizations, NENO. There is also some information in Russian language, <http://www.ngo.ee>.

² Civil Society Development Plan 2015-2020, <http://www.kysk.ee/failid/Upload/files/KODAR.pdf> (in Estonian).

³ See the formal definition in „Non-profit associations act“, <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/ee/510042014003/consolide/current>.

⁴ See the formal definition in „Foundations act“, <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/ee/510042014001/consolide/current>.

⁵ There are 215 local governments in Estonia, from which 30 cities and 185 rural municipalities. System is single-tier and local governments independently decide and organize questions of local life.

⁶ Estonian Urban Lab and the Estonian Village Movement Kodukant. 2014. “Community Study: Mapping of the Current Status of Estonian Urban and Rural Communities 2014”. Available at <http://www.linnalabor.ee/failid/n/52b5698cef1431087333dbf84a56380f> (in Estonian).

example in 2013, there were 4438 villages in Estonia, from that 1615 had their own leader of village and 1000 had own village association.

The region of action of a community does not necessarily coincide with the borders of a LG. Usually the region of action is smaller than a LG (66% operate on a village level and 12% on a borough level). Sometimes the region of action is the same with the borders of a LG (10% operate in a municipality level) and sometimes it crosses the borders of LGs (on a county level there are 4% of community organisations). But a community organisation might operate even over-Estonia or even pan-Europe.

Since the year 2000, the city communities have become more popular, currently 22 out of 26 city communities are in Tallinn (the capital) and others only in Tartu, Pärnu and Paide (these also belong among the biggest towns in Estonia).

Legal environment

In Estonian legal system, there is no direct obligation to consult with urban or rural communities as such (in a top-down manner). Estonian regulation covers the relationship between all citizens and public institutions; it does not refer specifically to NGOs. E.g.:

- **Public Information Act** – states that every person has the opportunity to access information intended for public use in the quickest and easiest manner possible. According to the Act people can also request for additional information and officials (those who have the information) are obliged to comply the request as soon as possible, but not later than within five working days. Also the purpose of the law is to create opportunities for the public to monitor the performance of public duties.⁷
- **Rules for Good Legislative Practice and Legislative Drafting** – the document states that interest groups and the public have to be involved in the preparation of a legislative intent, concept or a draft Act. In addition, interest groups should be engaged in the ex-post impact assessment of an Act in accordance with the Good Practice of Involvement. It also obliges the officials to give explanation if opinions and proposals of engaged interest groups have not been taken into account.⁸
- **Good Practice of Involvement** – according to the document, it a standard of operation that government authorities engage interest groups and the public in the every stage of decision-making process to ensure the best possible quality and legitimacy of the decisions.⁹

Although the regulations mentioned above create a framework for cooperation between the power and the people, the actual level of collaboration between communities and LGs depends on the (good or bad) relations with municipality administration and sometimes with concrete officials (since Estonia is a small state, personal networks and relations matter a lot).

Estonia does not have special legal type of urban or rural community NGOs, the definition of community is uncertain and interpreted differently. In some cases the term “community” includes all people and active organizations in one certain territory. On the other hand, communities may be called as “local action groups”, which are built up by all interest and residents groups, where at least 50% of votes must belong to non-public sector organization (i.e. they are not controlled by state or local administration). In even narrower definition, communities are village associations or their leaders.¹⁰

Characteristics of communities

⁷ Public Information Act, <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/522122014002/consolide>

⁸ Rules for Good Legislative Practice and Legislative Drafting, <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/508012015003/consolide>.

⁹ Good Practice of Involvement, <http://www.ngo.ee/node/278>.

¹⁰ The main source of information is the following study (if not indicated otherwise): Estonian Urban Lab and the Estonian Village Movement Kodukant. 2014. “Community Study: Mapping of the Current Status of Estonian Urban and Rural Communities 2014”. Available at <http://www.linnalabor.ee/failid/n/52b5698cef1431087333dbf84a56380f> (in Estonian).

Due to the fact that most of Estonian communities are small, they depend on (a small number of) community leaders. Over half of communities have up to 10 active members; about quarter have 11-20 active members; 10% of communities have about 11-20 members and only 6% have more than 30 active members.

Mostly, the members of communities are middle-aged or older women; and in general, members have lived in a particular territory over 5 years.

In Estonian case, participation in community activities as a volunteer is quite popular. Registered NGOs have stronger volunteers' base. Mostly volunteers participate in community activities (bees¹¹) and maintenance work (75%), also as organizing different events (61%).

Estonian communities prefer communication channels which in the first place help to reach the members of communities like telephone, random meetings. Channels, which are directed to wider audience, are not prevalent, e.g. flyers, webpages, social media. In sum, community communication is mostly addressed to its' own members and little job is done to involve outsiders.

Decision making processes in communities are quite similar across the communities – in most communities, important questions are usually discussed during meetings. However, in general, the decision-making often rests at the shoulder of leaders.

Estonian communities are not politicized, in 2013 only 10% had done co-operation with political parties and 6% had permanent collaboration with political parties.

Activities and co-operation with local governments

Generally, the main aim of creating the communities was to develop the local life. In more detail, the most popular reasons for community activism were cultural development and communication of community members (over half of communities pointed these out as the main reasons). In smaller part, solving local problems (32%), opposing certain project or to fulfil local government orders (service contracts) were mentioned as a reason to create a community. About 16% said they did not have one certain reason to be active; more or less they value all aforementioned reasons.

Estonian urban and rural communities can also be classified according their reasons why they still are active. The underlying reasons are the same as mentioned in previous paragraph, but the proportions of answers were more equal: 35% of communities currently exist to improve cultural life; 28% don't have one certain reason; 26% still want to solve some local problems and smallest part (11%) oppose a certain project.

The cooperation with local/national governments is not as widespread as one would expect. Indeed many (local) authorities and even ministries consider communities to be important partners, e.g. in their (development) plans and other documents. But too often the cooperation is merely in the form of financial support. Also, communities which have people who possess official authority among their active members or in leading position of a community, have closer relations with local government.

According to co-operation patterns with government, communities can be categorized into different types:

- 1) Very active, bilateral co-operation, service providing (drafting development plans, service planning, delegation of services, project grants, financial support, formal credit): 23% of communities;
- 2) Active, bilateral co-operation (development plans, service planning, project grants, formal credit): 13%;
- 3) Project based recognized cooperation (project grants and organizing events; formal credit): 23%;

¹¹ Something like „subbotnik“.

- 4) Project-based unrecognized cooperation (only project grants): 20%;
- 5) Difficulties in defining the content cooperation: 22%.

The most common co-operation model with local governments is financial support (70%). Less popular are taking part in drafting development concepts (48% of communities have done this) and service planning (36%). Important is to note, that only 11% of communities have experience with service delegation / contracting out. Also, 11% of communities do not have had any relationships with local governments and 9% have not got any support even if they have asked for it.

Financial sources

Communities are funded from variety of sources – the most common are local government appropriations. However, most helpful are grants from national funding sources, e.g. the National Foundation of Civil Society¹². In lesser extent, communities' budget is composed of payments for products and services, donations, membership duties. Support from private companies is very rare in Estonian case.

Officially registered community organisations have better options for financial support compared to communities that are not registered as NGOs.

Problems and factors that influence the activities of communities

The most common **problems** are the fatigue of leaders (due smallness, there are few people) and limited financial sources. More than half respondents also indicated to the problem of decrease in members' interest and the aging of active members. Only 4% said that they have no obstacles.

The most important factors that positively influence communities' activism were: successful events, emergence of regularity or tradition, as well as sing and dance parties. Also opposing certain local government decision or project boosts activism. Third, important activator is related to property development – building local village swings, museums, theatres, community centres etc.

Negative factors that hamper communities' activism are mostly local government opposition or politics intervention to community affairs. In addition, fatigue of members or their aging, absence of new members and failure of projects or funding possibilities were reasons for lower motivation.

What communities need the most is financial support, but also information about different financial possibilities and co-operation possibilities with other communities and/or organizations.

On national level, there are some umbrella organizations – Kodukant, the Estonian Village Movement¹³ and the Urban Lab¹⁴, who provide support and share information to their members and other community activists. The most known event which takes place every second year is Maapäev (Rural Parliament) organized by Kodukant. On Maapäev, delegates from throughout the country gather to debate issues, prepare declarations to the government.¹⁵

¹² See <http://kysk.ee/nfcs>.

¹³ Kodukant, the Estonian Village Movement, <http://kodukant.kovtp.ee/web/eng>

¹⁴ Urban Lab, <http://www.linnalabor.ee/>

¹⁵ Kodukant, the Estonian Village Movement, <http://kodukant.kovtp.ee/web/eng>