

# Network Governance Approach: Collaboration Practices between NGOs and Local Governments in Rural Areas in Latvia

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*Abstract:* Shrinking and depopulation processes in Latvian rural territories are asking for non-conventional solutions in order to keep rural areas alive. Therefore, different forms and practices of collaboration and network governance have been developing in rural territories lately. Relations between non-governmental organizations and local governments are crucial for implementing new ideas and improving place development. The research, done in a qualitative manner of social investigations, identifies four typical models of relations between NGOs and local governments in rural territories of Latvia and confirms theoretical statements of network governance approach. Research results strongly emphasize necessity and importance of society-centred approach in place development where the network governance approach serves as a tool for giving voice and involving different social agents in a shared network.

*Key-Words:* sustainable territorial development, society-centred development, collaborative governance, place development

## 1 Introduction

Network governance approach is a topical term for describing both theoretical goals of sustainable territorial development and recent trends of governance itself. Concerning territorial development in rural areas, the dominant discourse in last decades is theoretical and empirical analysis of endogenous and neoendogenous development and predicts development based on local human, natural and cultural resources as well as making local and extra-local networks [1]. It is implied that these networks include various horizontal partnerships, for instance local municipalities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), entrepreneurs, museums, schools, religious organizations and other social agents [2]. Dutch sociologist Bettina Bock goes a step forward and calls for the nexogenous development that means “restoring bonds between (urban and rural) areas and reconnection of marginal rural areas at its core” [3].

In Latvia, above mentioned ideas are crucial because of so called shrinking processes of rural territories; it is found that due to the negative migration saldo and negative natural growth they have lost in average 30% but in certain places more than 50% of population during last three decades

[4]. Therefore, the necessity to survive has prompted active rural people to concentrate resources and to build multiple economic and social structures thus even overtaking plans and goals of central government. High diversity of tourism and cultural activities are developed that also bring in new economic practices [5, 6]. We can say that the limited opportunities of conventional tools for development and even desperation of rural people have created strong signs of endogenous and neoendogenous development in Latvia. Also, the creation of networks between horizontal and vertical actors as well as between rural and urban actors has grown from rural people’s need to find new ways for their existence.

Despite of numerous good practices in Latvia, the making of networks is not always an easy process [7]. Therefore, authors concentrate on deeper investigation of collaboration between NGOs and local governments. The focus is found both in theoretical statements of network governance as well as observing recent trends in rural territories in Latvia. The aim of the paper is to describe existing relations between NGOs and local governments in rural territories of Latvia in order to analyse them from the viewpoint of collaboration and network

governance approach. Qualitative semi-structured interviews from 18 rural municipalities in all regions in Latvia have been collected during 2015-2018 both with representatives of local governments and non-governmental organizations (N=31) as well as with experts (N=2).

## 2 Theoretical Background

Collaboration is broadly described and different attempts of theorizing of the term are available. Difficulties of conceptualization of collaboration are related to its seeming simplicity and self-evidence. However, there are some classical definitions that are also used in exploring non-profit-public relations or partnerships, e.g. British scientists claim that collaboration refers to “formalized, joint-working arrangements between organizations that remain legally autonomous while engaging in ongoing, coordinated collective action to achieve outcomes that none of them could achieve on their own” [8]. Deeper analysis distinguishes coordination, concertation, cooperation and collaboration as separate terms according to the logics of collective action. E.g., concertation is defined as cooperation between organizations involved in policy formulation and implementation but coordination refers to cooperation in the act of production [9]. This case reveals pretty free usage of terms according to the aim of their actions and interactions.

However, more widespread interpretation of collaborative process is that cooperation comes after competition and occurs when “one person or group helps another group in carrying out a task, whose outcome benefits both partners” [10]. This also includes so called forced cooperation when this form of interaction is necessary to survive and deal with certain challenges. Collaboration is the relatively highest degree and follows cooperation that predicts “shared decision making in which all the parties with a stake in the problem constructively explore their differences and develop a joint strategy for action” [10]. This division is appropriate also for explaining situation in rural territories of Latvia.

Theoretically, collaboration develops gradually and follows the competition and cooperation if first steps and experience are positive and successful. It reveals interdependence of involved agents and calls for deeper trust, disposition to collaborate, and goal congruence [11]. Therefore, it is possible to measure collaboration according to the trust level, motivation for engagement, communication and goals. American researcher C.C.Snow claims that

cooperation involves trust secured by contracts, extrinsic motivation, selective communication, goals directed to achieve desired outcomes while collaboration is related to high trust, intrinsic motivation, open communication and goals directed to achieve new solutions [10]. In other words, cooperation is more or less forced mechanism that characterizes by administrative networks. In the opposite, collaboration relates to joint organizations [12]. Thus, making collaboration gives evidence of more shared and integrated governance.

Also in recent literature of trends and challenges of the governance, the stress is placed exactly on the “escalation of complex, interdependent problems on local agendas, beyond the capacity of any one organization to resolve them” [13], calling for boundary-spanning leadership and collaboration [14].

Collaboration as the relatively highest form of cooperative interaction predicts integrated goals that are higher than goals of the separate organizations because it involves “working across boundaries and in multi-organizational arrangements” [14].

Collaborative governance (also participatory governance [15], network governance [16], self-governance [17] etc.) is defined as “processes and structures of public policy decision-making and management that engage people constructively across the boundaries of public agencies, levels of government, and/or public, private and civic spheres in order to carry out a public purpose” [18]. Similarly, the network governance “involves a set of autonomous individual organizations working together to address complex problems and adapt to contextual contingencies based on implicit and open-ended contracts, rather than hierarchical and market means” [19]. Thus, network governance recognizes the social foundations of collective action typical of network arrangements [16] and, in a broader context, the network governance approach further emphasizes the role of social relations that are also crucial for sustainable territorial development [20].

Theoretically, network governance can be initiated by public agencies or civil society. The last one is also called society-centred approach with the aim to integrate different agents of civil society into problem-oriented networks [13]. Thus, the role of public authorities, e.g. local municipalities often becomes unclear or even separated or, in other words, we can discuss the division of the power in decision making between involved agents. On the one hand, many theorists see the network governance approach as a mutual dependence and balance of power [21]. On the other hand, critics

claim that despite of widespread view of network governance as a panacea for complex public challenges, the consequences of such approach differ and not all problems are able to be resolved within this mutual interdependence [15, 22, 11]. Sometimes collaborative networks can solve certain problems better than hierarchical structures but the questions about power division and group dynamics remains.

Focusing on collaborative practices specifically between local municipalities or between local governments and NGOs, it is recognized that the beginning of collaboration is usually based on certain needs, e.g. policy failures, economic competition, metropolitan fragmentation [12], need for financial resources and sharing of risks [11] etc. Local governments and NGOs face certain difficulties in performing their functions, as they have to adapt to changing circumstances. Therefore, the cooperation begins with organizational needs or needs to reach their goals. This way, collaboration seems a rational choice for promoting economic development, making place branding, implementing projects etc. In addition, existence of strong leadership is an important factor for processing collaboration [23, 11].

Regarding rural territories LEADER program in the EU has strongly promoted the popularity of network governance approach in last decades. As several studies reveal, one of the most widespread realm in rural territories is tourism as a sign of collective action [24]. It is also related to the collaborative governance and is clearly relevant to the situation in Latvian rural areas. Tourism activities and exploiting of different cultural objects has become a crucial part of activities in rural municipalities lately.

In sum, all above mentioned terms and their interpretations are interconnected and reveal unified paradigm that is characterized by decentralization, networking and locality. In the light of postmodern sociological theories we could refer to Zygmunt Bauman's thesis about moving "from "system" to "society", from "politics" to "life politics", from the "macro" to the "micro" level of social cohabitation" [25]. Bauman also uses terms like embracing ambivalence, contingency, uncertainty, and thus transcending boundaries [25] that are also keywords of current issues of sustainable development of rural territories and that characterizes modern situation and challenges in society.

### 3 Collaborative Practices between Local Governments and NGOs

#### 3.1 General Characteristics of the Situation of Rural Municipalities and NGOs in Latvia

Rural areas in Latvia are relatively difficult to identify, especially in the international context. The urban and rural system has been shaped by various complex processes, which are currently hampering both the collection of statistical data and spatial planning. If we believe a city to be a populated place with a city status, then about 68% of the population lives in cities and 32% in the countryside [4]. However, if the rural areas are characterized by their functional importance and international standards, then it is considered that villages and small towns constitute 99% of Latvia's territory, where 49% of the population lives. Accordingly, the remaining 51% live in 9 republic cities [26].

As mentioned in the introduction, the rural areas of Latvia after the collapse of the Soviet Union and significant economic and political changes are characterized by rapid depopulation, which also characterizes other Central and Eastern European countries [4]. In Latvia, as a strongly monocentric country, residents and services have concentrated around Riga in the last few decades, but other populated areas are facing more or less substantial depopulation.

As the population declines, rural infrastructure is also shrinking. According to the World Economic Forum data, the quality of infrastructure in Latvia is lower than the average in the OECD countries; the road quality is seen as especially low [27]. Rural areas are experiencing decrease in the number of public administration, schools, so on and in general, the density of the infrastructure elements, thus reducing the number of available jobs, therefore, various solutions are being sought at the national level, such as, possibilities of labour import, attraction of investments for plant placement in rural areas, etc.

In turn, researchers in Latvia point out that the developmental documents of all levels are incompatible with the actual shrinking situation and calls for a search for different policies for growth and shrinking and also "Attitude change is needed towards shrinking, – from seeing the shrinkage as a failure of development, as deprivation and wrong direction of pathway, towards positive framing, that provides a new opportunity to create spaces and places differently, possibility to new spatial and economic development innovations and policy transfers, opportunities to implement place-based

and community-based actions, opportunities to strengthen science-policy linkages and activate local entrepreneurship, smart place image-making and marketing targeted to return and new inhabitants and companies” [28].

The above quotation explicitly expresses what local people do in many rural areas. Without waiting for the approval of the state institutions, they use the available resources and independently take care of their economic security, social and cultural activities, and the unification of the community, which gradually develops from the initial good practices into the social movement characteristic of rural areas of Latvia.

In describing the structure of local governments, we must point out that significant changes were made in 2009 when the administrative territorial reform was completed. The reform was necessary as the functions of municipalities had broadened and their responsibilities had increased. Small municipalities were not able to ensure efficient investment attraction, the development and implementation of spatial plans and socio-economic plans. They lacked the necessary financial and material resources and failed to ensure the effective functioning of local democracy, i.e. respecting the principle of separation of powers and organizing local elections.

As a result of the reform, 119 municipalities were formed: 9 municipalities of the republic cities and 110 district (or rural) municipalities. Both city and county government work is led by a council which on the political level is made of democratically elected deputies and on the administrative level made of local government employees. The political level of the municipality is managed by the chairman of the council, while the administration is organized by the executive director. In order to ensure the availability of services provided by the municipality in county villages and towns where the municipality's administrative centre is not present, the municipality council establishes a village or town administration managed by the head of the administration. His/her subordination is determined by the local government regulations, and he/she may not be the deputy of the respective council.

Non-governmental organizations play a major role in the development of local democracy and in the promotion of citizen participation both before and after the reform. There is no precise information on how and in what areas non-governmental organizations operate in rural areas of Latvia. An indirect indicator is the number and density of NGOs. At the beginning of 2016 61% of non-

governmental organizations were concentrated in the Riga region (practically urban territory), in the other 4 regions - 39% (including 7 republic cities). The density of NGOs in rural areas in 2016 was from 7 to 10 organizations per 1,000 inhabitants [29]. NGO density indicators tend to increase, due to two parallel processes - a decrease in the number of inhabitants and the establishment of new NGOs.

In rural areas one of the most visible NGOs is LEADER program partnerships. The Latvian Rural Forum brings together 35 rural NGO partnerships, uniting multi-district non-governmental organizations and implementing LEADER program projects [30].

### 3.2 Relational Models between Local Governments and NGOs

As mentioned in the introduction, 33 semi-structured interviews with representatives of non-governmental organizations and local governments as well as with experts were used in the study's analysis section. The structure of the analysis is organized by describing the found examples and discussing them in a theoretical and general context. The names of the informants and the names of the populated places are not mentioned, since the results of individual interviews are sensitive.

Interview results reveal a wide range of interrelationships and possible cooperation between rural government and non-governmental organizations. Summarizing the information obtained, four typical relationship models crystallize, where the main point of reference is the symmetry of relations (also taking responsibility, separating power). The symmetry of relationships as potentially problematic is also mentioned in theoretical literature.

It is important to mention a common feature of all the studied municipalities before a closer description of the relationship models. Namely, in Latvia, the decisive role in the development of a site is played not by its size, population, infrastructure, but by the presence of active citizens or leaders. If there is at least one person in the local community who can gather other activists and work for development, other restrictions will be overcome.

Relations between local governments and non-governmental organizations are practically always based on personal acquaintance and personal relationships. Respondents, as representatives of a non-governmental organization, emphasize in the interviews not the cooperation of organizations, but cooperation between particular individuals, for example, calling on the head of the administration or naming all the people involved in a project. Such

an approach can be interpreted as an indicator of both rural community-specific interactions and a networking feature. Strong leadership features virtually all active non-governmental organizations in the field.

Local government officials tend to keep distance during the interviews, even in small rural villages, showing more formal communication with residents. However, in cases where mutual cooperation has developed far enough (trust, common goals), formalism disappears.

Returning to the above-mentioned typical models of NGOs and municipalities, we can mention, as the first and most appropriate theoretical statements of network management or collaborative governance, the networks of social agents created in certain villages (which are parts of larger counties). It includes one or more non-governmental organizations, a local government, local structures (e.g. schools, museums), entrepreneurs, religious organizations, etc. Collaboration networks are characterized by a smooth or symmetrical relationship between the agents involved. Projects that are currently the most common form of implementation of various activities are usually implemented by non-governmental organizations or local governments, but, as informants admit, it is not decisive: *"It's difficult to separate where the school where the government where the association is. It depends on which "hat" is better to operate under"* (2016). In such cases, depending on the purpose of the project, it involves all individuals or organizations that can participate in any possible way. For example, as representatives of a non-governmental organization say, local youth are not interested in participating in the "Latvian Sense of Life" summer school, but they are happy to organize sports events for campers. Consequently, this network is flexible, and the individuals and organizations involved have developed a high degree of adaptability: *"One employee told us that he had found a semi-legal production in Riga. In the beginning we were desperate, but then we started to think – can't we order the materials ourselves?! And we learned!"* (2016).

Horizontal cooperation is also characterized by the experience of LEADER partnerships. For example, in a partnership, decision makers are represented by members of each of the municipalities in which the partnership operates. Both representatives of local governments and partners have a common vision of their mission: *"Municipalities are working for people and we are also working for people. To us everything seems well-matched, because it is important for us that the*

*money goes to the entrepreneur or the association or to whomever ... but it remains in the area. No matter who implements the project"* (2017).

The relationship model described above has a high level of innovative ability, as well as the ability to understand and implement the ideas of local people. For example, in one village, information points were placed at the most important objects based on the suggestion made by a local woman. As recognized by NGO representatives, rural people have the opportunity to come and realize their ideas, especially those relating to the field of culture and art, for example, in a small village local people hold Hay Days every summer when anyone can make their sculpture from the hay.

Informants admit that the rural space is more open for new ideas, albeit only because "there is plenty of space", but also because of the fact that based on personal relationships with local authorities, it is easier to get support: *"Human life has a higher quality in the countryside. You do feel and experience a community. Within the community among the people you know, you can do a lot more. In Riga, I cannot imagine going to the City Council on my own initiative and saying that I have this idea. And I ask for more moral, not for material support..."* (2018).

At the same time, there is a contradictory attitude in the countryside towards possible business activities. NGO experience shows that rural people are apprehensive about beginning their own business for fear of getting involved with state institutions. Consequently, in some cases, the participation of local people in the development of the locality could be more active, but there are also a number of good practices where, thanks to the activities of NGOs and local governments, the number of home-grown workers and new business ideas increases. For example, the regular market for local producers has encouraged "birth" of several entrepreneurs: *"He bakes wonderful bread. You keep persuading him to come to the market. He says, well, I don't know, it is not a big deal. Then he comes and sees that people are interested in his product. Then he realizes that his product is good. Next time he makes 10 loaves. And then he registers as an entrepreneur. And that's how they appear, the businessmen"* (2018). This example reveals the type of economic activity characteristic of rural areas, when they form gradually, according to the existing situation.

In research areas where symmetrical governance networks are observed, non-governmental organizations have taken on initial activity and leadership. It is possible that local governments find

it more difficult to violate institutional barriers and get involved in the common network, but ultimately, the common goal (in this case, the development of the locality) of all those involved is perceived and identified, which provides the basis for cooperation: *“At one moment it starts feeling like – why do we need this village administration? What is it that they do?! But we do not criticize them; quite the opposite... yes, the cooperation etc. And they also become more active, and we start working together”* (2017). It can also be said that all stakeholders are gradually becoming aware that cooperation is a rational way of realizing local development ideas.

Sometimes trust between network agents is so great that the realization of common ideas brings them together and makes them stand up to the established order of the central government. The introduction of the abovementioned market idea began about 10 years ago. Local NGOs came up with an initiative to create a marketplace where local producers could sell their products. The emphasis was put on supporting domestic producers. However, at that time, national legislation did not allow the existence of such a market. Several NGO activists turned to the local government that supported this idea and *“actually voted against the Cabinet of Ministers regulations. They allowed us to set up this regular market, despite the fact that the Cabinet of Ministers regulations do not allow it. And that's a lot!”* (2018). Subsequently representatives of the municipality and NGOs participated in the respective ministerial working group to achieve favourable changes in legislation.

The next models of NGO and municipal relations (second and third) are characterized by a relationship of asymmetry, namely, situations where life in the village is run by either a non-governmental organization, or a local government. For example, in one small rural municipality, thanks to the LEADER program projects, a strong partnership between non-governmental organizations has developed. As the local administration is not known for their initiative and performs only standard functions, the situation now is that the actual power belongs to a group of leaders in non-governmental organizations. This group puts forward both long-term and short-term goals and, in principle, guides the life in the village. The network also involves municipal institutions – a school, a museum, and it seems that the weakest link in the chain is the village administration. The relationship with the head of the local administration is good, perhaps beneficial to both parties, but the agents involved are not equal with each other: *“We are*

*grateful to him that he allows us to work, of course, but it would be great if he were more active. Yes, he could be the one to correct us from time to time”* (2016). The head of the administration himself admits that he was watching NGOs for the first few years, but is currently engaging as a supportive and simultaneously formal unit. Some justification for this is the fact that the head of administration in rural municipalities is appointed by the local government and their functions are rather limited. At the same time, the situation in the horizontal networks theoretically is identical; however, cooperation with NGOs and other agencies is developing more successfully. For example, cooperation between village administration and LEADER partnerships is possible. Village administrators can act as intermediaries, contact persons, providing information, motivating local NGOs to apply for projects, etc. In certain cases, the positive changes in the economic and social development of the village begin due to the initiative of the head of administration: *“This village is very active, because there is a new administrative leader with many great ideas. They now are developing this idea of themed village”* (2017).

The activity and initiative of non-governmental organizations serve as an incentive for local governments to be more active. For example, since a civil village has a non-governmental organization that simultaneously addresses the social needs of local people, organizes cultural activities, provides tourism services, the attitude of local government representatives towards this remote corner of the region has also changed: *“The village has been ‘in the pit’ for so long... even when it had a local government, it was in a very peculiar situation: it looked like a ‘tail’, all alone, and nobody showed any interest in it. Municipal infrastructure is non-existent; nowhere to place any investments. It’s just us.”* (2016) As a result, the activity of local people has created social and also economic structures that allow projects to be implemented at the moment, attracting public investment, for example through the Employment Agency to employ young people.

The described examples underline two other aspects that are specific to rural areas. Firstly, women's activity is more characteristic to Latvian rural areas. In the cases just described, the core of the group consists of a number of women, NGOs and local government representatives, justifying their activities with the desire to stay in the countryside and create there a quality living environment: *“We were born here. Our family home is here, and we want to continue living here. So we*

*are creating this life for us in order to have a more interesting and meaningful existence. That's why I do so many things without asking what and how much money I get for doing it. I simply work because I believe this is how it must be!* (2016). Another interesting case is the experience of a woman in a small town actively organizing civic activities, but the non-governmental organization she represents occasionally encounters financial difficulties. In order for this woman to continue her work, her son who moved to the UK regularly donates money to the organization and, if necessary, financially supports his mother. It shows that very often the work in the non-governmental sector is more than financial gain or rational considerations.

Secondly, the possible cooperation between different social agents takes place predominantly within a separate village rather than within the county boundaries. The new division of counties, as stated above, came into force in 2009, creating 119 counties out of the previous 500. Consequently, a part of the rural population still thinks and acts within the boundaries of the previous municipality, as the local authorities are fundamentally distant, and there is no county-based joint identity.

The type of NGO and local government relationship opposite to the previous one, when the initiative in the village is undertaken by the local government, is observed in larger municipalities, in cases where local government is trying to create a unified system, including a non-governmental sector. In these cases, the relationship between the municipality and the non-governmental sector is characterized mainly by an administrative aspect, which in each case occurs differently. For example, municipalities allocate free space to non-governmental organizations, allow office equipment to be used without additional payment, co-finance projects implemented by non-governmental organizations, announce project calls following centrally determined directions etc. Some informants distinguish this type of local government support from possible lobbying for local government interests, but elsewhere this boundary is unclear. Thus, administrative cooperation between local government and non-governmental sector is a matter of in-depth research.

In the municipalities included in the survey, where local government dominance exists, the relationship between local governments and non-governmental organizations is characterized by a vertical hierarchy rather than a horizontal network and equal involvement of the partners in decision-making. One of the most striking examples here is the decision of a large municipality to take over the

day-care centres that previously operated as NGOs in the region, making them into structural units that would allow for adjustments not only in financial but also in ideological matters. For example, an informant, a former association leader at a non-governmental organization forum, says that the municipality does not allow her to spend three days in the forum of civil society because of computer courses. On the one hand, the transfer of such functions and structures creates some degree of stability for non-governmental organizations and theoretical acceptance by local authorities. However, much of this situation raises questions about relations between civil society and power and their possible dynamics.

In a broader sense, both rural non-governmental organizations and lawmakers point out the tendencies of centralization of power in Latvia, which can partly explain the asymmetry in relations between NGOs and local authorities: *"Structural Funds remain in the institutions; the environment becomes more and more closed. Funding is substantial - if it is run in an open competition for associations, there would be good results. The Social Fund initially had open tenders, now it does not. The money stops somewhere in the middle and does not benefit real people. This is a terrible political error"* (2016). Municipalities and non-governmental organizations to a large extent depend on national decisions on the allocation of funding, the delegation of functions, and other issues. Therefore they are looking for different ways to adapt to the current situation, and horizontal cooperation between local social agents can be seen as a positive move. At the same time, less sustainable solutions are possible, which reaffirms the need for differentiated policies for populated areas.

A formal and personally remote perspective is not effective in rural communities, and for that reason, both local government officials and NGO representatives often recognize that a bureaucratic approach maintains a certain distance between civic activities and local governance. For rural communities, as mentioned earlier, informal relationships and leadership are important: *"I am seeing how it happens in the neighbouring town. They have a guy in the council who writes these projects. But the projects have to come from the people as their initiative. But nothing really happens because the people are not interested!"* (2018).

An interesting picture appears when looking at the diversity of NGOs and the goals of their activities. In response to the opportunities to attract EU financial resources, some formal NGO structures have been created by local authorities

themselves. These NGOs, where the people loyal to the local government operate, have been set up for a specific purpose, and when the purpose is accomplished the NGO stops functioning. Such NGOs, of course, distort the understanding of civil society initiatives, but they are part of the reality of the relationship between local governments and the non-governmental sector.

On the other hand, some non-governmental organizations are formed on the basis of the needs and initiative of the local population. For example, in view of the aging population in the countryside, societies that bring together retirees are becoming popular: *“Many seniors are alone now; they are looking for socialization. This trend is very topical nowadays in Latvia. We have a single street in our village with two rows of private houses and a single pensioner living in each of them. These organizations are good because people really need what they are offering”* (2017)

The last, fourth model of the relationship between local governments and NGOs does not reveal a particular organizational structure, since NGOs and municipalities operate principally autonomously. The vision of the village, the development of the locality is different and justified in the understanding of each party's order of affairs. So, both parties are acting accordingly, failing to find the common denominator. For example, as one resident of a small village says, the local "lady club" or the NGO, in parallel with organizing seminars and tours, turned to local political issues, following the decisions taken by the head of the village administration: *“We really do not have a leader. He is of no use! He only worries about his pockets. And they are quite deep. And there is nothing that can be done! We were fighting to open a pharmacy in the village. On one occasion we, the lady club, called him out and told him everything we had on our hearts. He got a storm on his head! But did it do any good? No!”* (2018). In this case, it can be seen that there is no competition between the local social agents that would give potential for cooperation. Civil society, meanwhile, does not feel strong enough to openly oppose the activities of the administration head that they call corrupt. Thus, life in the village is largely arbitrary and drifting; citizens are trying to cope with individual and social problems on their own, but do not always succeed: *“Well, drunkards stay. The rest of the people leave”* (2018). But it is precisely in such a village where there is virtually no cooperation between local agents, where an NGO representative discovers the meaning of cooperation between rural social agents. Namely, describing the head of their non-

governmental organization, she says: *“She is so attractive and pushes ahead all the time. She pushes us... ahead!”* (2018). This sentence has even a philosophical point of view, why it is important for local communities to have some future outlook. It may not be accurate, but it is important for the general public to realize that they live in a place "driven somewhere" and where every individual has value no matter how small or large the village is and where it lies. Thus, the rural population confirms the importance of what municipalities and non-governmental organizations are doing for the role of individual leadership and networking in promoting of sustainable rural development.

Commenting on the described examples and currently typical patterns of relationships between NGOs and municipalities in the broader context, the results of the study do not reveal significant deviations from the theoretical aspects of network government. There are different practices of relations between NGOs and local governments in rural areas of Latvia, characterized by both vertical and horizontal structures, revealing some signs of competition, cooperation and collaboration. The described models are considered as contingent abstracts, giving a brief insight into the situation faced by everyday social agents representing rural areas.

Latvia's rural areas have not developed collaboration to the extent that they include the creation of joint institutions, but this is due to the adaptation of local governments and NGOs to the existing institutional arrangements and also to the relatively inflexible regulatory framework for strengthening collaboration.

The transition from competition to cooperation and collaboration largely involves shifting from individual goals to collective goals, as well as various circumstances that push for new solutions. The transition is also characterized by some caution and a gradual increase in confidence.

## 4 Conclusion

Both the public and non-governmental sectors play a major role in ensuring the sustainability of rural areas, i.e. local governments and non-governmental organizations. Their cooperation is to a large extent the basis for the activity of local people and the effectiveness of participation.

According to the results of the research, four typical practices of relationships can be distinguished between local governments and non-governmental organizations: 1) network of social agents, when local governments work closely with



NGOs, help each other solve problems; 2) life in the village is managed by non-governmental organizations, taking initiatives in identifying problems and offering solutions; 3) life in the village is managed by the local government, and the relations here are more formal; 4) NGOs and municipalities operate autonomously and occasionally compete.

Relations between local municipalities and non-governmental organizations are practically always based on personal acquaintance and personal relationships. The existence of active citizens or leaders who are able to engage other activists in advancement of the site and community play a crucial role in development of the locality.

The results of this research confirm the need for a society-centred approach, which is one of the essential needs of the rural population, as well as the theoretical thesis on the importance of collaborative governance and the potential for growth in the locality, but also reveals certain constraints and challenges that occur in certain economic, social and political the framework.

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