

Non-Governmental Organizations as the Key Actors of Renewal of Rural Territories in Latvia

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Abstract: The paper is addressed to the description of activities of non-governmental organizations of Latvia to overcome the problem of depopulation and shrinking in rural territories in Latvia. Authors use the term “renewal of society” in the context of endogenous and neo-endogenous development revealing the significant role of non-governmental organizations and civil society in rural areas in Latvia. Results collected using qualitative social research methods unveil non-governmental organizations in rural territories of Latvia as not only the animators and facilitators of rural development, but also as strong agents of creating social and economical structures that challenge existing political structures and relations between state and civil society.

Key-Words: renewal of society, rural territories, rural development, civil society, non-governmental organizations, animators.

1 Introduction

Necessity to renew society or to find appropriate tools for sustainable development is confirmed in formal documents and programs in Latvia and also stated as a serious problem by demographers and other scientists. Due to the low birth rate and high mortality, massive flow of emigration we can say that Latvia, especially its rural territories is a shrinking country. There are disappearing villages, empty houses and ever centralized infrastructure in rural territories in Latvia. Current attempts to cope with this situation are more related to quantitative and massive solutions, e.g. increasing benefits for the third child, increasing of workplaces as a main driver of development etc. Policy-makers do not take into account social and the cultural aspects of development and the appearing small economic structures.

Norms and traditions of civil society of Latvia have developed in a similar way as in other post-soviet countries. Distorted trust and cooperation, interrupted social networks is natural heritage of the current Latvian society. People trust family members and close friends mostly, simultaneously expressing deep distrust towards the state institutions and decision-makers. The results of the survey done in 2016 reveal a clear picture of the abovementioned statement – 94% people trust family, 40% trust nongovernmental organizations and only 14% trust the Parliament of Latvia [1]. It means that the gap between politicians and people

and also between social classes is huge. Moreover, it is not only in economic terms but also ideologically. Anthropologists claim that common practices in rural areas is living in so called “pockets of the state” that means informal economical exchange, hidden production and exchange of goods, unwillingness to participate in political processes, escaping of paying taxes etc. People act independently of the state structures that are estimated as being rather rigid than supportive ones [2]. Also, international researches have discovered the political passivity of Latvian people saying that they implement their civic activities in a narrow circle of their social contacts [3].

Despite the rather pessimistic view of the situation, a lot of fresh initiatives have developed in rural territories. A part of people is moving to the countryside in order to seek the second house or to choose a deliberated and settled life there. New types and forms of entrepreneurship, new products and cooperation forms have been appearing in rural localities recently. Moreover, researches evidence that practitioners, grassroots initiatives and pilot programmes are already generating a wealth of experiences and knowledge that could be fruitfully used to inform higher-level policy development [4, 5].

As the actors involved in the renewal processes of rural territories are different, authors specifically emphasize the role of rural non-governmental organizations in the paper. Theoretical mission of

the non-governmental organizations is to fill out the gap between private sector organizations and state organizations in order to meet needs of different groups of people [6]. The problem observed in rural territories of Latvia is related to the overload of duties of non-governmental organizations. In other words, the field that is not covered by the state institutions or private sector institutions is enormous. There are some peripheries in rural territories in Latvia where there is no infrastructure (not the post-office, the shop, the school), and all the responsibility about surviving and possible development is placed on the local people alone. In such cases, non-governmental organizations, established by active individuals, act as the only unit that is able to attract financing, build community and promote sustainability of rural territories.

In the abovementioned way, active non-governmental organizations are considered to be significant actors and drivers of social changes and renewal processes. Therefore, the aim of the paper is to describe the activities and situation of rural NGOs in Latvia in the context of renewal or sustainability of rural territories. Research questions are the following: what are current functions of the NGOs in the rural territories of Latvia? What are the links between these functions and the renewal of rural territories? The research is done in a qualitative manner in order to understand the context and the current situation in rural territories.

2 Theoretical Statements of the Role of Non-Governmental Organizations in the Context of Renewal of Society

2.1 Conceptual Framework of Renewal of Society

The term “renewal of the society” is not used widely. More familiar are the theories of sustainability or development issues [7] or social innovation approach which has lately been used [8, 9] that are relevant for explaining the problem. The term “renewal of the society” is used in the paper due to at least two reasons that can give additional understanding of the societal processes.

First, the term “renewal” is used quite technically with a simple desire to return something in the status that is lost [10]. In terms of societal processes, it is used to express some kind of nostalgia towards past that serves as a wish to maintain the continuity of identity both on individual and collective level [11]. This particular form of nostalgia has recently arisen in the post-socialist countries and is described as a glorification of the past (“*Ostalgie*”) and

rediscovery of former consumer products [12]. It means that the first reaction to economic or social problems that request implementation of some innovative actions and solutions could be desire to reestablish former structures or functions. But if we overcome the nostalgia, it is possible to consider past in a more rational way, take the best things from it and apply them in a new way. As a British sociologist Garry Runciman says, the main task of the renewal of society is to recreate the society in order to help people to cope with everyday life and challenges [13].

There are different problems and situations in society that call for a particular kind of the renewal. As mentioned above, the case of Latvia is related to shrinking population and settlements. Therefore, the dominant discourse of Latvian politicians and specialists is what to do in order to increase the birthrate and call back emigrants. In other cases, there are problems with overpopulated areas, asylum-seekers’ crisis, stagnation in old traditions and norms etc. Generally, we can say that the request to renew society comes from quite ineffective societal structures and functions that people cannot use in order to reach their goals. In terms of the structural functionalism theory, there is an inadequacy of “means and goals” [14]. It is worth to mention that sometimes people overcome rigid social structures and find their own individual and also collective ways of solving their problems without waiting for permission or changes of social structures. We could state hypothetically that active rural people have created their own patterns for surviving and renew their communities and territories independently of formal structures and rules.

The linkage between the renewal of society and a systemic approach is expressed also by German anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner. He argued that “*The 'social question' is not something which has suddenly appeared at this stage of human evolution and which can be resolved by a few individuals or by some parliamentary body, and stay resolved. It is an integral part of modern civilization which has come to stay, and as such will have to be resolved anew for each moment in the world's historical development*” [15]. Beyond the strong social memory and nostalgia, there is a necessity to bring new ideas and solutions to cope with nowadays challenges.

The second point for using concept of renewal is seen in its clear message of what (or who) are main drivers of social changes. Rudolf Steiner argues that the basic values of the renewal of society are free cultural activities, individual responsibility and

freedom to perform individual aims: “*the only way to renewal, to a really healthy economy and healthy system of justice, is to create free space for the good impulses and aspirations living in humans to come to the surface*” [15]. The same idea is expressed in terms of individual and collective creativity as drivers of the place development [16]. It fits with theories of endogenous and neo-endogenous development, shift from the economic determinism or exogenous development towards highlighting of social and cultural aspects of the development. According to this approach, activities that come from people’s free will and innovative thinking, developed cooperation and mutual trust is the best way for achieving long term benefits.

The manner and the level how these ideas are integrated into the strategies of development of society or territories, is different. Some countries have been appreciating the social issues of the development for a long time already. For instance, the Strategy of the national renewal of the Great Britain developed in 1994 declares that investment in social institutions, including good quality public services, is as important as investment in economic infrastructure. Communities do not become strong because they are rich; they become rich because they are strong. By investing in skills, we help people realise their potential, raise their capacity to add value to the economy, take charge of their own lives and contribute to their families and communities [17]. The current strategy for social renewal in UK (2014) brings out similar points: spreading power and responsibility, fostering contribution and reciprocity, strengthening shared institutions [18]. The Government’s National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal draws new national policies, new ideas to empower communities and new structures to provide national and regional leadership [19]. That way cooperation and involvement both of governmental and non-governmental bodies as well as appreciating the social aspects of renewal are recognized as the most effective way for the continuous sustainability. To conclude, the example of the Great Britain make visible and embedded ideas of inter-sectoral governance and the significant role of the third sector in it as well as great example of state – sponsored local development.

Some countries have rather strong expectations and policies for growing economic development and other top-down strategies, but generally the widespread discourses about rural development that emphasize economic development, profitability and income have beg towards highlighting social and cultural aspects of rural development [5].

Thus, renewal of the society becomes a topical term in the context of the development that is driven bottom-up and seen as a tool for coping with the challenges brought up by national and global changes.

2.2 Non-Governmental Organizations as Drivers of Rural Development

In terms of the renewal of the society, community, identity and place are central to meeting the societal challenge of how to adapt and thrive in a rapidly changing world. Growing evidence shows that community, identity and place are powerful resources in the collective mobilisation of people to “shape” their futures [20].

The strategical documents of both the European Union and separate countries declare the changing role of rural territories that is called the New Rural Paradigm including multisectoral, place-based approach to rural development [21]. They are seen as multifunctional countryside not only producing food, but also sustaining rural landscapes, protecting biodiversity, generating employment and contributing to the viability of rural areas [22]. Several key components are described as drivers of current rural development – rural tourism [22], cultural activities, crafts, different forms of rural entrepreneurship [23] etc.

Consequently, as the themes of agricultural restructuring, economic diversification, cultural diversity and environmental management pervade the current European programme, the process requires co-operation among the interest groups that are working towards the common goal of achieving rural development [22]. Rural development in Europe is seen in the context of social innovations, neo-endogenous development and lately so called nexogenous development [8]. Also the term “smart rural development” is used to highlight the necessity of policies of innovation, research and education through embeddedness, relatedness and connectivity [23].

Rural development refers broadly to the economic and social development of rural communities through the participation of those directly affected [24]. It relates to the characteristics of the sustainable development: concerns a geographically bounded territory characterized by a degree of economic, social and cultural cohesion; involves an area-based development strategy which is multi-sectoral and is characterized by a strong degree of integration at the level of development plans and their implementation; relates both to the process of development (e.g. learning, capacity building, bonding, networking, etc.) and to the

outcomes of development (e.g. products, projects, services, etc.) [25]. The active role of the third sector is considered pivotal in the creation of rural development conditions in which social and economic development can be stimulated. A crucial role of the third sector in rural development initiatives is to address marginalised issues that have fallen between the cracks of public and private sector mandates. The mobilisation of the third sector is associated with the nuanced local development approach required to maximise the use of local knowledge and resources, an important characteristic of neo-endogenous development and place-based development [26].

NGOs therefore are viewed as important actors in promoting changes, having emerged as viable forces for the articulation of people's needs and grievances [27], working on the ground, meeting people's needs and advocating for changes in policy [28], creating social value [29] and common good [26], playing a variety of social, economic, and political roles in the society. They provide services as well as educate, advocate, and engage people in civic and social life [30]. The functions of rural NGOs differ among countries and societies as they always depend on real needs and obstacles in society. In the European discourse NGOs are considered as a significant part of the governance [31] reinforcing the power of initiative, the capacity-building and the mobilization of rural actors [32].

Also in terms of the renewal processes in rural territories, it is claimed that the community in rural areas is often embedded in smaller, more entrenched networks, encompassed businesses, civic organizations and public services [33]. Almost 20 years ago Scottish human geographer John Bryden wrote about the main aspects of rural renewal that are still relevant: updating the analysis of the local context, strengthening local partnerships, increasing local added value, developing niche markets, strengthening local-global linkages, taking advantage of information and communications technologies, investing in human resources, restructuring the primary sector and diversifying farm incomes, tapping new tourism markets, developing environmental activities, changing attitudes [34]. John Bryden, as well as many other authors has viewed the abovementioned thesis in the context of the LEADER program that gives certain framework to the rural development and has also received criticism; nevertheless the program plays important role in activating rural communities in Europe and also in Latvia. Especially in post-Soviet countries, LEADER program has resulted in a significant increase in the number of third sector

organizations, however its resources and power in rural governance are considered as patchy and requests a more defined and powerful presence in intersectoral partnerships and in rural areas [26].

Probably the most appropriate conceptual framework for describing the activities of non-governmental organizations comes from the European Academy for sustainable rural development that stresses the term "local animator and facilitator" who plays the role of mediator and provides inspiration for new development actions among local communities as well as technical knowledge for the promotion and organization of such actions. Being an animator in rural territories means strengthening the social capacities traditionally associated with rural communities, and effectively utilising the power of mutual help, strong neighbourhood ties and local social capital. Thus, a rural animator is a trusted person who can protect and develop the interests of the community and address local development issues including all its aspects as they affect a rural community: economic regeneration, social cohesion, quality of life. The activities of local animators and facilitators are also described with the term "pre-development" that is used to refer to the phase that precedes development, when local groups are animated and a capacity is generated among local people to work purposefully in collective action [25].

As previous researches and data from different countries reveal, the path of the bottom-up driven development and multi-governance approach is considered to be a successful way of solving complicated problems and preparing local people to cope with current challenges. However, the way towards it is complicated, full of power struggles and lessons in cooperation and trust.

3 Activities of the Rural Non-Governmental organizations in Latvia

3.1 Methodology of the research

Qualitative approach of social researches was used collecting information during the National Research Program ECOSOC from 2014-2017 [35]. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of local municipalities, non-governmental organizations, entrepreneurs, experts about different issues of the development of rural territories of Latvia. For the purposes of the paper 26 interviews done in 2015-2017 were analyzed in order to highlight the specifics of rural NGOs in Latvia, describing their activities and situation in the context of the renewal of rural territories. Interviews

were done in 16 different settlements of Latvia that represent all regions. Chosen settlements varied by their proximity to the capital, infrastructure and resources. The results of the research do not pretend to be representative by themselves but they confirm trends in Latvia described by other researchers and gathered with other methods of social research.

Results gathered through interviews were complemented by document analysis about non-governmental sector in Latvia (statistics, reviews) and some information from media to describe the situation in Latvia in the most precise way.

3.2 General Characteristics of the Non-Governmental Organizations in Latvia

According to the Review of the NGO Sector in January, 2016 there were 20,662 active registered associations and foundations in Latvia. The average density of NGOs per 1,000 inhabitants is 9.4. [36]. According to the report data, it is not possible to obtain precise information on the proportion of the total number of NGOs in rural areas and what areas they operate in. Excluding the NGOs registered in cities from the total number of NGOs, it can be concluded that the approximate number of NGOs in rural areas is 8400, i.e. about 40%. Most NGOs are registered in republican cities, and in particular in the capital city of Riga.

The fields of activity of Latvian NGOs are relatively difficult to classify and measure. Civic Alliance - Latvia is the only organization that conducts regular research on the NGO sector, but the data provided by NGOs and included in their reports is often controversial and does not provide sufficient and reliable information.

Depending on the financial sources available, some changes have been taking place in the NGO sector. For example, a growing number of NGOs register as providers of social services and cooperate with the state institutions. Popular practice is for an NGO to gain so called status of public benefit organization (2,454 NGOs in 2016 [36]) which implies 85% tax deduction for donations. Gradually, social entrepreneurship is evolving, where NGOs are trying to address a number of societal challenges [37].

In Latvia associations as a legal NGO form have been given a wide range of opportunities that people appreciate and use accordingly. Sometimes the word "association" conceals an economic activity that comes very close to activities of private enterprise; sometimes the status of an association is used as a rational form that allows achieving goals that can not be achieved by a single individual or public administration organization. Consequently, NGO

founding goals and activities are not always far-reaching and based on the values of civil society. The typical activity of NGOs in Latvia is rooted in rational considerations.

This situation is largely due to the aforementioned distrust of the state and the contradictory relations of the non-governmental sector with state administration institutions. In theory, civil society has opportunities to participate in decision-making, but, as recognized by NGO representatives, it is a declarative function of an NGO that manifests itself in formal participation in decision-making processes. In real life corruptive mechanism [38, 39] are still very actual when decisions are made in a narrow circle in the interests of a small group, which is uniquely regarded as a post-Soviet normative heritage, also known as "elite political culture" [40]. Consequently, non-governmental organizations that are not close to the decision makers, for example, do not receive funding from the deputies of the Saeima [41], must look for various other fund-raising mechanisms. Non-governmental organizations are very flexible, ready to respond to uncertainty, which in turn complicates the achievement of the organization's objectives and, to a certain extent, their sustainability.

As a positive aspect, it can be said that in some cases, due to NGO protests, there has been some success in changing the adopted legislation, but the protests are used after the decision has already been taken without consulting the agents involved [36].

In rural territories the main NGO 'player' is the network of the association "Latvian Rural Forum" that is a national level organization and involves 37 local action groups and 33 associate members providing implementation of the LEADER program in Latvia [42]. Due to the active work of the association in educating and leading of rural NGOs, this is one of the most influential NGOs networks in Latvia. Representatives of the association reveal that the expertise of rural NGOs has developed gradually from almost mechanic implementation of projects until more sustainable planning of the local development.

3.3 Functions of Rural Non-Governmental organizations in Latvia

There are different stories of the establishment and development of rural NGOs. Some of them are developed based on the real needs of local people but in most cases they represent legal and rational ways of attracting financing from the European Union and other sources. Local patriotism and the desire to keep their place live and active is quite

typical motivation of any activities: *“I thought that something had to be done locally in order to make our life better and more interesting. There are no special secrets or miraculous recipes. Just go and take part in this project or that, raise some money for it”*.

A significant number of rural non-governmental organizations focus on cultural, educational, sports issues in their activities. Depending on the funding available, non-governmental organizations have greatly invested in the promotion and reproduction of intangible and material cultural heritage. The multifaceted use of cultural heritage and the creation of new values is the most obvious sphere of activities in rural areas in Latvia, which consists of organizing and attending numerous cultural events, participating in groups of amateur art, organizing various educational workshops and seminars, and using cultural values in business and in marketing [43]. Similarly, through various educational activities, knowledge is disseminated in different areas of life. There is also cooperation taking place in this area, both between NGOs and between municipalities [44].

In rural territories, similarly to the whole of Latvia NGOs are not active in the defence of human rights or solving of political issues. Despite some episodes in the public domain regarding criticisms of certain municipalities or other public sphere organizations, non-governmental organizations are not active initiators of changes in existing power relations. The results of the 2015 survey indicate that NGOs believe more in their power to help population in daily situations than in their ability to influence systemic changes [36].

The power relations between NGOs and public sphere institutions are a separate subject of research, but it is worth mentioning in the article that the informal relations, the idea of having an "acquaintance" in the right place and the benefits that can be gained through such acquaintance that are so characteristic to post-Soviet society are still dominant in Latvia. It must be said that the typical model of rural NGOs and municipalities is the adaptation of NGOs to existing authorities and attempts to "find common ground". There are cases where a non-governmental organization actually manages life in a parish where a parish manager is a formal unit that approves the necessary documents: *“At one moment it started to look like why we actually need this parish board, what they accomplish?! But we did not criticize them; quite the opposite, yes, cooperation etc. And then they started to do things, and then we began cooperating”*. Such a situation, of course, is more

likely in small counties or parishes where the relations of local people are less formalized and social barriers are less pronounced. There are still cases in which the municipality, when it sees that NGOs are active, is happy to unofficially transfer their functions to NGOs: *“When the executive board meets at our place, municipality asks: so when you will get the grass mowed? Listen, we do not manage the territory!”* In order to sort out this relationship, municipalities are slowly developing the practice of contracts of division of functions, but according to informants, this is a new practice and therefore not always welcomed. In Latvia, a new tendency has emerged in relations between municipalities and non-governmental organizations: some structures established by NGOs have lately become strong and rather influential. Therefore, public institutions are interested not only to develop cooperation with NGOs but also take their resources in order to make stronger their own structures and power. An example of this is the practice of one large area where the municipality took over the activity centers set up by the NGOs in some parishes and began determining their activities, as well as the roles and agenda of the staff, former NGO leaders. This tells us about certain way of uneven relations between state organizations and NGOs that bring up some challenges and even threats for rural communities and civil society in general.

Returning to the above-mentioned fact about cultural, educational and sporting activities as the most visible part of NGO activity in rural areas, LEADER network and local action groups play a large role in rural areas. Due to the funding available to LEADER, significant funds are invested not only in the field of culture and education but also in improving infrastructure and quality of life. Most of the time they are small investment projects, for example, to buy equipment for leisure, to arrange a playground or sports ground, to open a museum or park, etc. The project has positive repercussions when local people engage in the realization and further use of it, showing initiative and taking up responsibility for the introduced innovation. Here is where the levels of activity of non-governmental organizations can be revealed: the first is to carry out activities that bring some benefits to the local community and territory, but do not comply with the needs of the local community and do not promote wider community activity. In such cases, the view of non-governmental organizations is short-lived and depends on the available financial resources. By overcoming this functional level, non-governmental organizations are beginning to think more strategically about the

development of the local community and territory, looking at long-term goals and opportunities and initiating subsequent activities accordingly.

An example of this is the development of tourism in rural areas. It is not difficult to develop some products and services or arrange objects for attracting tourists, but it is more difficult to maintain the sustainability of tourist facilities or to ensure that tourism is related to the wider development of the community and territory. One of respondents says: *"Yeah, we have three buses of tourists a day coming to see what we have. But now we need to think what to do next"*. Sometimes all of the expectations related to the renewal of the functioning of society and territory is placed on tourism alone. However, if tourism activities are not "rooted" in the local culture and made to be an integral part of the local community, they quickly "dry out" and become an empty marketing activity: *"We don't care much about huge crowds coming here. We are more about quality... All big, good events that gain huge commercial success lose the atmosphere. That is not our goal"*.

What is considered good practice in the case of rural areas of Latvia are horizontal networks, which include local governments, non-governmental organizations, schools, museums, religious organizations, individual companies or individual entrepreneurs and other social agents depending on the situation with the aim of attracting funding as efficiently as possible. As experts and informants themselves say about such networks, it's difficult to decide who is doing which project, because everyone is equally involved: *"We do things together. It's not like this is a school event, it's a museum, etc. If somewhere there is activity, everyone is invited, forces are concentrated"*.

As one respondent mentioned, there are many opportunities in the countryside where to express themselves creatively. Non-governmental organizations are therefore mediators, legal and material framework for the implementation of various activities. For example, a respondent talks about how the signs to various objects were placed in their parish: *"It all came from one pensioner. Her relatives that were coming for a visit could not find her house. We heard the same reports from other visitors. These things are apparent for us, but a visitor does not know. So that is how the signs came about."* This example tells that it is possible for any resident of a parish to come up with an idea and carry it out with the help from municipality or an NGO. There are similar examples about the activities of young people, land improvements etc. It should be said that, in particular, for environmental

clean-ups and land improvement, residents organize themselves, without the involvement of official institutions. An example of this is the fact that in summer 2017 we all heard about family that built a bus stop on their own [45]. One businessman put up asphalt pavement on a section of state-owned road for his own money [46]. On the one hand, such examples illustrate the huge gap between the state and the population and the fact that citizens actually perform state functions, but on the other hand they reveal self-organization and civic activities of people. Representatives of non-governmental organizations are aware of their "mission" to build a community, unite people and, as they themselves say, "drag people out of their homes". Non-governmental organizations, sometimes unlike local authorities, are better known to local people and are more flexible in adapting to their needs. For example, in order to invite residents to a parish forum to discuss developmental strategies, rural NGOs often address the majority of the population personally, knowing that *"in fact, a leaflet does not work; definitely not!"*, while in the municipality as a formal structure this practice is considered unacceptable.

NGOs, in the direct sense, create space for activities of local people, which is in line with the theory of the restoration of society. First of all, this is done through implemented projects, which improve infrastructure, develop environment, create various services, and make cultural and educational activities available. Several NGOs function as community centres where they focus on physical, emotional and spiritual needs of the community simultaneously. Second, non-governmental organizations are better than official structures in assessing the potential of local people and more willing to involve them in different activities, strengthening their significance and the sense of responsibility: *"You are definitely needed there, you are important! Without a doubt you will be able to say something that will cause things to change!"*

NGOs act as mediators between different social agents. For example, a rural development association organized an agricultural exhibition in 2011, based on the fact that 100 years ago, the same event was organized. The exhibition brought together farmers, entrepreneurs from the neighborhood, thus promoting mutual co-operation and economic activity.

Mutual co-operation between rural social agents are also encouraged by national and global challenges. For example, respondents say that at the time of the economic crisis (2009-2011) there was a

danger of closing a local school, the school management actively cooperated with local non-governmental organizations, both to develop collaborative projects and to learn from the experience of non-governmental organizations. This is a very important aspect of the role of NGOs in rural areas, since under certain conditions they act as an innovation and knowledge transfer agent. The motivation comes from the experience of those NGOs that have changed their attitude from 'we are entitled' to 'we are able to do something for others'. In remarkable cases, such a change of attitude also takes place at an institutional level, for example, when a school starts to operate on the principle that it can offer something to local residents.

The activities of non-governmental organizations are based on the activity and initiative of some people, but in the case of Latvia, rural non-governmental organizations have proved themselves to be an effective animator by creating horizontal networks between different actors and promoting the activity of local people, which manifests itself not only in the social but also in the economic sphere: "It caused a part of the people to become more active. Last year we put together a booklet about the entrepreneurship in the parish. It turned out that when we [NGO] began there were two-three small businesses; now there are over twenty. I believe some of them are linked to our activities". In this way, rural NGOs act as drivers of economic growth, directly and indirectly, by creating jobs through project implementation and project results, as well as by inspiring and activating local people. For example, it is a common practice to organize artisan workshops, where old skills are restored and transferred. Thus small economic structures and networks are emerging in the countryside, which in the current situation is practically the only scenario of existence and possible development.

4 Conclusion

The representatives of NGOs in rural areas are aware of the demographic situation and see the rural exodus problem not only in Latvia but also in other European countries. At the same time, they have created structures that enable both the people involved and the wider community to survive and secure their needs in a shrinking environment.

Non-governmental organizations in rural areas of Latvia act not only as an animator and facilitator, but also take on a certain part of the functions of public administration. The case of Latvia shows that local people are able to create tangible and intangible values even in the conditions of weak

infrastructure and lack of resources. The gap between the public and non-governmental sectors in recent years has served as a free space for rural people to create their own survival and growth scenarios, being ahead of national organizations in their ideas and development. Consequently, the current issue is how relations between civil society and state structures could develop in the future. However, both the results of this and other studies confirm that the non-governmental sector in Latvia has the potential and capacity to manage the processes of society renewal.

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