

THE PERSPECTIVES OF SUSTAINABLE SOCIAL SERVICES PROVISION THROUGH LOCAL NGOS IN LITHUANIA

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The supply, accessibility and efficiency of social services are important factors in the quality of life of society, as they are the basis for maintaining social well-being and the quality of life of people with social needs. Local communities, as the smallest part of the social system of society, are becoming a significant stakeholder in the formation and provision of social services. The aim of this article, as well as the conducted qualitative research, is to reveal and discuss the topic relevant today - the involvement of local community organizations (NGOs) in community service development processes, focusing on NGO capacity building and sustainability. The article reveals the possibilities of community-level NGOs in Lithuania to actively participate in the provision of social services.

The research was carried out by interviewing the leaders and representatives of NGOs belonging to the Kaunas Community Association. The results of the research reveal the current conditions and perspective opportunities of local NGOs to develop and provide social services at the local level and allow a clearer understanding of the sector's readiness for the development of social services in Lithuania. The study showed that although non-governmental organizations can be actively involved in the provision of social services, there are some limitations due to non-constructive communication with public institutions and the lack of financial resources. Although local NGOs provide some social services at the community level, the need for social services is significantly greater than the capacity of the organization.

Keywords: NGOs, local community, community development, social policy, social services, NGO capacities, human and financial resources.

INTRODUCTION

The activities of NGOs in Lithuania cover various areas that are beneficial to society and important for the successful development of the state, such as: consumer protection, human rights advocacy, community building, environmental protection, preservation of culture and heritage, social exclusion, poverty reduction, development of social services, and promotion of international cooperation. Strong and competent NGOs represent the country in international organizations, promote volunteering, increase civic and corporate social responsibility, and attract funds from private sponsors and international foundations and organizations, or by carrying out commercial activities, thereby creating both social and economic value for the state. NGOs arise from civil initiative and the desire to solve current issues and satisfy the needs that the government and business sectors are unable to address. The chief obstacles to the development of the non-governmental sector are a lack of active citizenship, poor NGO administrative and financial resources, and underdeveloped cooperation between NGOs and public authorities.¹

With overall insufficiency of social services provision at a local level in Lithuania, the following article discusses the alternative institutions, more specifically NGOs taking an active part in providing social services locally. The article represents the main perspectives of non-governmental organizations as well as their current skills and conditions which may favor them in developing social services on a local level. The research analysis in this article is a part of a MA thesis: “Local NGOs’ capacity building for sustainable social service provision”. The research was conducted in the spring of 2020. The research methodology was qualitative, with the method of qualitative survey analysis and the research tool being online questionnaire. Four local NGO leaders were the research participants who filled out the questionnaires. The research

1 Ministry of Social Security and Labor, Non-governmental sector, <https://socmin.lrv.lt/en/activities/non-governmental-sector>

results reveal the perspectives of becoming a sustainable stakeholder as a social service provider.

The NGOs of Kaunas Community Association operating at a local level frequently engage with the local communities they represent. This means carrying out activities necessary for the specific community, facing different issues and more specific social needs. In order to satisfy the needs, the local NGOs use their capacities and skills as well as their human and financial resources. Thus, the problem in this article is to understand the non-governmental organization's overall activities, more specifically, local NGOs – acting as social service providers. Social policy focuses also on local communities and on the cooperation of non-governmental organizations. The local NGOs of the Kaunas Community Association, both acting at the local level and being non-governmental *per se*, are as the researcher finds, considerable stakeholders in providing social services

NGOS AND LOCAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

As non-governmental bodies, NGOs might be more approachable and easier to reach for a social service client. Development of social work services within non-governmental local communities is possible, taking in mind the number of capacities they already have. Members of local NGOs comprise a group of different people; in order to function effectively it is suggested that each member would understand that within the local NGO they are a team, not acting separately. Moreover, through team-building activities it is possible to strengthen the NGO from the inside, having an aim-oriented team. In the context of community social work, a strong team of a local NGO would develop more social services, and teambuilding would increase communication. Developing community social work requires workers to change their current practices. Change is often considered undesirable and disruptive: this is an understandable but incomplete perception of the nature of “change”. Experience teaches us, when we allow it, that life is not stable, but there

is a human and necessary tendency in us which leads us to behave as though it were. (Smale et al., 1988, p. 47)

The local non-governmental organizations of Kaunas Community Association operate on a local, community level, as each of them represents a certain neighborhood and local community of Kaunas. As the article authors find, an understanding of community development will help to construct the idea of sustainable development for local NGOs as well. Community development is a way of strengthening civil society by prioritizing the actions of communities, and their perspectives in the development of social, economic and environmental policy. It seeks the empowerment of local communities, taken to mean both geographical communities, communities of interest or identity and communities organizing around specific themes or policy initiatives. Community development is not only a practice, involving skills, a knowledge base, and a strong value base. It is also a goal, self-evidently the development of communities or, as it now appears fashionable to describe it, building the capacity of communities. The earliest sustained references to capacity-building in the literature date from the early 1990s, in the work of UNCED (1992), Agenda 21 and the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (UNDP, 1991). The UNDP definition focused on the role of the UN itself in supporting capacity-building. (Craig, 2007)

Communities are always the context, if not always the content, of social work practice. For social workers to be effective, they need to understand how community affects the lives of the people. The importance of community calls for a community based social work practice. Social work practice is about using the community and using naturally occurring and socially constructed networks within the social environment to provide social support. There are four perspectives of community for a community based social work practice: Community as People: A Socio-demographic View (the utility of socio-demographic information is for social planning purposes and to understand the community), Community as a Social System, Communities as Local, Global, or Virtual Networks and Community as an Arena of Conflict (suggests that conflict

and change are characteristic of communities and it brings power and politics to the fore)". (Pradeep and Sathyamurthi, 2017, p. 62).

Researchers have argued that the presence of non-profit organizations provides a range of community-level benefits including contributions to quality of life, catering for marginalized groups and for those who have been overlooked by government and/or the market (Musick and Wilson, 2008). However, in addition to the direct benefits to communities, it has been argued that there are also latent benefits for the functioning of communities from a strong voluntary sector presence (e.g. the formation of social capital). In some ways, the limited evidence for community-level influences may be thought surprising (Mohan and Bennett, 2019, p. 952). Volunteering largely takes place locally: most people travel short distances to volunteer, serve local organizations, and become involved through social networks that are local in focus (e.g. school, church or other voluntary groups), or in response to solicitation from a local organization (Musick and Wilson, 2008; Mohan and Bennet, 2019).

SOCIAL POLICY FOR SOCIAL SERVICES IN LITHUANIA

The research, conducted in the spring of 2020, revealed that provision of social services over a few recent years in Lithuania was aimed at changing stationary services into ambulatory services, first and foremost, into social services at the recipients' place and at day centers. The intensifying trend of the provision of ambulatory social services instead of stationary services is progressive. It should be also noted that the number of stationary services in Lithuania has remained insufficient, especially with regard to old people and disabled people. The participation of local communities, NGOs, volunteers and the private sector in providing social services is insufficient, whereas demographic processes and aging in society will increase the need for such services in the future. Even though, overall, Lithuania has been relatively successful in regard to its post-EU membership economic development path, the proportion of GDP allocated to social protection in the Baltic countries

has remained at approximately half the EU average. Indeed, the fact that their allocations did not exceed 20% (with an exception of 2009 in case of Lithuania) placed these countries in the cohort of EU Member States with the lowest levels of expenditure on social protection in relation to GDP (Atas, 2018, p. 736).

While continuing the reform of provision of social services, commenced in 2002, over recent years efforts were made to organize social services in such a manner as to ensure basic personal needs and to encourage people to get actively involved in helping themselves. Provision of services alternative to stationary social care was intensified through day or short-term social care in an individual's home. In 2004–2006, the number of recipients of assistance at home increased from 10,500 to 12,900 (23%). Moreover, provision of social skills development and support services at home to families at social risk has been substantially intensified. Their number increased from 4,300 in 2006 to 23,000 in 2007. On the other hand, all these efforts have not resolved the shortage of long-term stationary social care services: individuals who need such services (disabled people, elderly people) still need to wait in queues to be provided them.

The level of social exclusion and poverty in Lithuania (as compared with other EU member states) has remained rather high. It is impossible to solve this problem by benefits alone. Active social inclusion policy measures should be implemented. One of the most important measures includes social, legal and cultural services. It has been acknowledged in the analytical section that despite recent progress, social services in Lithuania have not yet been sufficiently developed. The quality of and access to services in various Lithuanian regions differs a lot; evident differences between the urban and rural areas as well as between large cities and other towns are observed.²

2 National report of Lithuania on social protection and social inclusion strategies 2008–2010 (NR – SPSIS).

LITHUANIAN NGOS AND SOCIAL SERVICES PROVISION

The following presents and discusses the research methods, research sample as well as the research analysis covering the perspectives of sustainable social services' provision through local NGOs. The problem in this article was to understand overall the non-governmental local communities' (in the research mentioned as local NGOs) activities in the perspective of local NGOs – acting like social service providers. Through discussions with the administration of Kaunas Community Association the author discovered that there are 60 community centers in Kaunas, and 27 members of Kaunas Community Center Association. Qualitative methodology was used for the research and an online questionnaire in Lithuanian language for some community leaders was conducted.

The choice of the local NGOs for this research was made taking into consideration the willingness of NGO leaders to participate, the size of the local community, its location in the city and the researcher's own interest. Another indispensable factor was the local NGOs leaders' being a part of the Kaunas Community Center Association, as the research was conducted specifically for the Association. By this, it was aimed to have some variety of local NGOs and have an approximate image of the whole of Kaunas. Thus, overall, in the article NGOs within local communities will be analyzed – with similar size and population; one community with a midsize population and also having a close and direct connection with city center; and finally, a comparably new build community with a large size of population.

The research method initially was conducting interviews, but as not all community leaders could speak English the researcher decided to analyze only some non-governmental local communities, asking their leaders to fill out the questionnaire in Lithuanian. Due to the language barrier, the researcher conducted overall four questionnaires and analyzed them with the method of qualitative survey analysis.

Hereby are discussed and analyzed the questionnaires filled out by non-governmental local community leaders of these parts of Kaunas,

giving more or less the whole picture of the city's non-governmental local communities' perspectives and challenges as social service providers on local level. The initial plan for the method was semi-structured interviews, which later was changed to the form of a written text, a survey, while keeping the qualitative methodology and purpose.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY, ETHICAL PRINCIPLES AND DATA RELIABILITY

Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns and themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and it extends the literature or signals a call for action (Creswell, 2007, p. 37).

There are many types of qualitative data, which vary depending on the data collection method used. In qualitative social work research, there are three primary methods for collecting data: interviews, observation, and review of existing records (Krysiak and Finn, 2010, p. 103).

Padgett (1998) suggests that establishing a set of strategies to increase rigor in qualitative research will help qualitative researchers to manage reactivity and bias, legitimizing qualitative findings. Qualitative research typically relies on the voluntary participation of people who have experienced the phenomenon under investigation. The researcher uses a variety of recruitment methods to reach the relevant people and make it attractive for those people to participate. The art of attracting research participants is an important step in the research process with the researcher needing to carefully consider the methods most likely to capture the imagination of potential participants and then engage these

people in the research process. The nature of the relationship between the researcher and each participant is likely to be multifaceted and multipurpose (Bell, 2011). As social workers intervene with individuals, families, and communities, it is critical to remain informed regarding the literature base and research advances specific to one's field of practice. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW)'s Code of Ethics (1999) asserts the importance of engaging in practice informed by prevailing research when it states "social workers should critically examine and keep current with emerging knowledge relevant to social work."

The research presented in this article was conducted using an online questionnaire, which the research participants filled out voluntarily. The confidentiality of research participants was guaranteed: no names or other personal information are revealed in the article. Prevention of harm is a general ethical rule among researchers of all disciplines and methodologies.

THE RESEARCH

The research participants were the local NGO leaders of Kaunas Community Association, from the communities of Vilijampole, Šilainai, Panemunė and Aleksotas. During analysis, it was clear that each non-governmental local community has specific needs. In the case of Vilijampolė this is very specific: the NGO leader mentioned the need for a social worker. It shows their readiness to develop social services, at the same time mentioning the lack of a specialist in the field. Unlike Vilijampolė, the Šilainiai local NGO leader was not very specific, writing about social service needs, but indicating the general need for communication. Other scarcities, such as support, meetings and engagement were mentioned. According to the researcher, the lack of communication led to inactive engagement in social services as a local NGO. The reason here, as the researcher finds, needs to be examined using the concept of social networking. The leaders of local NGOs of Aleksotas and Panemunė mentioned more specific social service needs, as the researcher finds, this shows quite meaningful motivation and readiness

to develop more capacities, and to act as a social service provider at the local level. The Aleksotas NGO leader stressed on the importance for social essence and indicated the need for social services particularly for elderly, children and disadvantaged families. This, according to researcher, means that their social service needs are already assessed and the local NGO leader is thoughtful about his members social service needs. This was similar to what the Panemunė NGO leader mentioned:

“Cultural, communication, wellness, educational, civic initiatives, support for families in need, child and youth employment, environmental protection.”

The researcher finds that for the NGOs, which act on local community level, the development of capacities could be greatly improved. Beresford (2010) has given an account of how service users have organized to form groups or user-controlled organizations. By representing themselves and speaking up to get their views heard and respected, service users are fighting for more participation opportunities and promoting partnership between service users and service providers. Social welfare organizations have also been expected or required to provide more channels to consult service users and listen to their views, allow them to give feedback on the effectiveness of the services and encourage them to be involved in daily operation and management of the service (Kam, 2019). In order to understand the perspectives of local NGOs in providing social services, it is important to focus the attention also to the networking level within the communities.

While the local NGOs are operating on a community level they should have the possible resources for fulfilling sufficiently the communities' needs. Thus, another category the researcher analyzes, is the “means” of local NGOs, where the object is external and private resources. Here, the aim of the researcher was to find out what resources the NGOs have, in order to develop and increase social services locally. For example, the Vilijampolė NGO leader wrote about external resources, project funding and such private support as human resources and

membership fees. The Aleksotas community leader mentioned a variety of resources, however indicating that there is lack of municipal support:

“Volunteers-teachers, medics, artists, audio-visual equipment, computers, tents, tables and chairs, own folklore ensemble.”

“MSM program ‘Strengthening community activities in municipalities’, national competitions, Kaunas municipality in recent years almost does not support the activities of community organizations.”

Šilainiai, like Vilijampolė NGO has external resources – project funding, and private support such as human resources and membership fees. Panemune local NGO, like Aleksotas also has variety of resources as the community leader mentioned:

“Active members of the community, volunteers, professionals in various fields, forest part territory, access to church parish homes, library facilities. We hope in the future, once the renovation has been completed, will be allowed to use the district hall.”

“Project activities, member contributions, business support, volunteer work.”

Weisbrod (1988: 60) describes social services as “collective” goods that are “external benefits [provided] to persons who do not help to finance the [providing] organization’s objectives”. Governments typically provide such goods because for-profit firms cannot charge sufficient service fees to enable them to meet their profit-making objectives. Charities also fund (and deliver) services that government fails to provide as a supplementary response to social need (Weisbrod, 1988), or, alternatively, charities work in partnership with government to deliver social services which are complementary. Establishing a welfare state which provides collective goods is an expression of a country’s norms, values and social goals (Kildal and Kuhnle, 2005). The funding of social services which form the basis of welfare is therefore a normative issue that not only asks what the government should do, but also the extent to which charities should rely on private rather than collective funding (Cordery, 2012).

Overall, there is longterm experience in Kaunas Community Association. Namely, as the Vilijampolė local NGO leader says:

“Many years of experience writing projects, sometimes succeed in attracting sponsors.”

The rest of the NGO leaders mentioned the fundraising experience likewise:

“We write several projects each year and win 1–2 projects.”

“Every year we submit 1–3 applications to different institutions for funding activities.”

The Panemunė local NGO leader also mentioned applying to different projects and institutions.

“We have been writing projects for over ten years. We have been involved in international projects, ministries and municipal projects. We executed the projects with our own resources and sponsors’ funds.”

For the representatives of local NGOs fundraising skills are quite vital, and they need to be flexible both in writing projects and searching for all possible funds. Community fundraising is about mobilizing communities to support your cause. The basis of community fundraising is that a large audience gives small donations, and a key feature of community fundraising is that it is largely unpaid and carried out often by volunteers in the local community.

For small groups, community fundraising is often an attractive proposition. Small groups have a strong relationship with the local community and community fundraising provides an opportunity to engage volunteers in a meaningful way and also build relationships with the communities that they exist to serve. But it shouldn’t be assumed that fundraising in the community is without its own good practice. Community fundraising done badly can damage the reputation of the organization, lose volunteers and potentially leave groups open to legal challenge (Community fundraising, 2016).

THE COOPERATION LEVEL BETWEEN LOCAL NGOS AND MUNICIPAL BODIES

Due to the fact that Kaunas Community Association operates at a local level, the researcher aimed to highlight the importance of municipal cooperation and thus made it a separate category, having an object as the local authority and dimension of a Local Action Group (LAG). In the following, the researcher will present the communication of local NGOs on the municipal level. Each answer the local NGO leaders gave was unique, meaning there is a different level of cooperation with the local authorities.

“The Chair is a member of the Extended Elders’ Conference. We participate in joint events with the eldership, start cooperation with Fluksus Labas – Kaunas 2020, participate in meetings with the city municipality, and events initiated by them. 1 BC member is on the City Seniors Council.”

However, answering the question about being a part of a LAG, Vilijampolė NGO mentioned:

“There are no opportunities for the urban community.”

Unlike Vilijampolė, Aleksotas NGO mentioned being a part of a LAG at the moment of research.

“The Aleksotas Community Center is currently a member of the Aleksotas Local Action Group, as will be unknown in the future.”

Aleksotas NGO leader also mentioned about the variety of cooperation with the local authority.

“Cooperation agreement, involvement in working groups, NGO Council, Council of Community Organizations, meetings-discussions with authorities.”

The Šilainai NGO leader presented the cooperation with the local authority as distant and formal, the researcher finds, taking into account how he answered about the municipal cooperation and becoming part of a Local Action Group.

*“Meetings, formal correspondence. There is no direct communication.”
“It is not even a theoretical option to become a LAG at this time.”*

The Panemunė NGO leader talked about active cooperation with the municipality, however mentioning it in the past tense.

“We have been cooperating with the eldership, and in the past we have cooperated constructively and regularly with the municipal administration. Currently, from time to time and irregularly.”

Answering about the possibility of becoming the part of a LAG, the leader sounds quite optimistic and motivated, as the researcher finds from his response:

“I think we are able to participate in the LAG. We have long-term experience of real work and actions, active members of the community, competent specialists of various fields, motivated members of the community.”

Currently functioning as a non-governmental organization at the local community level, the local NGOs of Kaunas Community Association should not underestimate the flawless and productive cooperation with the municipality. The importance of local governments having the capacity to carry out their roles has long been recognized. Although the definition of government capacity and ways to enhance and evaluate this capacity are debated, there is agreement that it is a multidimensional concept with different applications in different. The localities with more capacity to obtain grant funding are those with more fiscal, administrative, and political resources to use for grant getting (Sprague et al., 2018, p. 174).

It is evident through the research analysis data that there are still a number of improvements required for the sustainable capacity-building of local NGOs. The main support the local NGO needs, in order to provide social services and become an active stakeholder on a municipal level, depends on government actions, state funds and a productive cooperation with the municipality. Nevertheless, with the own resources the local NGOs have, they can still provide social services, but the provision of those services will be limited.

The need for social services will always remain, especially with social problems existing in each community, city, and country. Social problems are explained by what people lack (Cruikshank, 1999): lack of co-ordinated and quality services, social cohesion and civic engagement. The solution: stronger urban networks and alliance between central and local government, local community organisations and residents (Scott and Liew, 2012).

CONCLUSIONS

Because of the high level of social exclusion in the country as indicated in social policy and rapidly aging population, the involvement of NGOs in this case would help reinforce the development of social services, at the same time building more sustainable social services for the clients – the communities. Even though all local NGOs belonged to the same association they were not all that similar, in that the researcher found more unique answers for each local NGO. Especially when asking about social services, the answers of all local NGO leaders indicated a variety of needs and issues they would like to change or improve: some local NGO leaders indicated a number of needs, and some only few. However, there was a similarity between two leaders who indicated more specific, concrete social service activities that their members need within the local NGOs. The resources of these four local NGOs of Kaunas Community Association were not identical, differing for each community. Fundraising skills, as the researcher found, were not new to all NGO leaders, as they were part of their long-term experience.

The research results showed that as an NGO, Kaunas Community Association is able to act as social service provider, at least to some extent. To become a fully sustainable stakeholder in the field there are still some drawbacks to be fixed. The first that can be mentioned is the productive partnership with the public governing bodies, which, according to the local NGO leaders, is not at a very high level. Another thing is financial support and lack of resources. But it is worth mentioning that the situation is not the same in all local NGOs, because, as was

clear from the research analysis, some NGOs have sufficient resources to start and develop provision of social services at the community level.

Through the research analysis data, it is evident that there are still number of improvements required for the sustainable capacity-building of local NGOs. The main support the local NGO needs, in order to provide social services and become an active stakeholder at a municipal level, depends on government actions, state funds and a productive cooperation with the municipality. Nevertheless, with the own resources the local NGOs have, they can still provide social services, but the provision of those services will remain limited. Solving the problem of the research, that is the capacity building for sustainable community development in providing social services, could be implemented by joining the local action group, which will partially solve the funding scarcities. The strengthening of cooperation with the local authority also will have positive impacts on local NGOs.

The need for social services will always remain, especially with social problems existing in each community, city, and country. Social problems are explained by what people lack (Cruikshank, 1999): lack of co-ordinated and quality services, social cohesion and civic engagement. The solution: stronger urban networks and alliance between central and local government, local community organisations and residents (Scott and Liew, 2012).

RECOMMENDATIONS

NGOs in Lithuania, when functioning sufficiently as social service providers at a local level, might bring benefits to local communities and satisfy the social needs of citizens at the national level as well.

After the research process, the researcher was seeking possible ways of making improvements in the social services sphere and thus came up with some recommendations. The recommendation part starts with addressing policy makers, due to the fact that all other measurements depend on how well social policy in Lithuania is built. Another group the researcher is addressing are social workers, who should understand

the service providers' and the clients' needs within a macro system of social work practice, meaning within the local non-governmental organizations. And finally, the third group are the researchers who will examine this topic and might be developing it more in future.

Recommendations for policy makers. Expand the measurements on social services efficient provision in Lithuania, namely include all available stakeholders for social services provision on local level, giving the opportunity for other stakeholders, rather than only state institutions, to take an active part in the decision-making process on projects and funds allocations for the social services reinforcement.

Recommendations for future researchers. The future research on the topic of social service provision through local NGOs, could be implemented taking and analyzing all local NGOs of the Kaunas Community Association, thus having a wider understanding of social service issues to be researched. Proceeding with other relevant theories as well as researching both from local authority and local NGO views, are also recommended by the researcher. The use of various methods could reveal different aspects in social services provision and developing challenges, through a new analysis of local non-governmental organizations of the Kaunas Community Association.

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TVARIŲ SOCIALINIŲ PASLAUGŲ TEIKIMO PER BENDRUOMENINES NVO PERSPEKTYVOS LIETUVOJE SANTRAUKA

Šiame straipsnyje pagrindinis dėmesys skiriamas NVO galimybėms tapti socialinių paslaugų teikėjomis. Socialinės politikos priemonių įgyvendinimas Lietuvoje rodo aiškius socialinių paslaugų teikimo bendruomeniniame lygmenyje trūkumus. Esant socialiniams iššūkiams tenkinti poreikių turinčių asmenų socialinių paslaugų prieinamumą, akivaizdu, kad reikia stiprinti ir tobulinti socialinių paslaugų kūrimo ir teikimo praktiką, įtraukiant visas suinteresuotas šalis.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: NVO, vietos bendruomenė, bendruomenės plėtra, socialinė politika, socialinės paslaugos, NVO pajėgumai, žmogiškieji ir finansiniai ištekliai.