



Universität Potsdam

Stefan Huber

## **Citizens Participation in Latvia**

Still a Long Road to go?



Forschungspapiere „Probleme der Öffentlichen Verwaltung  
in Mittel- und Osteuropa“



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## **Abstract**

On the 20.01.1991 the Latvian people defended the Latvian political elite from the Soviet OMON troops in order to achieve independence. After this impressive sign of civil society the people fell asleep, the level of mobility and the satisfaction with the functioning of democracy therefore is rather weak. The referendum (2008), to gain the right to dissolve the Parliament by the people, initiated by the Trade Unions can be assessed as a sign that there is something on the move. This paper is trying to give an impression of the situation of the civil society in terms of participation in the decision-making process. Hereby the focus lays on NGOs: What is the legal base and which problems do they face. To learn more about the situation interviews were organized with representatives of NGOs from different sectors like community development; Social inclusion; advocating gender issues as well as environment and sustainable development. As a result of the research it can be said that the civil society made some steps forward but it is still struggling with a high level of corruption, lack of interested from the elite and the ordinary people and the insecure financial state.



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**List of Abbreviations:**

EU	European Union
Eurohouse	EIROMĀJA Starptautiskais sadarbības centrs (International Partnership Centre "Eurohouse")
CAL	Latvijas Pilsoniska Alianse (Civic Alliance-Latvia)
FES	Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation)
LaGM	Latvijas Zala kustiba (The Latvian Green Movement)
LBAS	Latvijas Brīvo arodbiedrību savieniba (Free Trade Union Confederation of Latvia)
LiTS	Life in Transition Survey
LVL	Lats - Latvian currency (1 EUR = 0, 7048 LVL; 8. August 2008)
LRS	Kreisa Karsta kustiba (Left Riverside Movement)
MAB	Mezaparka Attīstības biedrība (Mezaparks Develop Association)
Marta	Resursu Centrs Sievietēm "Marta" (The Resource Center for Women "Marta")
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association

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## I. Introduction <sup>1</sup>

On August 21, 1991 Latvia gained back independence after 45 years of Russian occupation and Latvia started a transformation process from a Soviet Republic to a Western European democracy. This process is not finished yet although Latvia has joined the NATO and the EU in 2004. The country is still ruled by small political and economic elite with only little ties to the civil society.

The level of corruption is also rather high in Latvia. In 2007 the country was ranked low with just 4, 8 out of 10 points<sup>2</sup> on the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index. Anything below 5 is seen to be a critical value. The election of the President Valdis Zatlers is a good example how the policy system works. Zatlers, known for accepting private "donations" from his patients and with little public acknowledgement, was nevertheless elected by the Saeima (the Parliament) to become the President in July 8, 2007. Before the next change in power (April 2008) was brought in by the dismissal of the head of the Anti-corruption Agency Andrejs Loskutovs. It was the last incident that forced Prime Minister Aigars Kalvitis to withdraw from office but with Ivars Godmanis the next prime minister (until March 2009) things did not change much. The gap between the political elites and the society is still growing.

Therefore one of the challenges for the Latvian democracy is the development of an active civil society, which is willing to take part and control in the political processes. As Alexis de Tocqueville already pointed out in his book "Democracy in America" (1835), participation of civil society is essential for democracy. He also favored the idea of the *independent associations* as the school of democracy to encourage civil behavior and developing democratic values like tolerance and solidarity. These *corps intermediaries*, as institutions of self-government, should be able to influence politics on all levels, especially on the local level.<sup>3</sup> In Latvia, rights of civil codetermination are laid down in the Satversme (the Constitution) and are specified by law but they were suppressed from the political and economical elite. This becomes clear by a statement from head of the National Security Council and one of the former

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<sup>1</sup> This text is the edited version of the Policy Paper the author wrote during his internship at the FES office in Riga / Latvia 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Cp. <http://www.transparency.org/content/download/23977/358251>

<sup>3</sup> Kratschmar Andreas / Marschitz Walter: Die Bürgergesellschaft: Stationen einer Idee; in Zeitschrift; 1999. [http://www.plattform.or.at/download/POP\\_Art\\_buergeridee.pdf](http://www.plattform.or.at/download/POP_Art_buergeridee.pdf) [30.04.08]

Prime Ministers, Indulis Emsis in 2006. He stated that non-governmental organizations should not be forbidden but they should keep out of political affairs otherwise they should transform themselves into political parties.<sup>4</sup> The aim of this paper is to spotlight the development of the civic participation in political decision making processes. Hereby the main focus is laid on the NGO sector. The paper is thought to give a small impression about the situation in Latvia. In order to do so it is subdivided in two main parts: a theoretical and an empirical part. In the second part I will try to evaluate the theoretical findings from the first part in terms: Does the law work? Which are the prioritie problems in the daily work of NGOs? Therefore guided interviews with representatives of the most active NGOs in Riga and Talsi have been made. It is not a number, which would be seen as representative for the Latvian NGO sector as such, but the selected areas are among the most significant for Latvian democratic development. These sectors are:

- Community Development
- Social inclusion
- Advocating gender issues
- Environment and sustainable development

Furthermore two of these NGOs are umbrella organizations, which represent up to 84 member groups. Despite of this small number, these seven NGOs picked-up here are able to give a fruitful insight into the Latvian NGO sector.

One very Latvian characteristic is kept aside: The big issue of the Russian-speaking so-called *non-citizens*. Although it is important for better understanding of the Latvian idiosyncrasy it can be addressed only briefly within the present context. Going more into detail would exceed the capacity of this paper, for more details about this topic see e.g. Inese Supule.

## **II. Civic Participation in Latvia**

Civic participation means that individuals, groups and organizations have the opportunity to get involved in decisions which will affect them or in which they have an interest in a meaningful way. It comprehends the involvement of individuals, who

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<sup>4</sup>Römpezyk, Elmar: Baltische Übergangsgesellschaften woher - wohin?; 2008; <http://www.elmar-global.com> [30.04.08]

choose to express their views, and collective actors, which are able to synthesize or aggregate shared messages. "Effective public participation requires that citizens be informed and knowledgeable about the topics being discussed. They must be willing and able to be involved, having the interest, the time, and the opportunity or access. Citizens must take responsibility for the quality of their participation and be accountable to each other for effective and efficient use of time and other resources."<sup>5</sup> To ensure this, the citizens must have a secure basis provided by the state, like laws which guarantee certain rights and active support of civic participation. Therefore self-organized groups in a democratic society, which act between state and society, are part of civic participation. These groups are characterized as "relatively independent from public authorities and firms and families; they are capable of deliberating and taking collective actions in defense or promotion of their interests or passions; they do not seek to replace either state agents or private (re) producers or to accept responsibility for governing the polity as a whole; and they agree to act within pre-established rules of a "civil" nature, that is, conveying mutual respect."<sup>6</sup> It is true that public participation in the decision-making process does not necessarily lead to a better policy outcome it but it can lead booth to a better understanding of politics and needs of the people. In this chapter I try to analyze the progress the Latvian civil society have made and which problems it still faces after 18 years of independence. Which ways and instruments can be used and are used to take part in the decision-making-process? The different opportunities to do so will be shortly discussed before the focus will lay on the NGOs as an important parts of the society.

## **II.1. Latvian Civil Society**

During the Russian occupation the sphere of civil society was strictly regulated. The existing organizations were installed and controlled by the authorities. As a result the public space, defined as the "citizens' private activities and networks", developed outside the state's domain. Families, friends and networks placed themselves outside of

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<sup>5</sup> Smith, Bruce L.: Public Policy and Public Participation: Engaging Citizens and Community in the Development of Public Policy; Produced for the Population and Public Health Branch, Atlantic Regional Office, Health Canada; 2003; P.34.

<sup>6</sup> Resteman, Olimpia: The Role of Civil Society in the Transparency of Local Governments; Warszawa 2007; [http://www.emes.net/fileadmin/emes/PDF\\_files/ISTR\\_EMES\\_Paris/PS\\_3/PS3\\_S1/PS\\_3\\_S1d\\_ISTR-EMES\\_Resteman.pdf](http://www.emes.net/fileadmin/emes/PDF_files/ISTR_EMES_Paris/PS_3/PS3_S1/PS_3_S1d_ISTR-EMES_Resteman.pdf). [25.04.08].

the realm and often in opposition to the socialist state."<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, certain abilities and freedoms to live parallel to the political structures define the civil society in these days. This 'parallel society', as such, was rooted in an 'anti-political' approach to the system in place and was driven by an 'us-versus-them' attitude, where civil society took the higher moral ground."<sup>8</sup> In 2004, a study on the development of civil society in Latvia pointed out that specific leaders are very important for the organized civil society. Furthermore, "the existence of activities depends on having a leader"<sup>9</sup> These leaders take the initiative. They have the power of persuasion and are highly involved in public issues. This need for somebody who makes the first step has not change much till 2007. In a focus group discussion on political culture the representatives' of all social classes still see the "necessity to have a leader to lead the society."<sup>10</sup>

This attitudes leads to one of the main problems the society has to deal with until today, the negative view towards the functioning of democracy. The other main issue, which will be described in a short excurses, is the exclusion of the big group of Russian speaking non-citizens in the Latvian society.

### **II.1.1. Attitudes towards Democracy**

After 18 years of democracy the improvement of the human rights situation, the freedom of self-expression, the open access to information, the freedom to travel, to work aboard and other personal liberties are seen commonly as positive changes. On the other hand people charge democracy for the lack of professionalism, transparency and political responsibility in the ruling elite as well as for the unjust distribution of resources and the over-bureaucratization.<sup>11</sup>

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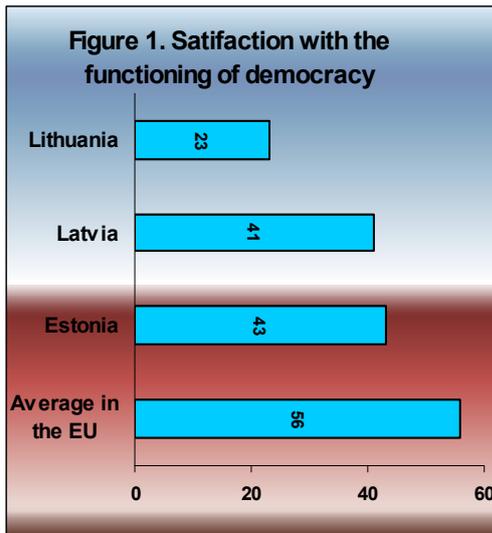
<sup>7</sup> CBSS Working Group on Democratic Institutions under the Swedish Chairmanship 2005-2006: Study on Citizens' Participation in the Baltic Sea region by the Presented at the 6th Baltic Sea States Summit in Reykjavik 2006.; P.7.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. P.8.

<sup>9</sup> Vilka Inga / Strupiss Aigars: The development of civil society in Latvia An analysis; Secretariat of the Minister for Special Assignments for Society Integration Affairs; Riga; 2004;P. 8. <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/data/file/e/mso35b.pdf> [25.04.08]

<sup>10</sup> Ostrovska Ilze: Political Culture and Legitimation of Democracy in Latvia - differentiation among population; SPK-Europe; Riga; 2007; P.4.

<sup>11</sup> Cp. ibid. P.3.



Source: Eurobarometer April 2006

This is linked with the perception of politics as "dirty, corrupted, estranged and connected with scandals concerning money and power", and politics is lobbying, "political crises [and] fight for power."<sup>12</sup> All this cumulates into a low rate of satisfaction with the functioning of the democratic system (41% in 2006) in the population. Although dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy is quite common in Europe, this value is clearly below the average of the EU (56%) but still higher than in the neighboring country Lithuania (23%).

"Democracy is not just democratic institutions and procedures; democracy cannot function effectively if it is not rooted in public confidence. In other words, democracy cannot live without democrats."<sup>13</sup> But, it is not so dramatic as it might seem according to the Life in Transition Survey (LiTS) democracy is generally accepted in all age groups and classes of population, although the highest support is among the youth (18-34) with 61% and the lowest support is detected in the middle class with only approximately 45%. The findings of LiTS show as well that the people of Latvia have not lost their faith in the *new* political system, only 15% would prefer to have back the autocratic regime.<sup>14</sup>

### II.1.2. Non-Citizens

"A high level of ethno cultural fragmentation [is] believed to be one of the most important factors capable of cumbering the society's democratization process. [...] Unfortunately, during the years of the restored independence the issues of ethno politics have not become the subject of widespread discussion in the society, nor at the level of

<sup>12</sup> Ostrovska Ilze; [l.c. Reference 10]; P. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Rozenvalds, Juris: Democracy: Problems and Perspectives; in How democratic is Latvia? Audit of Democracy; University of Latvia; Riga 2005; P. 14.

<sup>14</sup> Cp. Life in Transition: A survey of people's experiences and attitudes; European Bank for Reconstruction and Development; 2007; <http://www.ebrd.com/pubs/econo/lit.htm> [07.05.08]; P. 58.

political elite."<sup>15</sup> The situation in Latvia (2008) is the following: Out of 2 276 282 inhabitants are 372 421 so-called non-citizens.<sup>16</sup> This means 16, 4% of the population are not citizens of Latvia or any other country. They have, in accordance with the Latvian law "**Regarding the status of citizens of the former USSR who possess neither Latvian nor other citizenship**", the right to a non-citizen passport issued by the Latvian government. They also are granted permanent residence in Latvia and are allowed to travel without visa within the EU. But they are not allowed to vote - not even the local level or in referenda<sup>17</sup> and they also have no right to be founder or member of a political party. The non-citizens are mostly persons who migrated to Latvia during the period of the Russian occupations until 1990 or their descendants. This migration, promoted by the central committee of the UDSSR, nearly transformed the Latvians into a minority in their own country. This and the fact that Latvia's independence was re-activated and all laws adopted between 1918 and 1939 as well as the Constitution of 1922 were reinstated into force lead to a rather strict **Law on Citizenship**. Only persons who were born before 1940 in territory of Latvian or their offspring achieved citizenship automatically. All others have to pass tests in Latvian language, history, the constitution and know the lyrics of the Latvian anthem, even if they were born in Latvia and have lived there for centuries.<sup>18</sup>

Children born to non-citizens after the independence are entitled to Latvian Citizenship automatically. At the beginning of 2004 this right has not been used much: Only 1312 children have been registered as citizens of Latvia though at the same time 17023 children remained non-citizens. In 12 years 128 286 people were naturalized. Naturalization rates have reached their peak in 2005 and since then, they have constantly decreased. This decrease is partly due to the difficult tests and disinterest. Many of the Russian-speaking non-citizens, who have lived in Latvia for decades, refuse to naturalize in order to protest against the rules. Consequently, 27% of the non-citizens are beyond the age of 60.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Rozenvalds, Juris; [l.c. Reference 13]; P. 15.

<sup>16</sup> The Naturalization Board of the Republic of Latvia;  
<http://www.np.gov.lv/index.php?id=469&top=469> [08.05.08]

<sup>17</sup> Cp. The law of citizenship; [http://www.np.gov.lv/en/faili\\_en/The\\_law\\_of\\_citizenship.pdf](http://www.np.gov.lv/en/faili_en/The_law_of_citizenship.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Cp. Supule, Inese: Active Civic Participation of Immigrants in Latvia; Country Report prepared for the European research project POLITIS; Oldenburg; 2005;P. 9; <http://www.uni-oldenburg.de/politis-europe/download/Latvia.pdf> [22.05.08]

<sup>19</sup> All numbers are taken from Information on naturalization process (January 1, 1995 - March 31, 2008); [http://www.np.gov.lv/en/faili\\_en/naturalizacija\\_eng.pdf](http://www.np.gov.lv/en/faili_en/naturalizacija_eng.pdf).

During the last years big effort has been made to encourage noncitizens to become citizens of Latvia. The naturalization process has been simplified several times e.g. in 1998 the law on Citizenship was liberalized after a referendum. Besides this the Latvian state established the Secretariat of the Minister for Special Assignments for Society Integration Affairs, due to this the situation of the minority organizations increased, e.g. they have more opportunities to be supported than other organizations have.<sup>20</sup>

The slow naturalization process divided the society in two parts and brought up two different problems for the civil society. For the Latvians the main problem is social justice but for the non-citizens is it political equality. It is believed that due to the division of the society there is a lack of a critical mass to influence anything in political decisions.<sup>21</sup> In the focus groups survey on the political culture, the state was blamed to have no interest in the civil society. The democratic rights and values were only introduced because of the EU but they just function as if, the freedom of speech is worthless because it has no effect on decisions. On the other hand the survey showed also that non-citizens have no proposals to improve the situation and considered it as a duty of the government to strengthen society.<sup>22</sup>

To improve the situation it is necessary that there are no political privileges for any ethnic group and all the population groups can keep their identity, culture and language. "A multicultural democracy may function effectively only when the members of society - regardless their origin - are sufficiently united with the regard to the basic principles, rules and means of communication of the public sphere, there is a quite high degree of mutual tolerance and trust and a common language of the public sphere is given one of the central spots in the functioning of the public sphere."<sup>23</sup>

## II. 2. Forms of Participation in Latvia

For the development and strengthening of democracy "the involvement of civil society in political processes [is] vital. Participation at *different levels of society* is the key to build a dynamic democracy."<sup>24</sup> There are many possibilities to participate in a

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<sup>20</sup> Cp. Šūpule, Inese: [l.c. reference 18]; P. 4.

<sup>21</sup> Cp. Ostrovska Ilze; [l.c. preference 10]; P.47f.

<sup>22</sup> Cp. ibid P.12 - 39.

<sup>23</sup> Rozenvalds, Juris; [l.c. Reference 13]; P. 16.

<sup>24</sup> CBSS Working Group; [l.c. preference 7]; P 22.

democracy, which can be differentiated in two groups either conventional or unconventional. The conventional options include voting, use the rights given by law and join a political party or a NGO. Unconventional acts of participation are e.g. demonstrations and boycotts.

### **II.2.1. Conventional acts of Participation**

The right to participate is a constitutional right laid down in the articles 100 to 104 in the Satversme. These rights are the following: The freedom of speech, which includes the right to freely receive, keep and distribute information; the freedom of assembly; the freedom of association. It is also regulated by law that **every citizen** of Latvia can participate in state or local government representation. **Everyone** has the right to address submissions to state or local government institutions and to receive a materially responsive reply.<sup>25</sup>

#### **II.2.1.1. Legal Framework**

The most important right to participate is the right to vote. According to the **electoral law** in Latvia every citizen at the age of 18 has the right to vote or to be elected. On the level of local governmental elections, the right to vote is a burning issue for non-citizens who had lived in Latvia for a certain time. Since 2005, citizens of the EU, living in Latvia, have the right to take part in elections on local level, but the big group of the Russian speaking non-citizens still is denied the right to vote.<sup>26</sup>

The law **On Information Accessibility** and the law **On Local Government** specify the basic right of free access to information. The Law on Information Accessibility regulates the procedure for physical or legal persons to acquire information within state administrative and local government institutions and the use of it.<sup>27</sup> The law on Local Government stipulates the right of the residents of an administrative territory to participate in city and district council meetings. The meetings of the council must be held in rooms with the opportunity to host residents, representatives of the media as

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<sup>25</sup> The Constitution of the Republic of Latvia;

[http://www.saeima.lv/Likumdosana\\_eng/likumdosana\\_satversme.html](http://www.saeima.lv/Likumdosana_eng/likumdosana_satversme.html); [28.04.2008].

<sup>26</sup> Cp. Jansone, Dace/Vilka, Inga: Government Responsiveness; in How democratic is Latvia? Audit of Democracy; University of Latvia; Riga 2005; P. 162.

<sup>27</sup> Law on Information Accessibility; <http://www.humanrights.lv/doc/latlik/info.htm>; [28.04.2008].

well as officials of local and district institutions. The public has the right of open access to any decision of the council or auditing commission and minutes of open council meetings. This law also regulates the duty of the local governments to supply information. There must be an annual publication, which gives an overview about the activities and the financial situation of the municipal or district.<sup>28</sup>

There is not only the right of information, but also the right for every individual and legal person to hand in proposals, petition and complaints to the national and local government and to receive an answer. Meetings must be held on a regular basis, at least once a month, with the representatives of the local government and the residents in a time convenient for them. This is specified in the law **Procedure of Reviewing Applications, Complaints and Suggestions in National and Local Government Institutions**. There is also an obligation for each deputy of a local government to organize meetings with the inhabitants at least once in two months.<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, the law of Latvia provides public discussion as a tool to integrate the people in the decisions-making process. A public discussion is obligatory in cases of the creation of a territorial plan (**Territorial Planning Law**) or in certain cases of public works, "if a publicly significant building is to be built; [...] a planned building or reconstruction exceed 50.000 LVL; the construction has a significant impact on the environmental situation, the living standards of the population or the real estate value; the construction is intended on a public used territory"<sup>30</sup> (**Construction Law**). The law **On Local Governments** allows the creation of boards, commissions or working groups in order to carry out certain duties or to manage the administrative territory, which includes members of the locale government council and the residents. They act according to the statues decreed by the council. "In accordance with the **Public Agencies Law**, consultative councils may create under the auspices of national or local government agencies. Depending on the agency specifics, these consultative councils may include national and local government representative, experts of respective fields and representatives of NGOs. [...] The consultative council has advisory rights on issues of public agency activities."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> The Law on Local Government;  
[www.ttc.lv/index.php?&id=10&tid=59&l=LV&seid=down&itid=13757](http://www.ttc.lv/index.php?&id=10&tid=59&l=LV&seid=down&itid=13757) [28.04.2008].

<sup>29</sup> Cp. Jansone, Dace/Vilka, Inga: [l.c. Reference 26]; P. 163.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. P. 164.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

According to the former State Secretary Ilze Kukute "public hearings are efficient instruments for public involvement in resolving public administration issues. Such efficiency is strengthened by two provisions of the law: firstly, organization of the public hearings is not the right of institutions, but an obligation, and secondly, the results of the public hearings cannot be ignored."<sup>32</sup> As we can see there are laws, which ensure participation rights for citizens as individuals or organized in groups at least formally.

### II.2.1.2. Non-Governmental Organizations

"NGOs have an extremely important role in shaping civil society and political democracy, generally speaking in reorganizing social structure in providing welfare services and restructuring the economy."<sup>33</sup> Through them, the public can be involved into the local and national decision making processes.

In Latvia emerged until 2003 about 7.704 social organizations. The usual definition of NGOs is based on Voluntariness and the non-profit principles but until 2004 there was no precise definition and no criteria to outline NGOs in Latvia. During this time "public organizations [state or local government institutions] and private not-for-profit organizations were considered to be non-governmental organizations."<sup>34</sup> After the adoption the law **On Associations and Foundations** (AFL) and the Law **On Public Benefit Organizations** the NGOs are now clearly defined and differentiated from political parties, but "there is no unified classification for non-governmental, including public organizations based on: the substance or area of their work."<sup>35</sup> NGOs are registered in the register of enterprises maintained by the Ministry of Justice.

After the AFL entered force the registration fee dropped from 25 LVL to 8 LVL. There are no fees "for organizations working on behalf of orphans and disabled persons, and for organizations working in the field of sport for young persons. The new law stipulates

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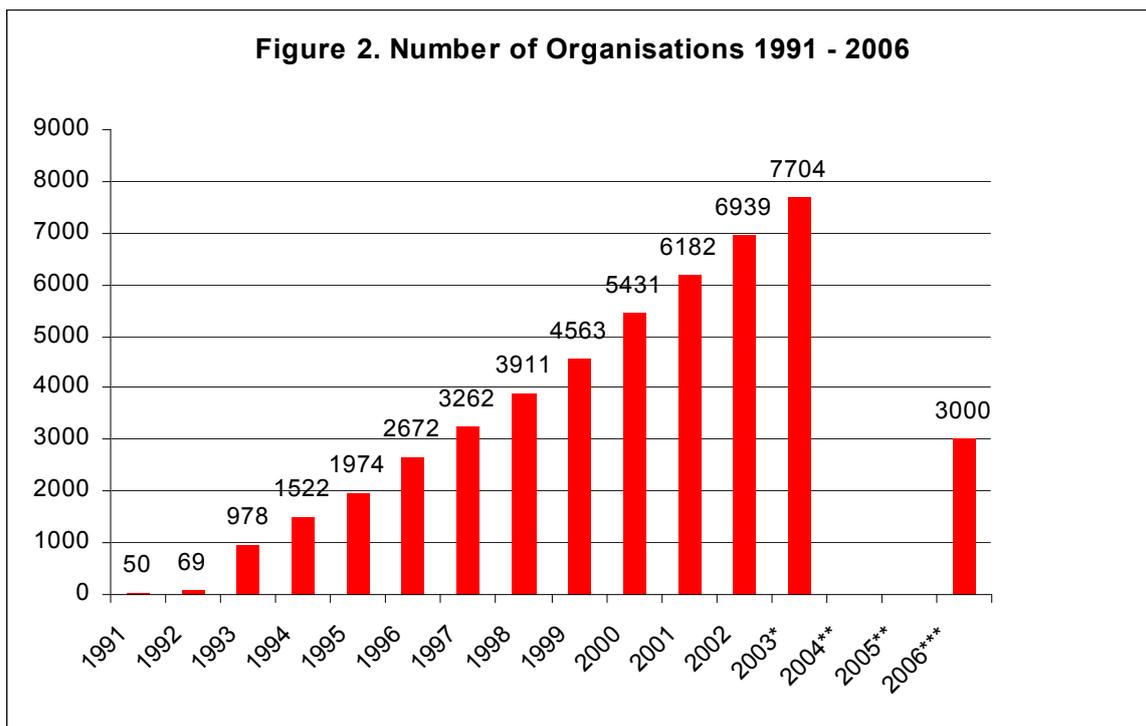
<sup>32</sup> Kukute, Ilze: The Ministry of regional development and local government democracy development in Latvia - local government reform and citizen participation in local public life; [http://www.raplm.gov.lv/lat/informacija/Presei/arhivs/2004.\\_gads/julijis/?doc=507](http://www.raplm.gov.lv/lat/informacija/Presei/arhivs/2004._gads/julijis/?doc=507)

<sup>33</sup> Resteman, Olimpia: [l.c. Reference 6]; P. 5.

<sup>34</sup> Vilka Inga / Strupiss Aigars: [l.c. Reference 9]; P. 19.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. P. 22.

that an organization must re-register every 2 years."<sup>36</sup> The already existing organizations had to re-register as well. The timeframe for re-registration had been set to the 31 December 2005. In 2006 only about 3000 organizations have been re-registered, despite of the ones which had not registered due to a lack of information or some other technical reason, this number shows according to Alex Reetz the real number of the active NGOs in Latvia.<sup>37</sup>



Source own representation based on:

\* Vilka Inga / Štrupiss Aigars: The development of civil society in Latvia An analysis; Secretariat of the Minister for Special Assignments for Society Integration Affairs; Riga; 2004 P. 19.

\*\* No data available.

\*\*\* Reetz Axel: Aktuelle Probleme postsozialistischer Länder – Das Beispiel Lettland; Verlag Wilhelm Surbir; Wittenbach/SG; 2007;

"The general profile of a Latvian non-governmental organization is as follows: it is a new (exists less than 4 years), small (under 50 members), small budget (annual budget not exceeding LVL 1000) organization, whose activity relates to dealing with educational and social issues, or it acts as a youth support organization. According to the [study "NGO sector in Latvia 2000/ 2001"] the majority of NGOs enlist from 10 to 30

<sup>36</sup> Ojala, Outi: The NGO Legislation in the Countries in the Baltic Sea Region - A survey with recommendations; in Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference Rapporteur 2004; P.17. [http://www.norden.org/nr/moten/sk/NGO\\_legislation\\_report.pdf](http://www.norden.org/nr/moten/sk/NGO_legislation_report.pdf). [16.05.2008]

<sup>37</sup> CP. Axel Reetz: Aktuelle Probleme postsozialistischer Länder - Das Beispiel Lettland; Verlag Wilhelm Surbir; Wittenbach/SG; 2007; P. 90.

members."<sup>38</sup> 14% of the NGOs have less than 10 members and only 4% have more than 500 members. These data show that there are only a few large organizations. In 2001 the active people were mostly involved (36%) in trade unions followed by sports clubs (21%), cultural societies (15%), local action groups (10%) and environmental movements (5%).<sup>39</sup> In 2006 about 20%<sup>40</sup> of all inhabitants were members of an organization including churches, religious organizations and political parties. All in all 26% of the Latvian citizens are organized.

The opportunities for NGOs to take part in the decision-making processes are: Attending in consultative boards; Getting in touch with decision makers by writing letters and/or organizing meetings; Co-operating with the authority; Joining in work groups; Participating in weekly meetings of State Secretaries of ministries; Being involved in public discussions organized by state institutions; Starting own campaigns.<sup>41</sup>

### **II.2.2. Unconventional acts of Participation**

Alongside the formal ways of participation there is also a growing use of the so-called unconventional acts of participation. Since 1998 an increase of protest activity of dissatisfied groups can be noted. In May 2000 the farmer used an international meeting of the European Bank to call attention to their situation by organizing pickets in Riga and blocking two border stations. Due to the protest the officials in charge of agricultural policy were willing to talk. These negotiations have been partly successful for the farmers'.<sup>42</sup> Another good example for the growing acceptance of this tool of influencing policy is the so-called "Lietussargu revolucija" (umbrella revolution) in autumn 2007. It was the biggest demonstration in Riga and Latvia since the independence in 1991. The demonstration was caused by various scandals of the political elite and led to a referendum to amend the constitution with the aim to make it

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<sup>38</sup> Cp. Supule, Inese: [l.c. reference 18]; P. 25.

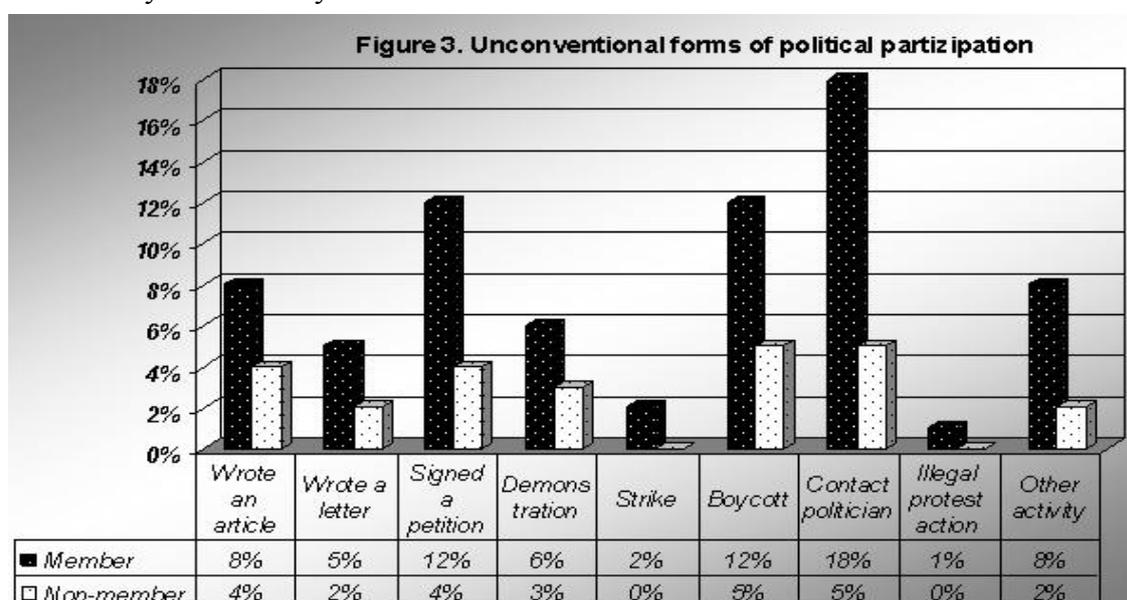
<sup>39</sup> Ozolina, Inese: Associational Membership and its Impact on Attitudes and Behaviour of People in the Baltic States - Does associational membership promote development of "social capital" in the Baltic States? A Comparative analysis. 2001; Table 1; [http://www.bszi.lv/downloads/publications/assoc\\_membership.pdf](http://www.bszi.lv/downloads/publications/assoc_membership.pdf) [22.05.08].

<sup>40</sup> Compare with the Scandinavian countries around 90%, Poland 60 % Estonia 50%, Lithuania 30% and Russia around 20%. CBSS Working Group; [l.c. preference 7]; P. 40.

<sup>41</sup> Ojala, Outi: [l.c. Reference 36].

<sup>42</sup> Karklins, Rasma/Zepa, Brigita: Political participation in Latvia 1987 - 2001 in "Journal of Baltic Studies"; Vol. 3; No. 42; 2001; P. 341 [http://www.bszi.lv/downloads/publications/polit\\_participation.pdf](http://www.bszi.lv/downloads/publications/polit_participation.pdf) [22.05.08].

possible for the people to initiate the dissolution of Parliament. From the 12th of March to the 10th of April the initiative lead by LBAS, a trade unions association, collected round about 213 000 votes in favor of the amendments. These are 63 936 votes more than needed.<sup>43</sup> This success is an important milestone for the civil society. In the last years could also be stated that the Russian speaking minorities increased their activities by starting different street protest actions. In 2000 some Russian-speaking NGOs organized collective protests against the language policy implemented by the state. Another proof of the increasing use of unconventional acts of participation is the number of protest actions by minority representatives against the changes planned for the minority education system in 2004.<sup>44</sup>



Source own representation based on: Ozoliņa, Inese: Associational membership and its impact on attitudes and behaviour of people in the Baltic States - Does associational membership promote development of “social capital” in the Baltic States? A Comparative analysis; 2001. [http://www.bszi.lv/downloads/publications/assoc\\_membership.pdf](http://www.bszi.lv/downloads/publications/assoc_membership.pdf) [22.05.08] Table 7 and 8.

The Latvian society as a whole has begun to use protests and the initiation of referenda to draw attention to their causes, with some success. "This suggests that Latvia has entered a new phase of political participation where the citizenry explores new ways to make itself heard."<sup>45</sup> These "new ways" including writhing articles and letters to the editor, signing petitions, go on strike, boycotting certain products and taking part in illegal forms of protest. Biggest push now initiated through the nearly lethal financial,

<sup>43</sup> Cp. <http://lettonica.blogspot.com/2008/04/referendum-ra-ra.html>

<sup>44</sup> Cp. Supule, Inese: [l.c. reference 18]; P. 5.

<sup>45</sup> Karklins, Rasma/Zepa, Brigita: [l.c. Reference 42]P. 341f.

economic and hence social crisis, which affects deeply all big player, but cuts very deep into the political and social structure of Latvia's state and society. Civil Society could not but show its enormous anxiety and frustration and fear for the future. This fear erupted in January 2009 in one of the biggest protest ever seen in downtown Riga.<sup>46</sup>

In general it can be said that, "in the Baltic countries [...] the tendency to become involved in organizations is not yet a main interest or influential channel for most people, unconventional means of participating can be way to make a statement here and now. [...] To sign a petition and take part in a demonstration requires one's participation the exact minute or the hour the activity is carried out. [...] Likewise, boycotting certain goods is an activity that is carried in one's private sphere. Making use of unconventional means of participation thus indicates that the lower level of participation in organizations [...] does not reflect, per se an attitude of indifference."<sup>47</sup>

## II.2.3 Obstacles for Participation

The obstacles on the way to more active participation of the civil society are not only the general attitude towards the functioning of democracy or the split of the society in two groups mentioned above. There are also more concrete problems blocking the road forwards to more citizens' participation. These obstacles can be subdivided in two groups: First the problems on the level of the individual. What detain people from taking part in the civil society actively? And second there are the difficulties NGOs have to deal with.

### II.2.3.1 Problems on the Individual Level

The Study development of civil society in Latvia (2004) by Secretariat of the Minister for Special Assignments for Society Integration Affairs gave the following answers to the question: Why aren't people more active in formal and informal social networks?

The most important reason is the **economic situation**: the level of income is low, especially for rural residents. People are busy making a living and do not have time to engage themselves for free. The research showed a general attitude that quite a lot

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<sup>46</sup> Cp. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7827708.stm> [06.12.2010]

<sup>47</sup> CBSS Working Group; [l.c. preference 7]; P. 44.

"people do not believe that it is worth doing anything unless it brings a profit."<sup>48</sup> Furthermore they do not believe that they can achieve a success only with social commitment and without a lot of money. The economic crisis in January 2009 changed this attitude for a moment, because the general population was deeply hurt so that even clashes with police forces were no longer rejected.<sup>49</sup>

**A lack of information** about NGOs was also identified in this study. However, the information gap is closing. In 2004 the number of people who know quite a lot or a great deal about NGOs doubled to 12% compared to 1998 and only 26% admit they know nothing about NGOs instead of 44%.<sup>50</sup>

Another main reason is the **lack of education**. Latvian` schools are not teaching to think critically and analytically. Mostly opinions are not formed by selected information out of different sources. The people still "prefer to listen to authority figures."<sup>51</sup>

Furthermore the **communication skills** are poorly developed by most of the people. They form an opinion about somebody on stories they have heard but they "are afraid of approaching one another."<sup>52</sup> This comes in addition with **personality traits** like "inertia, unwillingness, close-mindedness, introversion, not wanting to admit that they have problems."<sup>53</sup> Other reasons are that they are afraid of being rejected and misunderstood and also the "fear of the unknown, laziness or a lack of initiative."<sup>54</sup> These attitudes were complemented by **negative experiences**. They may have tried to be socially active, but failed to improve something. This negative result let them think participation is only waste of and come to the conclusion „it's easier to be a bystander and to criticize others than to assume responsibility." This is also linked with the "**inherited Soviet tendency** to rely on others" and leads to the development of a "consumer mentality"<sup>55</sup> by city inhabitants. Due to the history of the country there is a **lack of tradition** of being involved in NGOs. The generations who have experienced the Soviet occupation

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<sup>48</sup> Cp. Vilka Inga / Strupiss Aigars: [l.c. Reference 9] P. 9.

<sup>49</sup> Cp. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7827708.stm> [06.12.2010]

<sup>50</sup> Cp. Vilka Inga / Strupiss Aigars: [l.c. Reference 9] P. 9ff.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Supule, Inese: [l.c. reference 19] P. 9.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. P. 10.

have bad memories about formal organizations and the younger people want to enjoy their freedom instead of dealing with bureaucracy.<sup>56</sup>

### **II.2.3.2. Problems for Non Governmental Organizations**

As already mentioned, above NGOs in Latvia are rather weak in terms of membership and financial resources and capacities. Due to the lack of resources the administrative capacity of NGOs is also rather weak. Around 70% of NGOs do not have paid staff 14% claim to have one and 10% declare they have 2-3 paid staff members.<sup>57</sup> A long-term viability for only 10% of the NGOs is predicted. Inga Vilka and Aigars Strupiss described the financial condition of the NGO sector the following way "there's a lot of attrition, three out of ten organizations founded over a three-year period will survive. One reason for this is that NGOs are established to get money - if you write project proposals, you'll get money. Another reason is that local governments cannot apply for funding reserved for NGOs, so they secretly set up their own NGOs. When the money or chance of funding disappears, the organization collapses. Another factor is that people lack professional skills and don't really know what to do."<sup>58</sup> The NGOs activists lack the most on following training skills: fund raising, strategic planning, project management skills, and networking and cooperation.<sup>59</sup> Although the most NGOs work within their self set goals, only a few have a long-term strategy of action. In order to survive they often adjust their goals to funding possibilities. In 2005 a national program to strengthen civil society has started. This program tries to improve the situation in the course of this five NGO support centers and three smaller support units, were installed and providing grants to NGO projects. But the major difficulty to the effectiveness of this program is that the State's budget is planned annually and that the State budget does not allow multi-year financial commitments. So there is no planning reliability for projects, which are designed for a longer period than one year<sup>60</sup> - which is recommendable for social, environmental activities and most others.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Cp. Supule, Inese: [l.c. reference 19] P. 4.

<sup>58</sup> Vilka Inga / Strupiss Aigars: [l.c. Reference 9]; P.50.

<sup>59</sup> Cp. <http://www.rec.org/REC/Publications/NGODirIntros/Latvia.html>.

<sup>60</sup> Cp. The 2006 NGO sustainability index;  
[http://www.usaid.gov/locations/europe\\_eurasia/dem\\_gov/ngoindex/2006/latvia.pdf](http://www.usaid.gov/locations/europe_eurasia/dem_gov/ngoindex/2006/latvia.pdf)

Besides the financial problems the brain drain of Latvia did not leave the NGOs untouched. The opening of the Labor Market in certain EU member states like Ireland and Great Britain fostered the emigration of highly qualified and motivated workers and with them potential activists left the country and they did not automatically return when the global financial crisis started in 2008. To sum up the financial and human resources and capacities of NGOs tend to be limited, therefore their potential to activate social groups of the society is marginal.

### **II.3. Summary**

Latvia enacted several laws to strengthen the development of the civil society. Unfortunately, the majority of the Latvian population does not use these rights. They neither have taken part in the decision-making process by themselves nor participated in NGOs. If they do take part in any organization they mostly deal with sport, culture or youth but hardly with political issues. As figure 3 indicates people who are engaged in organizations are more active in the use of unconventional acts of participation as well. The motivation to look for direct contact with political decision makers is nearly four times higher (18%) among NGO-members than among non-members (5%). In Latvia (2005) it was a widespread opinion that public participation in the decision-making process often leads to unpleasant conflicts (64%) and more than one of two citizens (58%)<sup>61</sup> believed that the majority of the decisions should be left to experts. Moreover "43 % of the leaders believe that public participation is not necessary, if the decision-making is in the hand of a few trustworthy and competent leaders."<sup>62</sup> This result shows that, the attitude toward NGOs shown by Mr. Indulis Emsis is not an isolated case in the political elite or even in the society.

The use of the right to attend meetings or discussions with the authorities is not easy for NGO representatives, because most of the NGOs work on voluntary bases, they lack on financial resources and time. This makes it hard to prepare projects, studies or draft laws.<sup>63</sup> On the other hand there are no significant institutional barriers to the development of a civil society. It is easy to establish a NGO and there is already a great variety of NGOs. In order to extend opportunities for initiative a NGO center in Riga

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<sup>61</sup> Jansone, Dace/Vilka, Inga; [l.c. Reference 26] P. 167.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Cp. Ojala, Outi; [l.c. Reference 36]; P.40.

and regional support networks were installed. They provide information and services free of charge or for a minimal fee. However their existence is still dependent on foreign donors and project funding.<sup>64</sup>

### **III. NGO activities**

After the theoretical discussion of the opportunities and the problems of the civil society this chapter will try to draw a snapshot about the daily activities of Latvian NGOs. Which problems are the burning issues? Do the laws work which has been enforced to foster the public sector? For that reason seven guided interviews were made with selected NGOs from different fields of activities: a Neighborhood association; an umbrella organizations for women NGOs and women issues; an umbrella organization for all kind of NGOs; a youth organization; an environmental group, a short-time social movement and an international partnership center. The interviews focused on the visions for the future, the possibilities of participation in decision-making processes, the public and political support, public relations and financial resources.

#### **III.1. Examples of NGOs**

##### **III.1.1. Mezaparka Attīstības biedrība<sup>65</sup>**

Mezaparks Develop Association (MAB) was founded in 1979 and was one of the first neighborhoods associations in Latvia and represents a specific geographic location. In 1977 the founding process started with a conference organized by a local activist. More and more "people joined who thought it is really important to make an organization for the future development and not only for protection." So the main aim of MAB is to develop and protect one of the first and more than 100 years old and garden-city-neighborhood in Europe with its outstanding historical and architectural landmark. To strengthen the community MAB organizes street activities together with non-members regularly. Nowadays they are around 70 members, who are entitled to elect a management council consisting of seven members every year. The association work

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<sup>64</sup> Vilka Inga / Strupiss Aigars; [l.c. Reference 9]; P.52.

<sup>65</sup> This chapter is based on an Interview with Christine Arbolina and Andis Sinanz 2008.06.25.

completely on voluntary basis, excepted for sometimes the hire people for projects. The concept of the MAB is to integrate as much resistance as possible in the activities. But they do not "make special action to increase the number of members. The only thing what [they] did intentionally was to put an advertisement in [their] newspaper". This Newspaper, financed by the Riga city cultural fund, is edited regularly once or twice a year and is delivered to all residents in Mezaparks for free. This newspaper informs the residents about important issues concerning the neighborhood.

### **III.1.2. Latvijas Pilsoniska Alianse<sup>66</sup>**

Civic Alliance Latvia was founded in December 2004 and is an umbrella organization that combines more than 84 different NGOs and private members. It was created out of the need to have an organization that could negotiate with the government and public administration as a partner at eye level. CAL has seven employees; four of them normally lobbying there cause and the others are administrative staff and fund-raiser. The goal of CAL is to improve legal and financial environment and strengthen capacity of the NGOs for efficient lobbying. CAL lobbies the interests of the NGO sector, identifies and tries to resolve problems, supports and fosters the participation incentives on NGOs in the decision making process and represents the interests in collaboration with public authorities. CAL provides information for their members about topics like EU issues, legislation, funding, education, motivation and engagement and also carries out research initiatives. CAL has established a co-operation with the Secretariat of the Special Assignments Minister for Society Integration to start the resources center for Riga and surrounding area. The aim of this support center is: Foster and strengthen co-operation with the local governments, state institutions and other NGOs, to organizes training and seminars on current NGO issues, to provides access to literature and to offer technical support.

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<sup>66</sup> This chapter is based on an Interview with Inda Simanzka 2008.06.25 and on information from <http://www.nvo.lv>.

### **III.1.3. Resursu Centrs Sievietem "Marta"<sup>67</sup>**

The Resource Center for Women "Marta" was founded with money from the European Commission, in cooperation with women NGOs in Latvian, Swedish women association and Marta in Finland in 2000. It is by now one of the biggest NGOs in Latvia. Marta is also the leading organization of the Women's NGO Network of Latvia and holds its secretariat. This Network was founded in 2003 and consists of 52 women's organizations.

The Resource Center employs 13 people (lawyers, psychologists, social workers etc.) who are working almost fulltime (90 %) and volunteers from Latvia and abroad like Finland, USA and GB. They also work with external specialist. Both individuals and around 30 women NGOs are members of Marta. They provide services for women do Lobbying and research work. The mission of Marta is: To improve the situation in Latvian especially for women who are in a difficult living situations; to support low income and unemployed women; to promote gender equality; educating women about their rights; provide them with information and to protect the rights of women in Latvia.

### **III.1.4. Latvijas Zala kustiba<sup>68</sup>**

The Latvian Green Movement was founded 2004 by Janis Matulis and his colleagues, because of a disagreement about the activities in their former NGO "Friends of the Earth Latvia", in which they had been members since 1989. They wanted to improve the level of professionalism and work more politically by doing campaigns instead of practical activities like "going into the forest [for] informal environmental education." That is why they decided to found LaGM. They are active in the western part of Latvia in Kurzeme (Kurzeme province). Besides that LAGM run three branch-offices in the eastern part of Latgale, which is in the border area with Russia, and they do also activities in Riga. The main fields of activities are coastal protection campaigns ("Save Latvian Dunes"), reshaping energy policy towards renewables and international networking (mainly with Sweden and Germany). They have around 90 members but

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<sup>67</sup> This chapter is based on an Interview with Iluta Lace 2008.07.14 and on information from <http://www.marta.lv>.

<sup>68</sup> This chapter is based on an Interview with Janis Matulis 2008.07.18.

only two full paid staff. For maintenance, campaigning and environmental education activities LaGM receives financial support mostly from international donors like the Swedish SIDA or the German FES

### **III.1.5. IMKA <sup>69</sup>**

IMKA Latvia is the national branch of YMCA and was founded in 1999. It has seven regional branches in Riga, Salgale, Livani, Jaunsvirlauka, Sigulda, Tetele and Zenten. The centers outside Riga have up to 500 members but they are losing active members because most of them coming to Riga to study. IMKA Latvia started with traditional youth work, but there "is no youth policy in Latvia [and] no support for the organizations which are dealing with the youth." They are changing their program all the time according to the actual needs of young people and at moment (2008) they are busy working with socially excluded young people. Youth work is not there only field of interest they are also dealing gender issues. They are involved in Latvian women's organization network. Part of the daily work is consultation of organizations as well as lobbying. IMKA Latvia employs three people

### **III.1.6. Kreisa Karsta kustība<sup>70</sup>**

The "Left Riverside Movement" started in June 2006. The starting point for this social movement was a project called *Manhattan on Daugava*. It was a plan to build skyscrapers in Kipsala, a historical part of Riga and UNESCO World Heritage site. The public hearing for the project was set in summertime. The plan was done without impact analysis on the infrastructure and the public transportation system. "Nobody had thought about a sustainable development".

So basically the Left Riverside Movement started out of nothing and grew to an informal network for NGOs, which consisted out of 20 organizations and civic initiatives. It was coordinated students of the University of Latvia and students who went to England. The Movement was their first big project and they were eager to do something about Riga and "with the first successes, the people were moving faster and

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<sup>69</sup> This chapter is based on an Interview with Gunta Kelle 2008.07.23.

<sup>70</sup> This chapter is based on an Interview with Marcis Sakalovskis 2008.07.17.

better." The goals aside stopping Manhattan on Daugava were: To create a new dimension in the city decision-making processes by creating a network of NGOs, experts and advanced institutions interested in the development of Riga. Encourage the society to participate directly and indirectly in the cities decision-making processes. But after one and a half year when two of the founders returned to their studies in England, the movement fall apart.

### **III.1.7 EIROMAJA Starptautiskais sadarbības centrs<sup>71</sup>**

International Partnership Center "Eurohouse" is a public organization. It is financed 100 % by the municipalities in Talsi district. The Eurohouse was founded after a successful EU project in 2000. "The municipalities of Talsi started the organization because they needed it to write projects." The main idea of the organization is to inform municipalities about the EU and encourage them to present projects to get money for development. Another aim is to foster co-operation between municipalities in Latvia. So they mainly write projects for the municipalities to apply for EU money. They have a lot of projects partners from other countries and they do projects in the social field like life-long learning and youth work. Eurohouse employs two persons. In 2008 the existence was at risk because the municipality's regional conference wanted to decide, if they close down Eurohouse or not. It seems it was closed because the webpage cannot be found anymore (2010).

## **III.2 Participation in the Decision-making Process**

These NGOs use all ways of participation with different intensities of course. The main focus for CAL lays in negotiation with the government in the weekly state secretary meeting. In preparation of the meeting CAL informs its members about the topics and tries to find a common basis. Every year they make about 60 proposals for laws, which are "very often in the laws".<sup>72</sup> If a proposal is rejected they go on promoting it at the ministerial level. Furthermore there is a yearly NGO forum organized by CAL together with the parliament, to discussion different topics with parliamentarians and representatives of ministries. There should be one representative from each of each of

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<sup>71</sup> This chapter is based on an Interview with Aija Svarinska 2008.07.18.

<sup>72</sup> Inda Simanzka; [l.c. Reference 66].

the Latvian ministries but often only four appear. So there is an institutionalized negotiation system. Unfortunately it seems to be ignored more or less by most of the ministries. They discuss with ministries and parliamentary cooperation group in order to translate needs and demands of their focus groups into laws and regulations. Marta tried to develop a draft law to gender equality this way. In 2007 LaGM and other NGOs started to negotiations with the Ministry of Finances to create transparent criteria for regularly government funds. These negotiations turned out to be very difficult and no progress has been made in over two years.

Other means used to push decisions is to cooperate with monitory organizations like the ombudspersons, participate in workshops, and use the international networks and the open letters. Or they go to constitutional court. "If they don't change laws voluntarily then they have to take decisions from Constitutional Court or European Court of Justice into account."<sup>73</sup> The jurisdiction is used by MAB to sue Riga city council in order to stop privatization of the highly frequented inner-urban lake in Mezapark.

On the local level the LaGM mostly enforces decision about some problems by writing letters to official institution because they must respond in some way to letters. They also use pickets and demonstrations e.g. against the nuclear power plant Ignalina in Lithuania, collect and advice people to collect signatures for petitions and send them to the authority. These kinds of activities are supported by the other NGOs but mostly they do not use them actively. The Media is also an instrument to gain attention for the interested they represented and to put pressure on the authorities. According to MAB is an open letter a good method to do so if it is "done at the right time when the issue is hot."<sup>74</sup> On the one hand journalists already know whom to call when they recognize e.g. discrimination or need opinions about dunes or energy issues. Marta is represented in Latvian, Russian and European media. They also did two documentaries about human trafficking and domestic violence, which were shown in cinema and on national TV. The LaGM was present in some radio and TV reportages as well and has placed themselves in radio advertisements with well-known people addressing the society not to destroy the dunes and nature. Also the LSM was often in the news for Riga and they

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<sup>73</sup> Iluta Lace; [l.c. Reference 67].

<sup>74</sup> Christine Arbolina and Andis Sinanz [l.c. Reference 65].

believe that this has "[driven] the politicians to listen to [them] and to get involved more and more with [them]."<sup>75</sup>

On the other hand there are still problems to get attention from the media, because they are more interested when "somebody is killed or a bad accident happened"<sup>76</sup> like in other countries, too. The media is not interested in coming to conference held in Mezapark in a residency of an ambassador or to the international Baltic Sea NGO Forum. CAL and IMKA stated that it is easier to discuss and stress the roll of NGO as well as youth work in regional newspapers than in national ones. To foster and to develop the positive progress already made the NGOs had different strategies: organizing seminars for journalists or involving them in different studies and events. Not all of NGOs are doing intensive public relation work. CAL is mainly running their "Website where the statistics are rather high for a NGO but [they] doubts that this Website has change the view of many citizens."<sup>77</sup> IMKA does not want to spend resources and money because on the national level "the state knows what [they] are doing"<sup>78</sup>. To become more prominent in the mind of the people the local branches are doing more public relation.

### **III.3. Sources of Finance**

The financial sources of NGOs are funds from the government, the EU, Foundations from abroad, sponsors, donations and member fees.

There are funds in the Ministry of Environment and according to CAL also in the Ministry for Children and Families, the Secretariat of Social Integration with many programs for minority right. There is also a cultural fund available in Riga to finance e.g. cultural newspapers like the one from MAB. According to Iluta Lace the problem with the government funds is that they are not reliable because ministers are changing and with them the priorities. Second in times of economical crisis the government cuts on programs. But in 2007 there was 30 million LVL for sport clubs<sup>79</sup> but very little interest to support NGOs which activities aim for political and social change. Third there are no transparent criteria for the founding, once Marta was told form the "head of

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<sup>75</sup>Marcis Sakalovskis; [l.c. Reference 71].

<sup>76</sup> Janis Matulis [l.c. Reference 68].

<sup>77</sup> Inda Simanzka [l.c. Reference 66].

<sup>78</sup> Gunta Kelle [l.c. Reference 69].

<sup>79</sup> Cp. Iluta Lace[l.c. Reference 67].

finance committee in parliament in parliament there are 80 % men, we are not going to support an organization like yours.<sup>80</sup>

Due to the limited funds from the government, IMKA, CAL and Marta rely on money from the European commission projects and the EU social fund. But "many of the funds have gone to Russia, Kazakhstan and European money goes through Latvian government"<sup>81</sup> so the situation has become more difficult. Moreover for smaller NGOs with few employees the EU bureaucracy is to complicate and ties up a lot of time and resources. "Latvia had lost a lot of million just because of lacking the knowledge to fill out all these papers."<sup>82</sup> Alongside the EU there are other funding possibilities from abroad like the Baltic-American partnership program, the Nordic foundation, the Soros foundation, the FES and support from international networks in which the NGOs are involved.



Save Latvian Dunes is an example of a project, which is financed by various sources and done in cooperation with the media.

Sponsoring by companies is also a possibility for NGOs to get money for their activities but it depends very much on the economical situation.

Sponsoring is most of the time a donations for concrete projects but not for organization or to pay staff.<sup>83</sup> IMKA sometimes get e.g. a bank or an airline to support them. CAL remarked that the business world has changed a bit in the sense that it has become more social aware. CAL sees the reason of that change in the influence of the investments from Scandinavian countries and also Germany. Sponsoring is a delicate issue, especially when dealing with environmental topics. The LaGM also noticed a mentality change but not in the way Cal

<sup>80</sup> Iluta Lace [l.c. Reference 67].

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Janis Matulis; [l.c. Reference 68].

<sup>83</sup> Cp. Gunta Kelle; [l.c. Reference 69].

did. Business donators want now very good feedbacks. In the sense of "if I pay you, you neither don't touch me or you advertise me or my products everywhere."<sup>84</sup>

Private donations are the main source for the smaller and local NGOs like the MAB, which gets regular donations for street events and residents. "Donations are becoming more popular but they are more for social issues e.g. for a hospital for children than for [political] activity."<sup>85</sup> None of the interviewed NGO's could survive by member fees. To improve the financial situation they started some commercial activities like selling CDs with Latvian folk songs from a female perspective or selling expertise.

### **III.4. Achieved Success**

This chapter will be introducing some examples of successful actions. CAL managed to establish a memorandum among government and NGOs, which institutionalizes the meetings and was established in 2005 and is supervised by a council of NGOs and representatives of state institutions.

Marta took the government to court and the government was ruled to amend the law "On Social Benefits" to allow parents with small children below the age of one to work and receive childcare benefit at the same time. Or due to their open letter campaign the Riga airport was requested by the Minister of Transport to remove all huge posters with advertisement of striptease bars where the women on it were exposed. The LaGM managed to change the ranking system in the environment protection fund headed by the Minister of Environment. This is a special fund for environmental NGOs, but the criteria of the consultative council to rank the projects were not transparent. The consultative council consists of representatives from NGOs which select the projects in favor of each other and not because of the project quality. The financial council, lead by the minister, mostly takes the recommendation of the consultative council in account to finally approve the projects, more or less always without questioning the results. That is why the LaGM started a campaign to change the ranking system. They addressed the anticorruption office and the minister himself to complain about these things. Due to that they changed the score system to a system where the consultative council can only make three decisions: support; not to support; partly support. The minister now just sees

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<sup>84</sup> Janis Matulis; [l.c. Reference 68].

<sup>85</sup> Inda Simanzka; [l.c. Reference 67].

the general view of the council and needs to take a decision by his own. "The situation has improved. [...] But still [they] would wish to get it more transparent." <sup>86</sup>

They succeeded not only at the ministerial Level, but also in raising awareness about the dunes on the level of the ordinary people. The "majority has started to understand that the dunes are something that we must save", and in the dunes the situation has really improved, compared to 2007 when the campaign had started.<sup>87</sup>The locally working MAB obtained Mezaparks, the park and the neighborhood, by slowing down the privatization process and fighting for sustainable development. Three times it was able to stop the privatization of a piece of land, which was a donation to the public in 1930, by officially contacting the president, raising the interested of the press and calling in the corruption board and the ombudsman. The President stopped this project until these institutions had responded. The LSM also stopped an ill-conceived 30 floor building in Kipsala, by united effort of NGOs. Due to this success they started to set up a cooperation manifesto between Riga city council and NGOs to involve NGOs more into the decision-making process. Marcis Sakalovskis was quite enthusiastic: "Now they really want to involve NGOs."<sup>88</sup> It appears this has been a misjudgment because in February 2009 the city council of Riga dissolved the whole department of environment and distributed its several compartments to various other public entities. Among others this maneuver makes it very difficult for NGOs to develop or maintain efficient communication with Riga's politicians.<sup>89</sup>

The Eurohouse had a project to educate pensioners to work with computers. As results they have become more active and broke out of the isolation that age has put on them. They can go now to libraries or other points where there is internet for free to read books online, write emails, paying bills via internet banking and so on. In the field of Youth work IMKA started a project "motivation school" in regions for drop outs and youngster with low motivation and brought them back to the labor market.

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<sup>86</sup> Janis Matulis [l.c. Reference 68].

<sup>87</sup> The latest developments (08/2008) in this field are not auspicious. The foreign minister of Latvia wants to build a house in the dunes and is now trying together with four cabinet members to get rid of the building ban in the dunes.

<sup>88</sup> Marcis Sakalovskis [l.c. Reference 70].

<sup>89</sup> Thanks for the remark to Elmar Römpezyk head of the FES office in Latvia from 2003 – 2008.

### III.5. Problems

Finances and fund raising are the biggest problems for the organizations interviewed. The financial situation is changing unpredictably because of the dramatic economic and financial crisis. NGOs today cannot foresee what will happen tomorrow or next year. Due to that, they depend even more on money from abroad. This will have an immense effect on the activities of the NGOs. Inda Simanzka from CAL made this very clear. Already before the finance crisis in 2008 there was the risk that the activities put on hold just to raise funds. In her own words: "There is a risk that sometimes the main job get out of the focus because we must be able to be present at the EU level and we are now less than 5 people and we have to do all this things just to have some money."<sup>90</sup> State and local governments cut on programs because of the economical crisis. Another point is that there are no transparent criteria for who can apply and how the money is spent. For instance MAB was suing Riga city and they said it was nearly impossible for them to get money from city.

The "legislations regarding the NGO rights and the possibilities is pretty good compared with other countries like Lithuania and Estonia"<sup>91</sup> but the implementation of the laws is the biggest problem. In the law for local governments, it is said that they should work in close cooperation with other social partners but it can be interpreted on every stage so it depends more or less on every certain local government to give money to NGOs or not. Latvia has harmonized the laws with the EU but again the "implementation of the laws is very weak."<sup>92</sup> The program against human trafficking is a good example for it "the government can show that we have this program to foreign guest, but there is no money for this program".<sup>93</sup>

On the governmental level the situation is like this: "We have access to politicians I can meet Prime Minister and Ministers I can do it is no problem but it is no influence of my meetings."<sup>94</sup> According to Marta this is due to the ignorance and attitude of government and politicians: they listen and they know what Marta does and want but they do

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<sup>90</sup> Inda Simanzka [l.c. Reference 66].

<sup>91</sup> Janis Matulis; [l.c. Reference 68].

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Iluta Lace; [l.c. Reference 67].

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

nothing "or even they do something that harms e.g. if we go and plan something there is audit."<sup>95</sup> Gunta Kelle was the president of the Latvian youth council for years and involved in the youth policy and in developing youth political documents and working with governmental structures. At the end there now is a "youth law, which is useless. A law that is an umbrella law and not concrete for young people."<sup>96</sup>

On the local level the compulsory public hearings are in "summer time when nobody is here or around Christmas"<sup>97</sup>. The planning process of the skyscraper project Manhattan on Daugava, in Kipsala, which would have influenced all citizens of Riga, is a good example. Moreover the proposals from the NGOs often were not taken into account: "We always take part in those public inquiries for making plans. There is this public inquiry processes. In the first public inquiry at the very beginning we always write our proposals what we would like to see in that place. Then there is the second inquiry when the plan is draft. There they present a plan without having taken into account the proposals. Then we are repeating the same. There is no transparency, not at all."<sup>98</sup> But this depends on personality " five years or six years ago [there was] a different head of city department of environment he always invited [MAB] to take part in committee meeting, when they decided something about our neighborhood. He knows it was better to invite [us], otherwise [MAB] is making some trouble later."<sup>99</sup>

Further problems appear as "hidden corruption and investors interests" because the big picture is like this: "the political parties are still controlled by oligarchs, very narrow - focused economical interested groups. That's the reason why we have so many political parties."<sup>100</sup> Young people are not interested in politics and recruit them for organizations or for projects it is very difficult. They are not interested in it because they have lots of opportunities to spend their free time, especially in Riga. Due to the globalization process and the coming into force of the *Schengen Agreement* it is easier for them to study, to travel or to work aboard.

This problem correlates directly with the daily work of the NGOs because it needs many skills and knowledge e.g. about communication and to work on policy papers. So

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Gunta Kelle [l.c. Reference 69].

<sup>97</sup> Christine Arbolina and Andis Sinanz [l.c. Reference 65].

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Christine Arbolina and Andis Sinanz [l.c. Reference 65].

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

the brain drain is a real problem. Also due to the economical situation most of the people cannot afford to work voluntary for NGOs. First they have to make a living especially the older people and pensioners. Last but not least there is the matter of information - "at the parliamentary level it is very hard to find out the latest information"<sup>101</sup> - and the lack of information of the young people. "Their basic understanding about organizations, which are the bases for civil society, is that they are sects."<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Inda Simanzka [l.c. Reference 66].

<sup>102</sup> Gunta Kelle [l.c. Reference 69].

## IV. Conclusion and Outlook

"The establishment and broadening of citizen participation is very important for democracy. Citizens, politicians and public administration need to communicate. Public administrators need to give information to citizens and provide the possibility for communication, interpretation and dialogue. A readiness for dialogue is an expression of the central democratic principle that citizens should participate in public affairs. Dialogue is also a sign of citizen education and thus equipping them better for future performance of their citizen role.<sup>103</sup> To reach that kind of dialogue the actors in Latvia still have a long road to go. As mentioned above the political class is not cooperating voluntarily with the civil society. They are forced by the EU to harmonize the laws with European standards but the implementation is not fostered.

But the main problem is that most of the politicians care more about their own business than about the public wealth. An example of Mezaparks shows: Some years ago the property manager for the city and brother of the city financial director decided to create more land and started filling in the lake, which is common property.<sup>104</sup> And the city has



The appeal to vote in favor for the referendum: "Yes, to the right for people to dismiss the parliament!"

not done anything up to now. This is one example of corruption and self-interest of the political class. This was one of the main reasons for the umbrella revolution. At the 02.08.2008 this revolution has come to its preliminary end. The referendum failed to take the 50% quorum only 40% of the eligible voters took part in it, but out

of these 40% only 3% voted against the amendment of the constitution. To make sure that the referendum will fail the date was set in the middle of summer, as usual when the elite plan to keep the people away. To prevent things like that happening again, there are now attempts to change the constitution and to set the quorum from 50% to 66, 6% as

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<sup>103</sup> Plostajner, Zlalka; Building active citizenship: citizen participation at local level; in Citizen's participation in local Self- Government- Experiences of South-East European Countries; Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Zagreb; 2001; P. 23; <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/vifaost/a02-00023.pdf>[2.08.2008].

<sup>104</sup> Cp. Christine Arbolina and Andis Sinanz [l.c. Reference 65].

Tevzemei un Brīvibai (fatherland and freedom) one of the party in power suggested.<sup>105</sup> One more obstacle is that the mix between the political sphere and the sphere of the civil society is extremely hindered by one fact: It is hard to be involved in a political party and at the same time in a leading position of a NGO. If someone is active in a NGO and acts prominent for its cause he or she could be accused of having it done for the party and for the own public relation campaign and not for the public. "In Latvia we are not that tolerant as in your country [Germany] maybe, because the parties sometimes are heavily fighting and sometimes we are not using the best methods."<sup>106</sup>

On the political level there are still a lot of obstacles on the road to more participation, but on the other hand justice seemed to work quite well when the Supreme Court ruled, "that the master plan for one third of the territory of Riga is unlawful"<sup>107</sup> or it forced the government to change the law "On Social Benefits" to improve the situation of families. The media seems to get more balanced and liberal than "it was some 5 years ago".<sup>108</sup> These are positive signs!

What could be done to support these positive trends? And more important what is done by the NGOs to improve their situation? First of all Latvia must fight corruption. Estonia has installed e-democracy, where every citizen e.g. easily can make suggestions to different topics and the ministries have to answer and the meetings of the parliament are streamed on the Internet. This itself and alone does not help much against corruption, but it makes the system more transparent. MAB suggests changing the election law for the national level to have representatives elected from the districts. In order to have parliamentarians who can be hold responsible. Now it is all done on a party base and lists and they are not linked to any particularly district or riding in the country. Another point should be the support of the cooperation between NGOs. First steps are done e.g. with the NGO support centers but these centers should be more popularized because some of the interview partners never heard about them. Due to the limited resources cooperation with other NGOs is yet not really fostered because it consumes more time and energy.<sup>109</sup> This is true especially when the work is totally done by volunteers, but even MAB is "building strategic partnerships with the other

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<sup>105</sup> Cp. Römpezyk, Elmar: Politische Kurzanalysen: Baltische Staaten aktuell 41 - Referendum zur Verfassungsänderung zugunsten direkter Demokratie; 2008.

<sup>106</sup> Janis Matulis [l.c. Reference 68].

<sup>107</sup> Marcis Sakalovskis [l.c. Reference 70].

<sup>108</sup> Iluta Lace[l.c. Reference 67].

<sup>109</sup> Christine Arbolina and Andis Sinanz [l.c. Reference 65].

organizations around its locations, the local church, the local café or the UNESCO agency in the Park." <sup>110</sup> This is also possible on a higher level if the partners bring in their specific knowledge and resources so that everyone can benefit. To ensure substantial development of the NGO the LaGM negotiates with the government about a regular support system for NGOs. This system should be based on the Scandinavian model, where support depends not on the Minister but on transparent criteria. These criteria should be e.g. number of members, non-profit organization etc. With this kind of support the NGOs would get planning reliability and could focus on their main work. Transparent evaluation criteria for project funding should be adopted also on a local level to foster the independence of NGOs so that the authorities cannot punish them when they disturb the parties in their logrolling. This includes that information should be available for everyone on a regional and national level so that also a local NGO could get aware that there is a contest for projects for any kind of activity and that this organization can apply for finances by the local government.

Informing and educating teachers about NGOs is very important as they, who are multipliers, do not know much about them. This information and encouragement should start at the university level to push students to take part actively, because if they do not have practical knowledge about organizations they don't talk as teacher about NGOs. At the moment people are not interested in NGOs because they do not know what NGOs are. So it makes sense to give information about NGOs to a target group like teachers. In addition to that Latvian women and women organizations should even more mobilize and educate to be more effective and consolidate their cases'.

To attract more young people the structures for participation must be more simple and flexible e.g. like a social networking platform where people can get informed about their neighborhood and so they can put their efforts in something they are really interested in. Marcis Sakalovskis is now having a project called creative houses with the aim to have such a platform, which should function on two ways - first on the Internet and than in a place where NGOs and individuals can stay, work and people's ideas can be realized. The main idea behind this is to bring innovation into the public participation process and make it more flexible.

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<sup>110</sup>Christine Arbolina and Andis Sinanz [l.c. Reference 65].

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