The Participation of Social Partners and Nongovernmental Organizations in Development Planning

The Case of Latvia

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Introduction by the editors: This chapter examines the complex dynamic relationships between governmental institutions and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) participating in the policy planning process. In particular, the author examines the case of NGO involvement in the process of developing national and European Union (EU)-related governance documents. The qualitative research identifies the existing barriers to a more effective NGO participation, and discusses how state—NGO interaction influences such barriers. The findings from this chapter present valuable lessons from the countries that recently joined the EU, and thus have to reconcile new democratic requirements with old ways of doing business. This chapter brings into question the applicability, and fit with the local context, of Western democracy frameworks, in this case initiated by the EU. As the findings show, new members of the EU with a recent Soviet past often have trouble modifying their local policymaking processes in order to accommodate externally imposed requirements. This begs a question regarding the utility of externally imposed models of democracy versus an attempt to develop domestic alternatives that would be more integrated with historical and social contexts.¹

¹ Originally published as BISS (2013).
a larger research study on policy and development planning in the country (BISS, 2011). In order to analyze the participation of the nongovernmental sector in development planning processes, we conducted twelve in-depth interviews with representatives of thirteen NGOs and social partners, which have engaged in development and policy planning processes in preparation for the national development planning initiative.

Each of our interviewed NGO sector experts had at least four years of experience in development planning. The majority of the organizations involved in this research were unions and associations representing the interests of a wider organizational network. Additionally, the participating organizations can be divided into several subsector groups:

- Sectoral and professional organizations (Latvian Information and Communications Technology Association, Latvian Teachers Association, Social Workers Society, Latvian Rural Forum, and Latvian Chamber of Commerce and Industry).
- Civic initiative organizations (Delna, Providus, and Latvian Civil Alliance).
- Social partner organizations (Free Trade Union Confederation of Latvia and Latvian Employers’ Confederation).
- Municipal representation organizations (Latvian Association of Local and Regional Governments and Latvian Association of Big Cities).

The goal of this research was to assess the level of NGOs’ expertise in development planning and NGO leaders’ perceptions of the effectiveness of collaboration with the Latvian government, as well as to identify the main issues faced by NGOs when partaking in the process of drafting the planning documents and evaluating their implementation. The results of the qualitative data analysis of the interviews with NGO representatives are described through the following themes: participation in the development planning, collaboration

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2 The research, entitled “The Assessment of the Impact of the Policy Planning System Development Guidelines and Development Planning System,” was conducted by the Baltic Institute of Social Sciences (BISS) in 2013, as part of the 4.2. “Function Audit Performance” (ID No. MK VK 2012/7 ESF). The project “Support for the Implementation of the Structural Reforms in Public Administration” (ID No. 1DP/1.5.1.1.1./10/PIA/CFLA/004/002) was administered by the Latvian State Chancellery. This research was fully funded by the European Social Fund.

3 I further use the term nongovernmental organizations to describe all organizations involved in the research.

4 Social partners are the official representatives of both employers and employees in the social dialogue with the government and governmental institutions. Trade unions are an example of social partners.