

## **Role of Civil Society Organizations in Local Governance: Theoretical Approaches and Empirical Challenges in Lithuania**

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*The paper is focused on the discussion about the role of civil society in local governance and attempts to provide the answers to the questions: who is responsible for and should initiate the partnership between civil society organizations and local government? What are possible partnership models? How are public administrators affected by or do they affect civil society? What are the determinants of active civic participation in local governance? The paper is based on the two-fold approach: 1) general approach to the civil society and government partnership in local democracy; 2) particular approach examining how discussed partnership models work in Lithuania.*

**Keywords:** *civil society, local governance, community, civil society organizations.*

**Raktažodžiai:** *pilietinė visuomenė, vietos valdžia, bendruomenė, pilietinės visuomenės organizacijos.*

### **Introduction**

In recent years the role of civil society in local governance has become a popular topic in many academic discussions. In the last decades the transfer from traditional public administration to a new public management and eventually new public governance models has emphasized the rebirth of civil society all over the world. However,

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Straipsnis įteiktas redakcijai 2010 m. birželio mėn.; recenzuotas; parengtas spaudai 2010 m. rugpjūčio mėn.

the question that remains without explicit answer yet, is who should initiate the partnership: civil society or government?

Some theorists [2; 6; 8] argue that government could play an active role in encouraging citizen involvement in decision making. Even J. Denhardt and R. Denhardt [2] point out “an important role for government in encouraging community building and civil society”; however, authors give no concrete model of government and civil society partnership. Putnam [9] argues that democratic tradition is dependent on the existence of civically engaged citizens, active in governmental units. A lack of citizen participation in modern governance reduces the capacity of local democracy to be representative and responsive. Meanwhile, J. Denhardt and R. Denhardt [2] emphasize that “citizens would do what they are supposed to do in a democracy – they would run government”.

The second question eventually discussed in the paper is how does the western practice work in post-communist settings such as Lithuania? Together with political and social changes, democracy and civil society ideas are returning back to the Lithuanian society. However it is not only about their “return”, but also about their “introduction”, since to some extent civic concepts are new in social life and social discourse and mentality of Lithuania, as well of other post-communist countries. It is widely debated, that „the surprise of post-communist transition“, is that western economic, political and social theories and practices are not always valid in post-communist context [7]. According to empirical data, it might be assumed that Lithuania even after 20 years of transition still feels the legacies of non-democratic period – the lack of civil initiative and specific approach towards civil society. In 2008 Lithuania has passed a new *Law on Local Governance* that includes several chapters describing the role and opportunities for citizen participation [13]. However, as empirical data indicate the civic engagement is not high as citizens prefer government initiative and government expects citizen involvement.

Focusing specifically on the relationships between civil society and government this article takes a closer look at civil society and government partnership models and patterns in local democracy. This paper includes sections on civil society understanding; general approach to partnership arrangements in local democracy; and particular approach examining how discussed partnership models work in Lithuania.

## **1. The nature of civil society: defining the concept**

Civil society concept is often discussed, however, it is rather blur as it is always determined by certain criteria and historical context. Civil society in its historical context was always something that „lies outside the market and the State” or opposes State, however, at the same time it is inseparable from good governance [11].

Historically civil society concept originated in preindustrial societies. The notion of civil society as an active public sphere and citizen engagement derives from ancient Greek and Roman political philosophy (Aristotle, Cicero) but is more likely identified with 18<sup>th</sup> century political philosophy referring to Machiavelli and Rousseau that regarded civil society as a control of despotic State [7].

The classical ideas of civil society start from Scottish Enlightenment period (Ferguson), continue with Tocqueville, who emphasizes the role of associations in democracy:

“Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition, are forever forming associations. There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types – religious, moral serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute” [12].

Civic engagement, association and communitarian ideas could be traced also at the works of contemporary social theorists such as Putnam [9] who looks at civil society as a network of voluntary associations, civic engagement that influences public life and social institutions. Speaking about such organizational forms as philanthropy, Putnam [9] argues that a check in envelope, no matter how generous, cannot have that same effect as community bonds.

Evers and Laville argue that in contemporary social theory at least two approaches toward civil society perception could be crystallized – European and American ones [4]. A distinctive feature of European approach is a historical dynamic perspective that is less evident in American approach. American approach focuses on defining the main national components of a sector comprising a community of “non-profit organizations”. However, in historical context a third approach - post-communist civil society perception can not be ignored as well.

Civil society concept traces its historical roots from early modern history of Western Europe; however its revival came with post-communist movements in twentieth century that can be called a rebirth of civil society not just in post-communist countries, but all over Europe. Salamon [10] notices, that ambiguity is perhaps the principal characteristic that emerges from the picture of the post-communist civic sector. Habermas argues that rediscovery of the concept civil society and revolutions of 1989 gave Europe a second chance to create a communicative civil society [7]. Outhwhite and Ray distinguish classical and post-communist civil society contexts [7]. Classical conception refers to Locke, Ferguson, and Hegel emphasizing moral governance, civility and citizenship, civil society vs. state. The post-communist or Eastern European model refers to participatory democracy, self-governing political society, social movements, discussion about trust and social solidarity.

Discussion about civil society is inseparable from the clarifying the related terms: NGO, third sector, non-profit sector and its organizational expressions as voluntary action, philanthropy, charity. Deakin argues that civil society terminology may gain either positive or negative connotations that exclude civil society and its organizational forms as inferior to state or market [1]. For example, scholars and civil society activists in the United States are mostly used to *non-profit* concept that includes action carried out by entities not engaged in the market, trading for profit. Another popular term *third sector* assumes the primacy of the first and second sectors, the state and the market. These concepts are also popular in post-communist Europe that civil society perception is mostly based on *non-governmental organizations*, the term that also reflects inferiority of civil society location. In Western Europe, on the contrary, could be noticed rather positive civil society connotations: *association*, *economie sociale*. In the conceptual meanings it is important to notice that none of the definitions are static as terms emerge in specific contexts and are evolving according to changing circumstances [1, p. 10].

## 2. General approach to the role of civil society organizations in local governance: partnership models

With a shift from a normative public administration model “rooted with the idea of rational choice” [2] to a new public governance citizens acquire relevant role in public governance system. Zimmer argues that the issue of civil society and government partnerships “has gained momentum especially in light increasing importance of government arrangements” [15, p. 201]. In this context she points at the importance of the shift from „government“ to „governance“ as this gives an impulse for the discussion of various partnership models.

There is no single opinion about civil society organizations and local government partnership models. Different social sciences – politics, economics, sociology or administrative sciences - emphasize different dimensions of partnership: “For economist and scholars of administrative sciences the topics of effectiveness and efficiency are at the centre of interest. <...> Hence, economists and policy advisors keenly search for means for output maximization. By contrast, the key interest of political scientists is linked to questions and topics of how to establish, deepen, improve, and stabilize democracy and – more specifically – democratic governance via partnership arrangements including civil society and third sector organizations. Here the topics of legitimacy and democratic accountability are focal points of analysis. <...> Economists and scholars of public administration are interested in partnership arrangements involving TSOs [TSOs – Third Sector Organizations] that highlight the output dimension of governance, while the key interest of political scientists focuses by and large on the input side of governance” [15, p. 208-209].

Nevertheless some models for analysis of emerging partnership between civil society organizations and local government can be distinguished. The best known in the context of public administration there are Najam’s Four-C’s Model and Young’s Typology of Third Sector-Government Arrangements [15, p. 209-210]. This model incorporates two perspectives: government position towards third sector organizations and third sector organizations position towards government [5, p. 383]. On the basis of these two perspectives, Najam presents the typology of partnerships. In the typology Najam emphasizes certain ends (goals) and certain means (strategies), as every organization – governmental and non-governmental - seeks some goals by employing certain strategies. Organizations “float within the policy stream, they bump into each other in one of four possible combinations” [5, p. 383]. Thus, model presents four possible types of partnership:

- *Cooperation* when organizations are seeking similar ends with similar means;
- *Confrontation* when organizations are seeking dissimilar ends with dissimilar means;
- *Complementarity* when organizations are seeking similar ends but preferring dissimilar means;
- *Co-optation* when organizations prefer similar means but for dissimilar ends.

Najam typology is shown in the *Table 1*.

Table 1: The Four-C's of NGO–Government Relations

		<i>Goals (Ends)</i>	
		Similar	Dissimilar
<i>Preferred strategies (means)</i>	Similar	<p><b>Cooperation</b></p> <p>A cooperative relationship is likely when, on a given issue, government agencies and nongovernmental organizations not only share similar policy goals but also prefer similar strategies for achieving them. Essentially, there is a convergence of preferred ends as well as means.</p>	<p><b>Co-optation</b></p> <p>A co-optive relationship is likely when governmental and nongovernmental organizations share similar strategies but prefer different goals. Such situations, based on divergent goals but convergent strategies, are often transitory.</p>
	Dissimilar	<p><b>Complementarity</b></p> <p>A complementary relationship is likely when governmental and nongovernmental organizations share similar goals but prefer different strategies. Essentially, they have divergent strategies but convergent goals.</p>	<p><b>Confrontation</b></p> <p>A confrontational relationship is likely when governmental agencies and nongovernmental organizations consider each other's goals and strategies to be antithetical to their own-essentially, total divergence of preferred ends as well as means.</p>

Source: [5, p. 383-385, 387, 388].

As Zimmer argues, Najam's model is of „particular value because it covers a broad spectrum of partnership arrangements and can be applied in many settings around the world“ [15, p. 210].

Another significant model of partnership was presented by Dennis Young [14]. Young develops typology of partnership between non-governmental sector organizations and government also according two positions: „nonprofits prod government to make changes in public policy and to maintain accountability to the public. Reciprocally, government attempts to influence the behavior of nonprofit organizations by regulating its services and responding to its advocacy initiatives as well“ [14, p. 151]. He distinguishes three analytical views to partnership: 1) nonprofits as supplements to government; 2) nonprofits and government as complements; 3) non-profits and government as adversaries.

According to Young's typology, in the supplementary model nonprofits fulfill the demand for public goods that it not satisfied by government; in the complimentary model nonprofits cooperate with government in fulfilling the demand for public goods and in the adversarial model nonprofits encourage government „to make changes in public policy and to maintain accountability to the public“ [15, p. 210; 14, p.151-170].

The analysis of some empirical evidence led Young to verify his theoretical assumptions and conclude that government-nonprofit sector relations are multilayered, dynamic and best understood as a mix of all these modes. As Zimmer notices [15, p. 210], Young's reference to hybridization is of especial importance.

The discussion about partnership models is broad and rather sophisticated. Usually models present some ideal types or a frame that helps to analyze empirical data. Nevertheless partnership models differ from country to country. The country context is of high importance in the analysis of certain patterns of partnership between civil society organizations and local government.

### **3. Patterns of partnership between civil society organizations and local government in Lithuania**

Empirical analysis is based on the findings of two studies: i) data from the project “Local Democracy 2009” research that was conducted by the Department of Public Administration at Mykolas Romeris University and the Department of Public Administration and Municipal Training Center at Kaunas University of Technology, and ii) evidence from focus group discussions with active NGO members and representatives of local government. The paper presents data from five municipalities, as focus group discussions were conducted in these municipalities. The results of both quantitative and qualitative research include the viewpoint of local authorities and local CSOs leaders towards opportunities and challenges of the current situation of local governance and civil society partnership.

Civil society has been strongly related to the development of democracy, as Stephen Elstub says, „both externally, within the political system as whole, and internally, within the associations themselves” [3, p. 105]. CSOs participation in the governance performs an important role in various fields of public policy and strengthens democratic traditions. The participation depends not just on active citizens but also on government’s initiative. Thus, the analysis of empirical data incorporates two dimensions: local government position towards CSOs and citizens participation in local governance and CSOs’ approach towards local government’s role.

One of the ways of active participation in local governance is participation in Municipal Council. Empirical evidence indicates that over the last three years the most popular way to encourage citizens to participate in local governance was the delivery of agitation material directly to their resident places, however, local government rarely analyzes the situation why and what groups of citizens are inactive (see Figure 1).

Nevertheless different groups of respondents – CSOs members, politicians and representatives of local administration – have different perception of the situation (see Figure 2 and Figure 3). CSOs members are the most critical about municipality initiatives both referring analysis of inactive citizens’ groups in municipality and agitation material delivery to citizens’ home. Politicians and local administration perceive the situation more positively.

Government could play an active role in encouraging citizen participation in local governance, but interest and motivation of citizens themselves are the key factor in this process. According to empirical data, 64,7 % of CSOs members say that level of citizens’ participation in local public affairs is rather low, meanwhile majority of local government administration declare that civil society participation is rather normal or even high (28 % of local administrators say the level of citizens’ participation in local affairs is high) (see

Figure 4). This tendency indicates that CSOs members themselves are the most critical about participation levels, meanwhile administration are the most favorable about it.

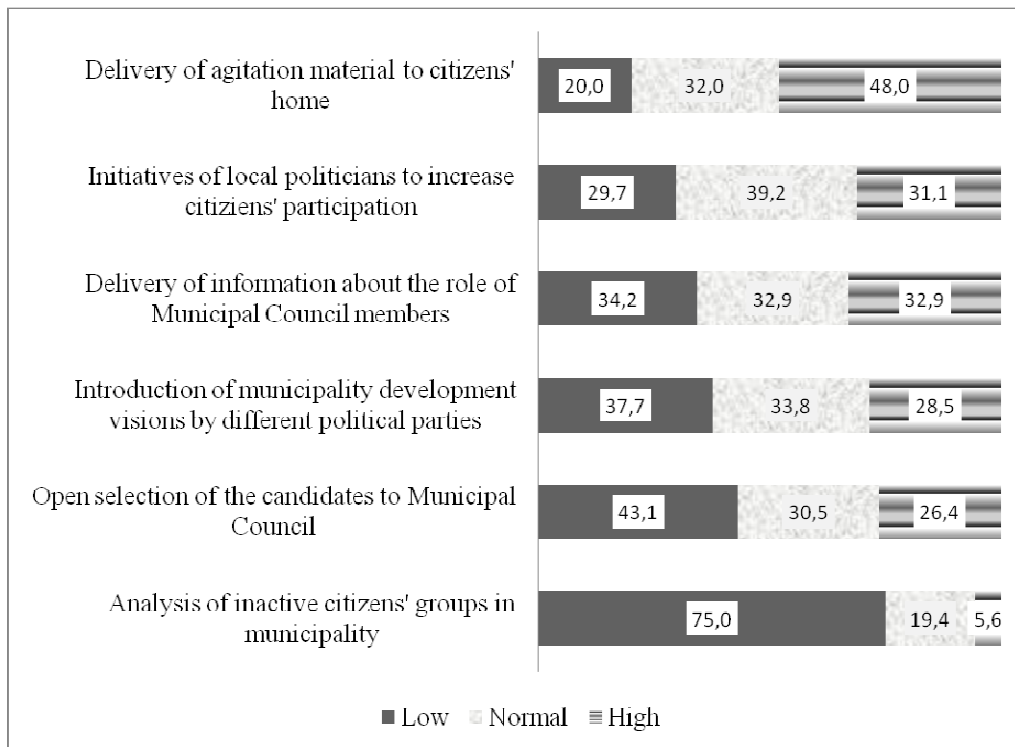


Figure 1: Distribution of respondents according to their opinion about ways of citizens' motivation to participate in Municipal Council elections (in per cent)

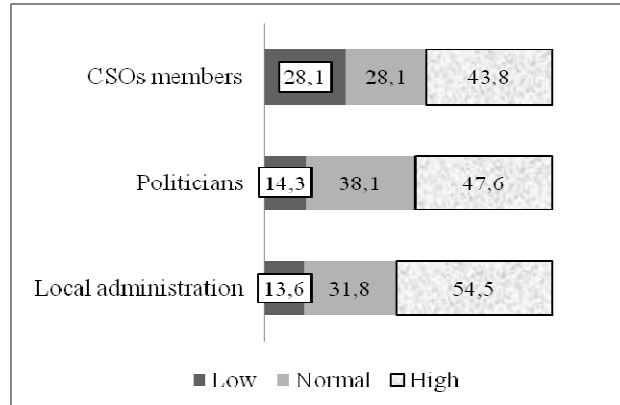


Figure 2: Distribution of different groups of respondents according to their opinion about the impact of analysis of inactive citizens' groups in municipality as a way of citizens' motivation to participate in Municipal Council elections (in per cent)

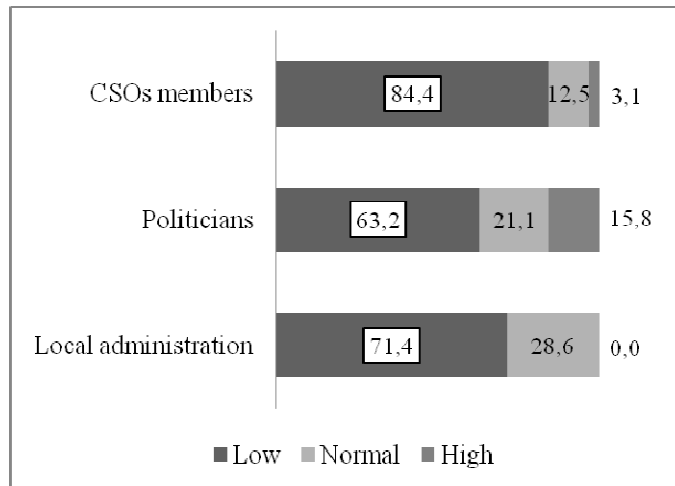


Figure 3: Distribution of different groups of respondents according to their opinion about the impact of delivery of agitation material to citizens' home as a way of citizens' motivation to participate in Municipal Council elections (*in per cent*)

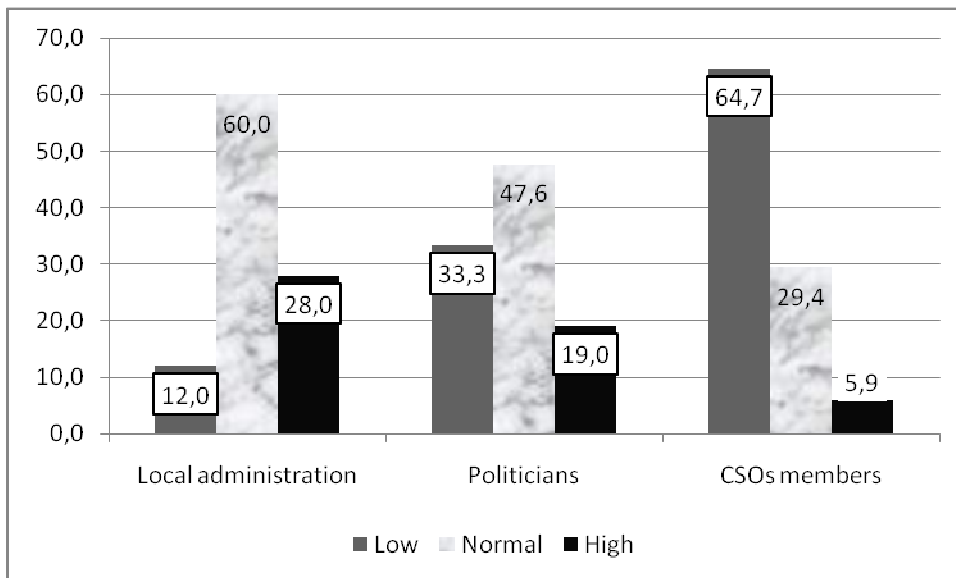


Figure 4: Distribution of different groups of respondents according to their opinion about the intensiveness of citizens' participation in local public affairs (*in per cent*)

As qualitative data shows, both local administration and CSOs activists acknowledge the importance of civil society participation in governance. The Head of a municipality department says that it is important to involve community and other voluntary organizations in local decision making. He argues that success of partnership depends



on community mentality, civic attitudes and initiative. NGO members also share the same opinion by saying that participation of citizens in local governance is very important for citizens themselves, because it is their interest to be involved, to influence decisions and to create real democracy.

Partnership is successful just in case both sides are interested in it. As Civil servant of a municipality department mentions, nobody can create partnership if one side does not show any interest. Of course, it takes decades to grow the real partnership and State should put initiative as well. Nevertheless, CSOs members are skeptical about local administration efforts to initiate partnership between local government and CSOs. According to opinion of NGO member, municipality never knocks at the door asking for partnership. NGOs should understand that they have to initiate partnership and only then municipality comes.

Summarizing the empirical evidence, it could be noticed that neither local government nor CSOs have clear vision about partnership models. Collaboration of CSOs with local government is rather fragmented, usually comes as separate projects but there is no obvious strategy for partnership development yet.

### **Concluding remarks**

1. The discussion about who should play an active role in the partnership between civil society organizations (CSOs) and local government is still open. However, summarizing the proposed models of partnership, it could be noticed that they are mostly focused either on civil society initiative, or on interaction between civil society and government. On the other hand, empirical evidence let us assume that local government admits the benefit of partnership and in most cases is willing to cooperate.

2. Empirical data indicates that government initiative is rather fragmented. Local government pays low attention to the analysis of existing situation that could enable the prevention of the same mistakes in the future. More often they seek for short term action like delivery of agitation material to citizens homes.

3. Meanwhile members of CSOs are most critical about the level of participation; however, they don't give any clear advices for solutions as well.

4. Summarizing the discussion it could be assumed that the role of CSOs in local governance is rather relevant in theory as well as in Lithuanian practice. The modes and patterns of partnership are mostly based on complementarity, i. e. both sides have similar goals (partnership), but prefer different ways and strategies to reach it.

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**Pilietinės visuomenės vaidmuo vietos valdyme:  
teorinės perspektyvos ir empiriniai iššūkiai Lietuvoje**

Santrauka

Straipsnyje diskutuojama apie pilietinės visuomenės vaidmenį vietos valdžios sistemoje. Siekiama atsakyti į klausimus: Kas – ar vietos valdžia, ar pilietinės visuomenės organizacijos – turėtų inicijuoti partnerystę ir kurie iš jų yra už partnerystės efektyvumą? Kokie galimi partnerystės modeliai? Kaip viešojo administravimo sistemos atstovai yra veikiami pilietinės visuomenės organizacijų arba kokią įtaką jie turi šioms organizacijoms? Kokie yra aktyvios partnerystės motyvai ir prielaidos? Nagrinėjamos dvi pagrindinės dimensijos: 1) bendrasis teorini požiūri į pilietinės visuomenės ir valdžios institucijų bendradarbiavimą; 2) konkretūs empiriniai pavyzdžiai, iliustruojantys Lietuvos realijas.