

Table 3.1

**The influence of the media among other participants in the political system**

*“Who influences the adoption of important political decisions in Latvia, and to what extent?” Percentage of respondents (in brackets) who answered “to a very large extent” or “to a fairly large extent.”*

Nr.	Inhabitants	Saeima deputies	Local government leaders	Ministry department directors
1.	Cabinet of Ministers (government) (84)	Cabinet of Ministers (government) (100)	Leaders of business groupings (90)	Cabinet of Ministers (government) (96)
2.	The <i>Saeima</i> (82)	Ruling political parties (97)	Ruling political parties (88)	Leaders of business groupings (92)
3.	Leaders of business groupings (79)	Political party leaders (94)	Cabinet of Ministers (government) (85)	Ruling political parties (90)
4.	Political party leaders (73)	The <i>Saeima</i> (92)	Political party leaders (82)	Political party leaders (88)
5.	Ruling political parties (68)	Leaders of business groupings (89)	The <i>Saeima</i> (79)	“Grey cardinals” and behind-the-scenes activists (84)
6.	“Grey cardinals” and behind-the-scenes activists (63)	“Grey cardinals” and behind-the-scenes activists (80)	“Grey cardinals” and behind-the-scenes activists (73)	The <i>Saeima</i> (78)
7.	<b>The media</b> (45)	<b>The media</b> (72)	<b>The media</b> (45)	<b>The media</b> (64)
8.	Professional experts (35)	Employees of ministries and ministry institutions (46)	Employees of ministries and ministry institutions (27)	Employees of ministries and ministry institutions (44)
9.	Local government leaders (28)	Public opinion leaders (37)	Opposition parties (20)	Local government leaders (36)
10.	Opposition parties (26)	Sector and professional associations (37)	Professional experts (18)	Sector and professional associations (32)
11.	Employees of ministries and ministry institutions (25)	Professional experts (34)	Rank-and-file political party members (13)	Professional experts (20)
12.	Rank-and-file political party members (21)	Local government leaders (29)	Sector and professional associations (7)	Opposition parties (20)
13.	Sector and professional associations (17)	Opposition parties (23)	Public opinion leaders (7)	Public opinion leaders (20)
14.	Public opinion leaders (16)	Rank-and-file political party members (21)	Local government leaders (6)	Rank-and-file political party members (12)
15.	Non-governmental organizations (8)	Non-governmental organizations (6)	Non-governmental organizations (2)	Non-governmental organizations (12)
16.	Citizens’ and initiative groups (5)	Citizens’ and initiative groups (0)	Citizens’ and initiative groups (1)	Citizens’ and initiative groups (4)



Nevertheless, in comparing the answers to this question, it is clear that there is a broad agreement on the main trends. Each of the groups surveyed places the media in seventh place among the sixteen participants in the political system. Each of the groups considers the most influential of these participants to be the ones who are either part of the political and economic elite or the main institutions of the State (the Cabinet of Ministers, the parties in the governing coalition, the leaders of the political parties, business groupings, the *Saeima* and the “grey cardinals”). All of the other participants in the political process are seen as being less influential. The relative ranking within these two broad categories is fairly dissimilar, which makes it all the more significant that the big picture remains the same: the elite has a crucial influence on decisions, the rest of the participants in the system have relatively little influence, and the media are somewhere in the middle.

All four groups surveyed have similar views on the competence and honesty of the media. In response to the question: “*To what extent do you trust the media to make competent, honest and just decisions?*” less than 3% in each of the groups surveyed answered that they trusted the media “to a large extent,” 20 - 28% answered that they trusted them “to a fair extent,” but the majority of between 62% and 76% answered that they trusted them “not very much” or “not at all.”

These results are especially significant because in each of the groups there was at least one organization or group of people that was trusted by more than 50% of those surveyed. In the population as a whole this was true of only one group, the professional experts, who are trusted to a fair or large extent by 52% of those surveyed. Civil servants trust not only themselves and the Cabinet of Ministers, but also the *Saeima* (52%) and industrial and professional organizations (56%). *Saeima* deputies trust the *Saeima*, the Cabinet of Ministers (57%), local government leaders (60%) and professional experts (83%). Local government leaders trust themselves the most, but trust professional experts only a little less (80%).

When asked what interests the media, all four of these groups broadly agree. Over half (51%) of the inhabitants as a whole, 68% of civil servants, 69% of local government leaders and 78% of *Saeima* deputies agreed fully or partly with the statement that “journalists are not interested in serious political analysis, they only search for scandals.”

The fact that the competence and honesty of the media receive fairly low ratings may seem surprising because surveys have consistently placed TV, the press and radio among those institutions that people trust the most. A survey done in the fall of 1999 indicated that the media’s level of trust (69%) was the highest for any State or societal institution.

This seeming paradox could be explained by assuming that society has defined the role of the media relatively narrowly, seeing them only as bearers of information and as watchdogs (or as “only looking for scandals,” which is the same thing, only in a negative light). Insofar as the media fulfil this role, they can be trusted. The public seemingly does not think that the media can effectively fulfil any broader functions. Although a large number of people in the previously mentioned survey do not trust the government (54%), when asked who should take the lead in fighting corruption, 74% answer that it should be the government. Only 3% answer that it should be the media.

Thus, it is clear that the Latvian media play a more or less effective role in watching over the work of State institutions. However, they only vaguely perceive the role they could play in policy formation and, judging by public opinion, do even less to actually fulfil this role.

## Forms of participation and public perceptions of their effectiveness

Participation can nominally be divided into election activities, short-term and spontaneous participation, and long-term participation. The establishment of contacts with State structures and partaking in public discussions can be distinguished as separate mechanisms.

The most popular form of participation in Latvia is *election activities*, or voting in *Saeima* and local government elections and referendums. Since the restoration of Latvia’s independence three *Saeima* elections, three local government elections and two national referendums have been held. A third national referendum regarding draft amendments to the *Law on Power Industries* did not take place. After a sufficient number of signatures had been gathered for holding the referendum, the *Saeima* adopted the amendments that had been proposed by the opposition.

Voter activity since the beginning of the 1990s has slightly subsided but remained generally stable (see Figure 3.2). In a survey conducted by the Central Electoral Commission following the 1997 local government elections, respondents explained the relatively low participation rate with a lack of suitable candidates and with the conviction that voting in elections would not bring about any meaningful changes.

The 2000 study conducted regarding public policy and participation showed that people consider local government elections as a more effective form of influence than *Saeima* elections, even though the participation rate in local government elections has been lower (see Figure 3.2). Forecasts conducted at the beginning of 2001 indicated an increase in voter activity for the March 2001 local government elections. The political parties involved also devoted a great deal of campaign activity to these elections.

Partaking in referendums is seen as the most effective form of participation. The 1997 referendum took place together with local government elections and attracted a larger number of inhabitants with voting rights than might otherwise have been the case. The initiatives on pension reform referred to in Chapter 2 are the only ones not to have made it to the referendum stage.

Latvians participate more actively in elections than other ethnic groups. This is partly explainable by the smaller proportion of Latvian citizens

among the other ethnic groups, which is also reflected in their lower rate of pre-election campaign activity. Activity in elections also increases with one's level of education. The higher the level of education, the more likely one is to vote in elections. In Latvia, women have been more active voters (particularly in local government elections), while men have been more active in the organization of election campaigns. The most active voters are persons of pre-retirement and early retirement age. Voting activity decreases for those aged over 65. The most inactive voters are young people between 18 and 24 years of age.

The most active voters in *Saeima* elections are from Latvia's Vidzeme region, or of the upper middle-class and higher income groupings. The most active voters in local government elections are from Latgale, as well as people who place themselves in the lowest social group and expect a slight decline in their material well-being. Latgale stands out as a region with close co-operation between local governments and the public.

Generally the most active voters are satisfied with the available participation mechanisms. Demands for the introduction of additional democratic mechanisms are also less likely among those with a higher level of education, family income and position in society.

The most active voters in referendums are rural inhabitants, persons of pre-retirement and early retirement age, and persons who predict a decline

Figure 3.1

### Voter participation in elections and referendums, 1990 – 2001 (percentage of inhabitants with voting rights)

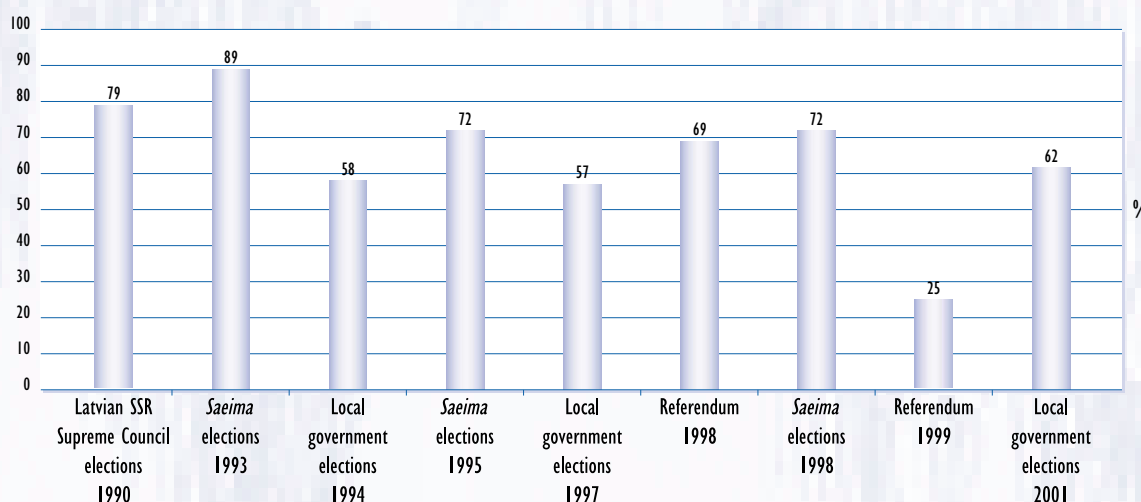
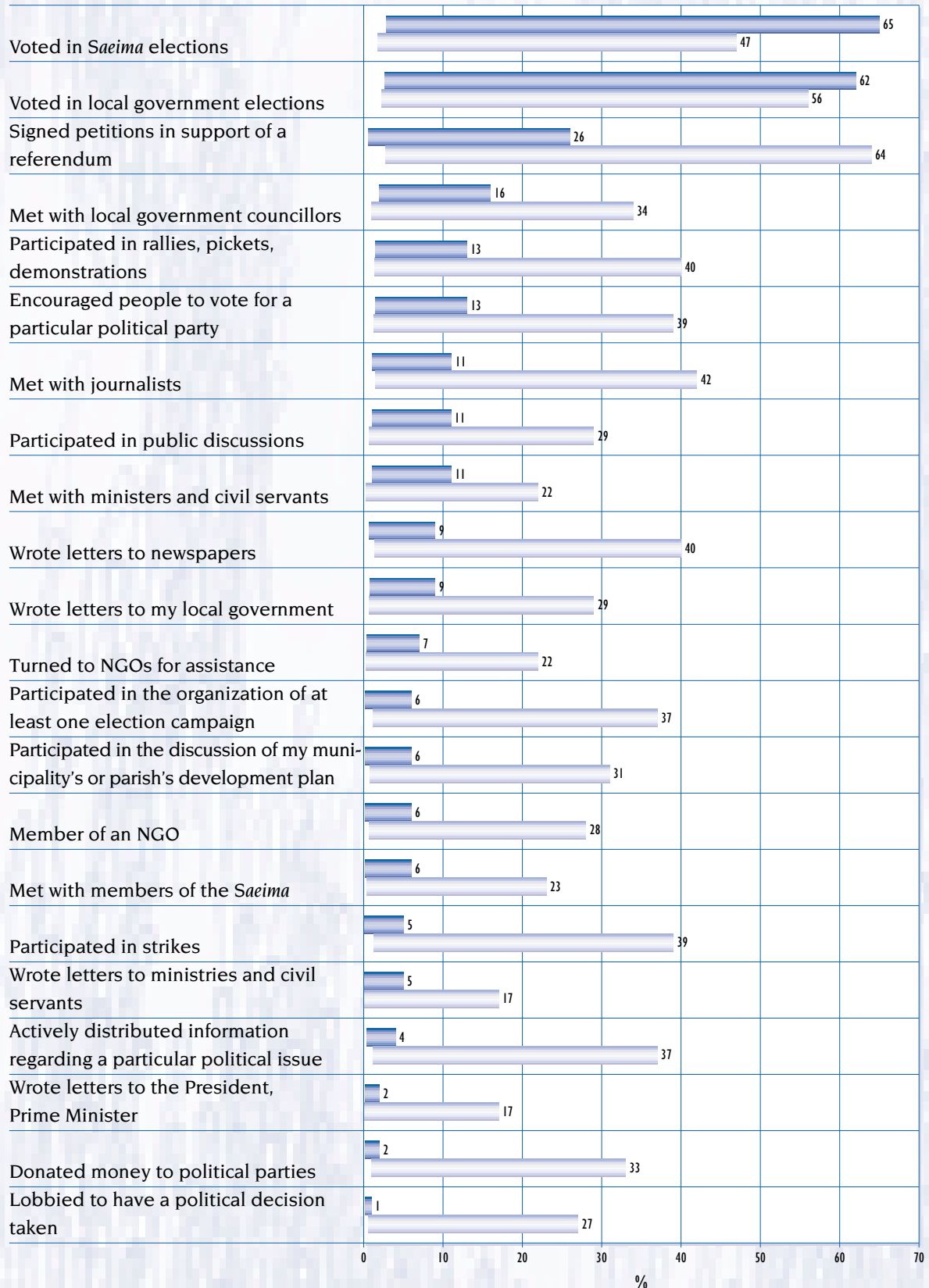




Figure 3.2

**Forms of participation and evaluations of their effectiveness**

(% of surveyed inhabitants who took part in [light blue] or viewed various forms of participation as effective [dark blue])



in their material well-being. The most passive are young people aged 18 to 24, non-Latvians, employers and entrepreneurs.

Other forms of participation associated with elections are also mentioned as being effective, such as partaking in the organization of election campaigns and distributing information regarding particular political issues.

*Short-term and spontaneous participation* is seen to be the most effective form of political participation after *voting in elections*. As can be seen in Figure 3.2, the effectiveness of strikes, rallies and demonstrations rates highly, but only a small proportion of respondents have participated in them. The highest proportion of persons attending pickets, demonstrations and rallies is in Riga. The most active participation in strikes has been by rural inhabitants from the Zemgale region, where the largest farmers' protests have taken place, including those of the summer of 2000.

Those engaged in *long-term forms of participation* (6 or 7% of respondents) are about half as numerous as those who have engaged in short-term participation. While approximately one-third of those surveyed see activity within a political party as an influential form of participation, only 1 to 2% have chosen to engage in it.

Activities in NGOs are seen to be comparatively less effective but have a higher participation rate, particularly in Riga and other Latvian cities. The most active NGO participants are of pre-retirement age (45-54 years). While ethnicity is not a deciding factor, NGO data indicate that the leadership of such organizations is assumed mostly by Latvians.

*The establishment of direct contacts* with State authorities and the mass media may be used as a mechanism for both spontaneous and long-term participation. The influence achieved by writing letters to newspapers or meeting with journalists is much greater than that which can be achieved by writing letters and meeting with local government councillors, employees of ministries and State institutions, the Prime Minister or the President. Of contacts with State institutions, writing to and meeting with local government councillors is twice as effective as writing to and meeting with representatives of other State structures. In general, letter-writing, especially to newspapers, is more prevalent in Riga, while the inhabitants of Latgale are more likely to meet with officials.

Participation in public meetings (a practice undertaken by 11% of respondents) or in discussions on one's municipal or parish development plan (6% of respondents) could develop into a stable practice. About one-third of those surveyed believe such participation mechanisms to be either very or fairly effective. Participation in public meetings is approximately equal in Latvia's cities and rural areas, but rural inhabitants, particularly in Latgale and Vidzeme, are nearly three times more active in discussions of city or parish development plans. Latvians have been involved twice as often in discussions of development plans as non-Latvians.

About 18% of respondents had *not participated* in any political activities. Non-participation was characteristic of older persons and respondents with a low level of education. Young people aged 18-24 also had a comparatively high non-participation rate.

Overall, the most active participants in the political process are Latvians, rural inhabitants, and people of pre-retirement or early retirement age, as well as those with a higher level of education. In evaluating the political process, most inhabitants do so through the prism of the realization of their own interests.

Certain similarities are discernable among those respondents who actively participate in policy-making by using one or more of the participation forms and mechanisms referred to. For the most part, such persons are not entirely satisfied with the currently available forms of democracy and consider that improved political participation mechanisms should be developed. Latvians and rural inhabitants form a greater proportion of such publicly active persons.

Political participation is significantly facilitated by access to information regarding decisions taken by State institutions and knowledge of the decision-making process. In total about one-third of respondents claimed to be informed to a large or fairly large extent about decisions already adopted by State institutions. Half as many claimed to be informed about draft decisions. A higher-level education could be mentioned as only the last of several significant participation factors. The provision of participation mechanisms by State structures is of fundamental importance for promoting the participation of politically active persons.

Overall this **Report's** research data corroborates that of NGOs: Latvia has a good legal framework for



participation, but many inhabitants lack the skills and experience required for meaningful participation in the public policy process.

## Participation strategies

In a more extensive analysis of the forms of public participation in Latvia, this **Report** distinguishes six different participation strategies (see Figure 3.3). Various types of skills, as well as experience and funding are required to implement them. Participants can use several strategies at the same time, and with the accumulation of experience, can shift from one strategy to another.

*Spontaneous and short-term political participation strategies* have great potential, as many people react to events in the form of “home democracy.” This **Report’s** participation survey shows that 56% of respondents discuss what they view as unsatisfactory political decisions with their colleagues, members of the family and friends. Through the public expression of their opinion in various manners, people sometimes even hope to indirectly influence the policy process. A typical arena for such spontaneous participation is the mass media, which, as has been mentioned previously, is a medium in which many people place high hopes and which many consider to be an instrument of authority. While it is possible to publicize one’s views by addressing the media, this is rarely sufficient to achieve the realization of one’s interests. This strategy sometimes occurs in the form of individual expression, or in the spontaneous mobilization of like-minded people. Even though the interests thus represented may be of a collective nature, their proponents rarely defend them actively over the longer term. This is one reason why the use of such a strategy is unlikely to have a direct influence on the public policy process.

The environment formed by spontaneous participation and “home democracy” creates a basis for broader participation. Publicly active persons state twice as often as passive ones that within the environment of their families and friends it is acceptable to become actively involved in public activities.

The strategy of spontaneously expressing one’s views is used not only by individuals, but also by interest groups and professional organizations. In such cases, problems affecting the interests of the organization are defined and a group is delegated

to defend the organization’s interests. Any resolution is seen to occur in the short-term process of dialogue or spontaneous protests, without engaging in long-term participation. This is shown in the fragment of an interview with the head of a professional organization:

*“The Architects’ Union is a public organization. It is not associated in any way with policy in State institutions. It is a voluntary organization with membership fees, congress meetings, and board elections.”* (Chairman of the Union)

Spontaneous reaction without further participation in the resolution of a problem is a form of participation that does not require large resources. It can provide a basis for the further expansion of activities with the participants’ increasing awareness of more effective forms of participation.

Another noteworthy form of spontaneous participation is *the spontaneous formation of groups for the resolution of concrete issues*. This form of activity is expanding rapidly, and one striking example has been in the form of tenant associations, which have been created to manage privatized apartment buildings. Such associations arise in answer to such concrete issues as heating and insulation, home repair and the privatization of land. Most frequently these associations arise spontaneously, with the initial tenant meetings occurring outdoors next to the apartment building or in one of its stairwells. In some cases, this participation grows into permanent activity through the creation of an official organization with legal status, as was the case with the Ogre Tenants’ Society.

Similar working strategies are used in Latvia’s rural areas, where many small business ideas have arisen through discussions in unofficial groups. Latvia’s Rural Development Programme has already been described in Chapter 1. In response to the opportunities provided by the World Bank-financed Rural Development Project, local initiative groups have been established in several parishes to generate local development strategies. These have provided the basis for further business ideas and entrepreneurial activity projects generated to attract rural development credits.

Spontaneous participation mechanisms may be used also for the defence of long-term interests in such cases where co-operation attempts do not bear fruit. A protest organized in a non-traditional manner has a greater chance of gaining the mass media’s attention and influencing public opinion.

Figure 3.3

### Public participation strategies in Latvia





The Environmental Protection Club has organized both officially registered and unannounced protest activities. One of these took place in December 2000 in opposition to the felling of trees for the construction of a parking garage in Riga's Kronvalda Park. A sharp conflict between public and private interests concluded with the felling of the trees, as described by the environmental activist:

*"We were unable to climb the trees. The enemy was more alert. (...) We were outmanoeuvred. It was hard to react. The trees were felled very early in the morning or at night, when everybody is sleeping. Were it not for the Green opposition, the public might have noticed maybe a week later. (...) It became a funeral procession for the felled trees."* (Representative of the Environmental Protection Club)

Protest activities are commonly conducted by the Environmental Protection Club to draw public attention to particular problems, and to put pressure on State and local government authorities.

Protest activities are sometimes an extreme form of participation that is adopted after other participation methods have failed to yield the desired results. A group of low-income inhabitants from Ventspils, having felt unable achieve the recognition of its interests through co-operation and non-traditional rallies, took the radical step of burning an effigy of the city council chairman at one of its assemblies. This drew greater attention to the group's problem than might have been the case with other methods.

In Latvia, individual unconventional activities have led to more permanent co-operation and provided long-term results. The blockade of border crossing points by farmers in the summer of 2000 compelled the Ministry of Agriculture to pay greater attention to farmers' issues. A stable co-operative instrument has evolved in the form of the Farmer's Co-operative Council, through which farmers can co-ordinate their interests with State institutions.

Examples from experience show that spontaneous protest activities are an appropriate strategy for the defence of one's interests and the resolution of local issues, and that these provide participants with experience, skills and knowledge that can be used in regular activity strategies.

*The participation of the public can also be initiated by State structures, and is successful in cases where representatives of the public are offered suitable par-*

*ticipation channels and partnership (see the section on Ventspils' Integration of Society Programme later in this Chapter).*

Some public organizations undertake to *monitor the activities of State administrative structures and their representatives*. Such a strategy is directed to preventing and publicising possible illegal activities with the participation of the mass media, and co-operating with State institutions in the adoption of decisions that are important to society. This is a permanent and responsible form of activity and most often is directed to the defence of the public good. In order to implement such monitoring activities, an official form of organization is necessary to keep abreast of possible illegal activities or to be an intermediary in the assessment of such cases.

Public interest organizations often undertake an intermediary role between State institutions and members of society. This occurs in cases where the link between State structures and the public is weak and where inhabitants are not informed about adopted decisions. Public interest organizations then step in to provide the missing information and support network. Since the exposure of hidden policies is an important element of such a strategy, information regarding decisions most often is acquired through unofficial channels. Many public monitoring groups and organizations have their own channels for the acquisition and further transfer of information:

*"Last week J. M. informed us that a group of nouveaux riches is levelling [seaside] sand dunes with bulldozers. This has not been approved. Later, of course, it will be."* (NGO representative).

Public organizations thus ensure openness with an alternative information transfer system. Such organizations also provide support and practical knowledge for the resolution of various issues:

*"It is ironic that personal contacts with people in the Riga City Council shorten the information acquisition process. Theoretically we have many problems with this. People inform us that such and such an event is occurring. We request information from the Riga City Council or the [Greater Riga] Regional Environment Administration. Theoretically, anyone should be able to go and find this information for himself. But either they are unable to obtain it or its acquisition time is very long. People are unaware of the fact that municipal employees are their servants, whose duty it is to provide information."* (NGO representative)



Public interest organizations have undertaken a unique law enforcement (ombudsman) role, as they serve the interests of inhabitants who have not gained or do not know how to acquire support in State institutions.

The supervision of State structures is usually done in a professional manner and requires knowledge about State administrative mechanisms and regulatory enactments. Public organizations usually have a small core of paid employees who ensure the continuity of activities. This type and volume of work requires a full or part-time commitment because contact with State institutions must be made during working hours, when most of the working public is indisposed and unable to directly use such participation activities. Moreover, in contrast to the previously discussed strategies that do not require the investment of considerable resources, this type of permanent participation is possible only with the assistance of donor funding. An example of this strategy is later described regarding the construction of a parking garage in Riga.

Another participation strategy is *the assumption of functions delegated by the State to NGOs*. Enduring traditions of co-operation have thus been established between stable NGOs and State institutions. In some cases the NGOs assume their tasks before the adoption of the relevant national legislation, as with Latvia's medical professional organizations, which have been performing broad regulatory and educational functions in their sectors for years.

According to data from the Non-governmental Organization Centre, some 80% of public organizations co-operate with State and local government structures in the adoption of decisions and preparation of regulatory enactments. Participation may also occur on an unofficial level through the provision of unofficial consultations to the relevant decision-makers. Such a strategy requires long-term participation, knowledge regarding policy-making, interest-defending ability and stable contacts with State administrative structures. This strategy will later be examined in more detail regarding reproductive health policy.

## Practical aspects of participation

Three examples of effective participation will be featured further in this Chapter, and special attention will be paid to the participation strategies used in these cases.

One example concerns the Ventspils Integration of Society Programme, which was established to promote the participation of residents, and particularly non-citizens, in the preparation and discussion of decisions by their local government. Obstacles to the existence of an integrated and open society were determined, and methods for their optimal resolution were proposed. The programme looks at integration from the perspective of the local community and the individual. The people of Ventspils, and particularly its non-citizens, were encouraged to take part in discussions of the programme and to increase their level of participation.

The second example of participation concerns the construction of several underground and multi-storied parking garages in the centre of Riga. These construction activities resulted in acrimonious public and NGO confrontations with the Riga City Council. Various issues were discussed in relation to this case, including construction in the natural territories and green zones of Riga, the fate of trees and gardens, the fate of the city's cultural and historical heritage in the designated construction sites, and the improvement of the traffic flow in the city. Opponents of the projects viewed them as unethical, and as the manifestation of a nation-wide encroachment by State structures and entrepreneurs onto public green space. Public participation partially influenced decision-making on these issues. In one case the planned garage was not built, while in the others compromises were reached.

The third case of participation is related to reproductive health policy, which in the widest sense is directed to the regulation of the demographic situation in the country. Latvia has one of Europe's lowest birth rates and is not experiencing a full renewal of its population. Reproductive health and economic indicators reveal much about the level of a country's development. Reproductive health policy is understood as policy regarding family planning, sexual health, medical treatment of infertility, maternity assistance and public education. This is a wide field where State institutions must co-operate with local governments, schools,



NGOs and all levels of medical service providers, beginning with primary care doctors and ending with specialized service professionals.

## Public participation: the example of the Ventspils Integration of Society Programme

The Ventspils Integration of Society Programme was initiated by the chairman of the Ventspils City Council and was worked out in about ten months from a basic idea to a final document (see Information 3.3).

One of the issues considered in forming the integration programme was increasing public participation by creating new forms of public participation and encouraging the public to use them. In analysing the development of the programme, one can determine several successful factors.

The formulation of the programme was skilfully managed and the varied interests of residents were co-ordinated. The city's residents formulated the

### Information 3.3

#### Formulation of the Ventspils Integration of Society Programme

May 1999. The Ventspils City Council chairman presents his initiative.

May-July 1999. Four City Council-organized meetings take place with the participation of representatives from local government institutions and various NGOs. The significance of the initiative is assessed and a solution is proposed. The public is involved in formulating the first ideas regarding the practical side of integration.

On 26 July 1999, the City Council formally authorizes the formulation of the Ventspils Integration of Society Programme (SIP) to facilitate the City Council's work in promoting the consolidation of a civil society, to ensure the implementation of the national State Integration Programme in a timely manner, and to foster the development of Ventspils as a dynamic, open and modern city.

July 1999 to January 2000. A working group is established with the participation of City Council and other municipal representatives, the Ventspils School of Graduate Studies, the Naturalization Board's regional office, the Ventspils branch of the Latvian Society for the Blind, the public organization *Nāc līdz!* (*Come Along!*) and Ventspils High School No. 3.

The working group agrees on the definition of integration and on the course of work to be followed. It considers the means at its disposal for co-operation with NGOs, the hearing of non-citizens' interests and the use sociological research.

The working group discusses the programme's structure and agrees on an implementation strategy. The draft programme is published in the mass media. Experts are invited to comment, and an annual public forum is organized.

In February 2000 public discussions of the integration programme are held. Some 50 residents directly take part. Reviews and opinions regarding the draft SIP are published in the newspaper *Ventas Balsis*.

On 17 April 2000, the Ventspils City Council approves the final version of the Ventspils Integration of Society Programme and establishes a permanent commission for its realization.

On 29 April 2000, a forum entitled *Integration of Society in Europe, Latvia and Ventspils* takes place. The forum is attended by the President of Latvia, foreign diplomats, local government representatives, the OSCE mission and UN representatives (as Ventspils SIP experts), NGO representatives, representatives of local government institutions, and the public. The Ventspils SIP is formally put forward and the tasks of local governments in realizing full societal integration in the country are discussed.

In January-March 2000 a candidate list for the city's Consultative Council for Non-citizen Issues (KPNJ) is published and discussed.

In May 2000 the Ventspils Consultative Council for Non-citizen Issues is established. It is granted local government commission status, along with the right to delegate its representatives to other commissions established by the City Council where the KPNJ has been accorded voting rights.

programme with their own resources, using available statistical data and sociological survey materials. They also prepared sectoral assessments and problem descriptions. Every resident had a say regarding the content of the programme. Outside experts were invited in the last phase of the project.

The draft programme was provided for discussion to the widest possible circle of Ventspils residents, who were invited to partake in the discussions. All local mass media were informed of its progress, and the full text of the draft programme was published in both Latvian and Russian. The two public discussions were attended by both individual residents and NGO representatives. The most active participants were Russian-speaking non-citizens, whose inability to speak the Latvian language and non-citizen status would normally restrict their participation.

The residents of Ventspils were involved, and not simply informed about the contents of the programme, with special attention being paid to Russian-speaking residents. In one of the places for discussion of the integration programme – Pārventa, where the majority of residents are Russian-speaking – the discussions took place in Russian at the request of those present. This show of respect raised the prestige of both the working group and the programme itself.

Even though the nation-wide Integration of Society Programme had been widely discussed in Ventspils proper, not much information had reached the city's Russian-speaking residents. It was actually the Ventspils integration programme that generated interest about the nation-wide programme and gave rise to local-level discussions.

The Ventspils Integration of Society Programme was designed to establish enduring, reciprocal dialogue between the public and the city's local government institutions. During the formulation of the programme, the City Council opened (and continues to operate) a "hot telephone," through which any resident could express his or her concerns. Post boxes were also placed in various locations throughout the city for the submission of written recommendations, which were replied to by city officials.

As a result of the formulation of the Ventspils integration programme a new type of institution in Latvia was established – the Ventspils Consultative Council for Non-citizen Issues, which is made up of non-citizens and recently naturalized citizens. The Consultative Council has an advisory function and may delegate its members to local government commissions. At present, representatives of the Council are partic-

ipating in the work of 13 local government commissions, with the right of one vote in each commission.

The Consultative Council for Non-citizen Issues is an intermediary institution between a municipal authority and the public. For non-citizens and new citizens it provides a stable and long-term participation arena, as non-citizens are denied the opportunity to use the most popular and most effective participation forms (at least according to respondents' replies) – elections and referendums. The sense of rejection that many non-citizens feel gives rise to insecurity about their status and makes them reluctant to use other forms of participation that are available to them by law. In the participation study for this **Report**, non-citizen respondents acknowledged that they often did not turn to local governments with their problems, because they considered that local governments work only for their electors.

The Council ensures a communications network between residents and the local government through the activity of the residents themselves. It is significant that this network arose from the wish of the local government to hear the concerns and interests of the city's residents and to transform them into equal partners. As one of the members of the Consultative Council said, the opportunity to work in such a council is helping people regain respect for the State. Some of the non-Latvian intelligentsia who were actively involved in the independence movement during the 1980s became non-citizens without voting rights in the restored Republic of Latvia. Many felt superfluous, unwanted and betrayed. Their withdrawal from participatory activities as a whole was a passive protest not against the State as such, but against the expression of State authority:

*"I have four generations living here, and yet I have to prove that I am loyal to the country. What is this country? Political parties? I have not been in prison, and I do not have to prove my loyalty. I know Latvia's history fairly well. Also the language and the national anthem. That is why I did not assume citizenship."* (Member of the Consultative Council)

The formulation of the Ventspils integration programme gave rise to several other forms of participation, including the establishment of a union of national cultural societies, cultural events projects, and a people's diplomacy initiative. Within the scope of this last activity, Ventspils residents of Russian origin – referring to the poor political relations between Latvia and Russia – established



links with Russians in Russia in the search for new forms of political, economic and cultural co-operation. They also shared their thoughts about the circumstances of the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia.

Chapter 1 of this **Report** shows that trust in Latvia's State institutions is low not only among non-citizens, but among a wide spectrum of the country's inhabitants. The formation of co-operation networks at various levels – and doted with real powers – between State authority structures and the public, could become a viable trust-promoting venture. The Ventspils Integration of Society Programme is one example where a co-operation network was established with the support of a local government, and which generated public activity from a part of the population that had not been active up until then.

## Monitoring of State and local government institutions: the example of the construction of parking garages in the centre of Riga

The controversial construction of several parking garages in Riga brought forth several participation strategies from the public. Individual protests appeared in the form of both daily conversations under “home democracy” procedures, and in the form of visits, telephone calls and letters to the mass media and NGOs. The reaction of some members of the public was quite emotional, and expressed in concerns about the disappearance of Rigans' favourite rest areas, reduced air quality in nearby apartment buildings, and the felling of trees in city parks. Public organizations combined this individual activity into collective action, and individual concerns were translated into a political level of communication (see Information 3.4).

In this case only a few interest groups engaged in active work. “Green” interests were represented by members of the Environmental Protection Club and the Green Party of Latvia. The *Delna* branch of Transparency International and the Soros Foundation – Latvia worked against the exclusion of the

public from the decision-making process and the adoption of decisions against the public interest. The Latvian Architects' Union also expressed its dissatisfaction with the projects supported by the City Council.

The most successful dialogue was between the entrepreneurs who planned the parking garages and the Riga City Council. The entrepreneurs had carefully prepared projects, well-trained employees with good communications skills and their own “good name” at their disposal. The City Council took a strong stand that went counter to its own Riga development plan for 1995-2005, and classified its contributions to the construction of the parking garages as investments.

The co-ordination of interests with the public was not of decisive importance. Even though public discussion of the *Jēkaba Arkāde* parking garage was organized as provided for by law, it did not appear to be seriously aimed at clarifying the views of the broader public. One entrepreneur described it as follows:

*“I placed advertisements in Diena and Rīgas Balss. It is their own fault if they do not read the newspapers. There is nothing I can do about that. About 20 people showed up. It was very good – no problems. There were no ‘Greens.’ That was their problem.”* (Entrepreneur)

Public discussions are often poorly advertised and take place for form's sake. Newspaper notices tend to “disappear” in the sheer volume of printed information.

*“It is not that people are not interested, but that it is not organized so that people come (...) If a noise is not made, then the mass media are not involved. There was a discussion. Where were you then?”* (NGO representative)

Public discussions regarding the projects did not take place in the context of Riga's development and were held merely for form's sake. The only exception was with the project at the *Vērmanģdārzs* Park, for which the City Council placed a suggestion book in its vestibule, and which allowed any member of the public to express his or her opinion. However, this concession by the City Council did not receive a universally positive evaluation:

*“Two books were filled. We wanted to publish [some of the materials] but couldn't get near them. Only for half an hour. On the one hand the views are written, but on the other they are still kept hidden.”* (NGO representative)

In the end, the Riga City Council took the views of the public into account and decided against the construction of an underground parking garage at the Vērmanģdārzs Park. However, a full compilation of the views expressed remained inaccessible to the public.

The entrepreneurs involved in the other cases form a powerful interest group that seems to have had a greater influence on city councillors than discussions with the public. While these entrepreneurs do not ignore the public interest, they look at it primarily from an economic perspective. Market surveys show that parking garages around Old Riga will be used by employees of the *Saeima*, government ministries and financial institutions, residents of Old Riga and entertainment seekers. The reaction of the public to the projects is not seen to be as objective and significant as market surveys and expected profits. The initial public reaction to the

construction of the *Jēkaba Arkāde* parking facility was mostly negative, and potential clients from the neighbouring *Jēkaba kazarmas* building complex also protested. Nevertheless, the project went ahead as planned. A compromise agreement reached in discussions with City Councillors and public organizations was not fully implemented, as several trees that were supposed to be left standing were later cut down, and a number of the trees saved as a result of the compromise were damaged.

This openly demonstrates the weak position of some public organizations and State and local government institutions in the face of private capital interests. Neither the public nor the supervisory municipal institutions involved could ensure the full implementation of promises made during discussions. The public was poorly organized in this case, and the public organizations involved were unable to mobilize broad and sustained public activity.

#### Information 3.4

### Participation attempts and mechanisms regarding the construction of parking garages in the centre of Riga

#### Agents involved:

- Riga City Council
- Entrepreneurs
- Individual residents
- Public interest organizations

#### Stages and mechanisms of participation

1. Residents provide information to the mass media and public interest organizations through letters, telephone calls, visits, and subsequent publications in the press.
2. Representatives of the public take part in the public discussions announced by the entrepreneurs.
3. An exchange of views takes place in the mass media.
4. The Environmental Protection Club organizes various protest activities.
5. Public interest organizations co-ordinate their views about the projects with the Riga City Council and arrive at compromise solutions.
6. The legal aspects of the parking garages' construction are investigated with the financial support of the Soros Foundation - Latvia.
7. The Soros Foundation verbally asks the Minister for Special Assignments Regarding the Reform of the State Administration and Local Government Affairs, the Prosecutor-General, the plenum of the Supreme Court and the State Audit Office to bring the matter before the Constitutional Court, but is turned down.
8. The Soros Foundation submits a written request to the Constitutional Court and asks it to investigate the matter. The Court does not take up the issue.
9. Protest activities continue, but the number of active supporters decreases as this form of activity loses its effectiveness.
10. The Environmental Protection Club considers changing its participation mechanisms and turns to the courts.



On the other hand, the builders of the parking garage did agree to archaeological excavations on the site, felled less trees than originally planned, planted new trees following the completion of the project, and made serious architectural efforts to ensure that the structure clashed as little as possible with its surroundings.

As mentioned previously, public pressure compelled the City Council to rule against the construction of a parking garage at the Vērmanģdārzs Park, and compromises were achieved in the other cases, including the announcement of a new tender for the construction of a parking facility at the riverfront.

The public defended its interests through the use of two different forms of influence. Protest activities drew the most public attention, had a greater effect on influencing public opinion, induced dialogue and achieved compromise solutions. However, the Greens did not manage to sustain the momentum of their protests and mobilize sufficient public support.

Resorting to court action has not been any more effective. The Soros Foundation – Latvia became involved in the dispute after reading publications in the mass media and after receiving personal and telephone complaints by individual representatives of the public. The issue was discussed by the Foundation’s Civil Society Commission, which ruled that the Foundation should investigate the issue further before taking a concrete stand. To date there have been no concrete results affecting the actual realization of these projects. Having received unofficial verbal refusals, the Soros Foundation and

the *Delna* branch of Transparency International continued to correspond with various State institutions in order to get the car park issue examined by the Constitutional Court. While there is little likelihood of this happening, the main aim of the Soros Foundation has been to use its monitoring actions to direct the activities of local governments towards transparent and responsible policy-making.

*“[Success] in the car park matter was 50:50. From the point of view of a court battle we have lost. But the public has won by showing that the local government cannot do whatever it likes. We have made the local government think about how it will operate next time. (...) We raise questions and get things moving. Then people become more educated. The local government has to answer for its activities.”* (NGO representative)

With protest activities having lost their effectiveness, the Environmental Protection Club has considered taking the Riga City Council to court. This activity is really directed towards the future. According to conservative estimates, in the case of a defeat, it would take several years for the matter to go through the entire Latvian court system and reach an international court. By then other issues will have assumed greater importance.

Organizations fulfilling a “watchdog” role in the public interest seek effective ways to improve the situation step by step. Even if no concrete result is achieved, such activities have the positive effect of activating the public and making it more difficult to disregard public interests in the future. According

## Guest author

### Romāns Vainšteins, Professional world cycling champion

#### A small nation with great resolve

I like the fact that Riga is being renewed and modernized at such a fast pace. Riga’s central area is kept clean and tidy. Parks in Riga’s central area and other cities are in order and well taken care of. I am particularly pleased with Ventspils, where development is taking place at full speed. The construction and modernization of the sports centre in that city is a great step forward, because young people will have a place to entertain themselves as well as the opportunity to become high-class athletes.

I am glad that every inhabitant has the opportunity to work and take responsibility for his own prosperity and happiness as he chooses. I am proud that Latvia is an independent nation and I want it to remain that way in the future. Our forefathers fought for centuries to be free. I am proud to be Latvian and I want my children and grandchildren to be Latvian. We are a small nation but in our hearts and souls we are as large as any other.

to representatives of such public interest organizations, activities of this nature help to form and to stabilize participation channels, and render each successive form of participation easier to implement and more effective.

## Policy-making and the defence of interests: the example of reproductive health policy

Reproductive health policy is one field where NGOs have become actively involved, co-operating with State institutions and assuming some of their functions. Nationally this policy is not defined. A draft reproductive health law has been in preparation since 1994 and was passed in its first reading by the *Saeima* only in 2000.

The long road of the reproductive health law through the corridors of power can be explained by a lack of interest on the part of those in political office. Reproductive health policy is very costly. Health services, investments in the purchase of technology, and social assistance to families with children incur great expenses. Reproductive health policy affects a broad yet "scattered" part of the population, as it does not address as concrete a target group as, for example, pension policy. Therefore, politicians have not advanced it to the centre of their activities.

In the previously discussed cases of participation the policy process was directed by powerful local governments and entrepreneurs (with the *Ventspils* integration programme it was the local government, while with the *Riga* parking garages it was the *Riga* City Council together with entrepreneurs). In contrast, reproductive health policy is being put forward by a group of health specialists and representatives of the public. These people have assumed part of the State's functions in the formation of reproductive policy, and are seeking to defend their own interests in the process.

The reproductive health sector can be divided into two policy traditions that exist in parallel. One tradition is characterized by centralized, closed and hidden decision-making dominated by intrigues, as other interested participants and rank-and-file doctors stay in the sidelines and quietly criticize the process amongst themselves:

*"X does not really want to leave the Riga City Council and begin to work. In principle he is right. That is related to elections. X is the State proxy in hospital B. He forces hospital B to its knees, which has to do the same [as the hospital managed by X]. Well, the manager of one hospital cannot be the State proxy in another. That is the way it happens. Nobody gets let in."* (Doctor)

Passivity is upheld by several circumstances. Many doctors do not believe in their abilities to intervene. A stable view has evolved regarding the authority hierarchy in the medical sector: in order to intervene one must work in "high" positions and be linked to political parties. A second contributing factor is the insecure position of reproductive health specialists. With cardinal changes in the health care system, the number of places for doctors is decreasing. The birth rate is falling and the demand for maternity specialists has rapidly decreased. Several maternity departments in Latvia have been closed. Many district centre hospital maternity sections are underworked and the staff fear losing their jobs in the case of hospital mergers. Financial resources in the sector are limited and there is a constant battle for them. In such a situation it is not easy to overcome personal interests and to work in the name of collective goals.

The perception of a centralized policy is echoed in the education system. Active youths from the Latvian Family Planning Association *Papardes zieds* (*Fern Blossom*) characterized the practice of health education in their schools as reflecting closed, incompetent, and non-transparent teaching methods. Only one of the youths said that it was possible to freely express one's own views on reproductive health in his school.

The second tradition in the reproductive health sector is one of involvement and participation, particularly by NGOs, which have been active in the formulation of reproductive policy. For example, Latvia was also represented by NGO workers at the 1994 UN Cairo conference on population and development. A serious assessment of the situation at the national level began only in 1997, when the Latvian Ministry of Welfare, in co-operation with the UN Demographic Fund and NGOs, conducted research and prepared a draft reproductive health strategy.

Interest in Latvia's reproductive health policies has been shown by foreign NGOs and foundations, the World Health Organization and the UNDP. *Papardes zieds* – the first Latvian NGO in this field – was



established with the direct assistance of ģemigrē Latvians, who provided personal leadership and inspiration for the activities of the organization. Joint activities provided an opportunity to establish a collective strategy for reducing the level of abortions and educating the public on reproductive health.

A powerful organizational network with extensive work experience has now developed in this field, uniting both professional and public organizations. According to data from the Non-governmental Organization Centre, about 250 NGOs mention reproductive health in their spheres of activity at least once, while about 40 professional and public interest organizations actively operate in this field.

The largest number of public interest organizations associated with reproductive health work in Riga – about ten in total. Nine organizations operate in Kurzeme, six in Zemgale and Vidzeme, and five in Latgale. Some of the regional organizations, such as the Youth Health Centre in Dobele, have managed to attract foreign donors. The principal problem outside of Riga is the lack of personnel with management and co-ordination skills, which is exacerbated by the exodus of talented young people to the larger cities to further their education. It was due to this circumstance that the successfully established youth centre in Saldus closed its doors.

The outstanding and long-term leader among Latvia's reproductive health organizations is *Papardes zieds*, which has been operating in the educational field since 1993. Representatives of the organization acknowledge that its initial goals have been largely achieved. A volunteer teaching network has been established and teaching materials have been provided to schools. The level of knowledge among young people has improved. Now the task of influencing policy, and the acquisition of skills associated with this, has been brought to the foreground.

*“We are travelling along two roads. Educating the public – providing information and opportunities. Teaching people that they have rights, and then promoting an active attitude towards reproductive health, and participation in policy-making. The second is to work with policy-makers. We have educated members of the Saeima. I spoke with M in Cairo for a whole week. All of those who were there from the ministry – Z, P, K – have changed. In this field we have educated the entire higher echelon. (...) B is the [next] patron of the Baltic Gynaecological Congress. He agreed while he was still the mayor of Riga. I hope that at the congress we will still be able to say: Prime Minister B, ex-mayor of Riga.”* (Representative of *Papardes zieds*)

It is significant that young people who are not satisfied with the information acquired at school regarding reproductive health have become involved in the activities of *Papardes zieds*, and gained an education as volunteers in this NGO. Thus, while not yet being aware of their participation in political life, they have become policy implementers. Politics and democracy are also associated with “grassroots” forms of participation, which initially may be unwitting, but which provide valuable participation experience.

The participation of public organizations in the formation of reproductive policy allows one to make several conclusions regarding methods of influence and participation. One of the methods used most often by the organization is personal contacts with influential politicians and civil servants. Various situations are taken advantage of – both when officials become patients and through joint participation in various events. Influential officials involved in the realization of projects bring them attention and raise their prestige.

The second widely used method involves soliciting the participation of other NGOs in both official and unofficial working groups. The draft reproductive health law, for example, was developed in an unofficial working group with the active participation of representatives from professional and public organizations.

Another method of influencing policy is through official requests and legislative proposals. For example, *Papardes zieds* and the Menopause Association asked the State to partially fund hormonal therapy for women during menopause. This request was based on predicted savings in health care funds, as complications that can arise by not using such therapy might cost the State even more.

As a whole, reproductive health policy reflects the entire policy process in the country. The dissatisfaction of people working in this sector and of patients receiving medical services has fuelled their desire to improve the situation. This is an important political factor that stimulates people to become active agents of policy formation. The defence of interests must be formulated and expressed in a language and level that conforms to the policy process. People become political agents from the moment that they formulate and express their interests.



## Summary and recommendations

The public arena, in which there is a place for all public interests, is beginning to appear in Latvia. The first steps have occurred in small local governments, which have themselves undertaken to build bridges toward a civil society, and in individual State institutions. However, the ruling political model is still far from the ideal of a civil society. Even though the legal framework for it has been secured, participation in practice has been increasing at a slow pace and with difficulty. On the one side stands the public, which does not know the extent of its rights and which does not believe in either the promises given by the government or in its own ability to influence the implementation of these promises. On the other side can be found the State administrative system, which does not consider the views and desires of the public to be an integral part of its work motif. Each side mentions the other's unwillingness and inability to participate as a reason for non-co-operation.

A large potential for activity lies dormant within Latvian society, where there is a comparatively high interest in the public policy process. Only 22% of those surveyed said that they are not interested in politics. Currently this public interest is not being used to its full extent. It is mainly used in elections and referendums, and in the discussion of politics under "home democracy" procedures. Most people are not aware or have a limited knowledge of the public policy process and their right to influence it.

The NGO sector has reached a certain level of maturity and competence. Several NGOs can work as equal partners with State and local government institutions in deciding on issues and implementing adopted policies. Clearly, not all members of society can resolve all issues. But the benefit of societal participation is more than just competent decisions. The most important benefit is public support for the policies adopted by State institutions.

Public support cannot be gained by simply "going through the motions" with formal consultations. There must be long-term co-operation with public interest groups following the adoption of a decision and its implementation. The quality and implementation of decisions is thus improved, and a competent and active society is formed.

The advent of public participation in policy-making would be facilitated by following four parallel steps:

- Promoting the accommodation of public interests by State institutions;
- Strengthening the ability of the public to participate;
- Improving public monitoring mechanisms;
- Promoting co-operation between NGOs in the defence of public interests.

## Promoting the accommodation of public interests by State institutions

This direction of development on the road to increased public participation arises through the awareness that State structures cannot and must not take decisions in the name of society without consulting with it. The divide that separates the State administration from society is conducive to closed policy-making that serves mainly private interests. It is strongly inhibiting the development of the country and an improvement in the well-being of the population. Closed policy is costing the country dearly, and in the future these costs could be even greater. Only with the purposeful opening of State and local government institutions to the public will irresponsible, chaotic and corrupted policy-making be reduced.

Politicians and civil servants will not acquire this awareness suddenly and unexpectedly, but as the result of systematic education and the acquisition of knowledge. The relevant political education programmes must be presented without delay, without awaiting the natural change of generations in the future. The competence of State and local government structures is analysed more in detail in the next Chapter.

State structures need to offer real co-operation mechanisms directed both to the hearing of public interests and to accountability for decisions taken. NGOs are one step ahead of State structures in the sense that a broad database has been established regarding Latvian NGOs and their areas of activity. This database can help State and local government institutions to find appropriate co-operation partners.



## Strengthening the ability of the public to participate

A second road that must be travelled in order for the public to enter and participate in politics, is the strengthening of its participatory abilities. This could be achieved with the civic education of society. Some educational functions have already been assumed by NGOs in cooperation with the mass media, but the popularization of educationally positive examples is only one step in the process. Civic education must enter school curricula and continuing education institutions with the support of the State.

State support in both moral and financial form must be provided for NGOs, which form the participatory base for public participation. In Latvia social activity is increasing despite the lack of a unified and conscious State NGO policy, rather than because of any consistent policy. As Latvia prepares for membership in the European Union, we should recall that Latvia wishes to approach a model that accords civil society greater importance in State policy-making.

In the previous **Reports** from 1996 and 1998, many recommendations were made for strengthening the NGO sector. These have not, however, gained widespread support. The authors of these reports maintain that:

- The State must establish a clear tax policy in relation to NGOs;
- Organizations operating with donated funds in the name of the public good must not be taxed (NGOs share all donations with the State);
- The State must promote philanthropic activities by offering advantageous tax breaks to donors and by facilitating the establishment of foundations.

The current experience of co-operation between the State and NGOs must be assessed. The success or failure of the delegation of State administrative functions to NGOs has still not been appropriately evaluated. At this time there is no common understanding of the usefulness and effectiveness of such practices, and there is no policy regarding their further development. The fields in which the assistance of public and private organizations could be useful need to be clearly determined. In some ministries and State administrative organizations co-operation with NGOs has been successful, while in others it has not gained the required support or has turned out to be unsuccessful. Allegations

regarding an unwillingness to co-operate have been made by both sides. An evaluation of co-operation to date will not only help to better organize future policy, but also provide the positive effect of openly recognising the important role of the public at large.

## Improving public monitoring mechanisms

The third path involves the strengthening of mechanisms that promote the realization of public interests. A good legislative framework already exists in the definition of people's rights, but it is also necessary to provide guarantees and mechanisms for the realization of these rights. The 1998 **Report** recommended the establishment of an institution that would fulfil the role of ombudsman, whose functions are currently being carried out in Latvia by various NGOs. In Lithuania such an institution is operating successfully. One can also choose an alternative to the appointment of an ombudsman by strengthening existing mechanisms. In such a case, NGO activities would require strong support from the country's court institutions.

With the expansion of opportunities for the public to monitor State institutions, the implementation of this **Report's** first two recommended steps will be more easy to realize. However, one should remember that an improvement in public monitoring mechanisms requires first and foremost the political will of those in power.

## Promoting co-operation between NGOs in the defence of public interests

The public at large still does not get sufficiently mobilized and does not use all of the mechanisms at its disposal. NGOs could implement more unified and purposeful activities in the defence of public interests. They would achieve better results with consolidated and consistent action. Expanding contacts and co-operation with other interest groups would also help. The non-governmental agents with the greatest influence in policy-making are experts and professional organizations. This

potential should be activated, and in case of necessity, organized and supported.

The basic reason behind the lack of a consistent policy regarding civil society is the previously mentioned inability or unwillingness of State structures

to understand the country's national development priorities. If the contribution of civil participation and non-governmental organizations to national development is not fully appreciated, then public activity will continue to remain sidelined as unimportant.