

## THE EXPERIENCE OF NGOS THAT REPRESENT THE INTERESTS OF THE DISABLED IN COOPERATING WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS

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**Abstract.** *This article examines the experiences of NGOs that represent the interests of the disabled in cooperating with municipal institutions. Applying qualitative research methods (interviews and content analysis), the forms of NGO cooperation with local government institutions were revealed as the most important avenue of financial support for NGO projects. The results of this study showed that NGOs face challenges – first among which is power inequality, where local authorities have little experience of working with people with disabilities. Factors that strengthen the successful cooperation of NGOs with municipal institutions were also identified. Based on the results of the qualitative study, it was found that successful cooperation is related to the commitment of the NGOs themselves, contributing to the stronger and more active well-being of people with disabilities as well as mutual support and trust.*

**Keywords:** *non-governmental organisations, cooperation, municipal institution.*

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** *nevyriausybinės organizacijos, bendradarbiavimas, savivaldos institucijos.*

### Introduction

Democratic processes in Lithuania allowed for the establishment of organisations that defend the rights of the disabled, which led to changes in the situation of the disabled in social life (Ruškus 2002). It is noteworthy that the establishment of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) has also contributed to changes in the lives of people with disabilities and their families. The existence of NGOs is a common phenomenon in modern society,

yet they are unique in terms of their purpose, nature, methods of resource mobilization, and forms of assistance provided. NGOs are considered part of the social, cultural, sports, or economic sectors (Kuruwila 2015). Dupuy and Prakash (2020) observe that NGOs play an important role in any democracy by providing the opportunity for citizens to shape social policy together and thus facilitate political work for government officials. Other authors treat NGOs as a third sector that is becoming a means of expressing freedom, which not only promotes welfare policies but also provides opposition to dubious political decisions (Salamon and Sokolowski, 2016). It should also be noted that NGOs are being understood as having a political impact on the protection of human rights (Landsberger 2019); consequently, the importance of NGOs in society is not in doubt.

The legal framework is sufficiently well-developed to represent the interests of people with disabilities. One important piece of legislation is the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (27 May 2010, No. XI-854), which aims to promote, protect, and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities. Consequently, regulatory laws and various documents form goals and objectives for people with disabilities to receive help, but also to protect them from experiencing discrimination. However, this requires the cooperation of NGOs with local authorities. It should be noted that, according to Bučaitė-Vilkė and Lazauskienė (2019), cooperation is useful, especially when it is developed to achieve a specific goal in the implementation of strategies. The initiation of cooperation promotes the purposeful development of activities and exchange between each participant. This enables the achievement of results and real help for the disabled.

The scientific problem of this research is substantiated by the fact that a lot of attention is paid to research into NGO activities, whilst the field of NGOs for the disabled in cooperation with municipal institutions has not yet been thoroughly investigated. This area of research needs to be addressed in order to better represent the interests of people with disabilities. Insufficient funding for NGO activities limits their development, and there is a lack of teamwork, dialogue, and trust between NGOs and local authorities. The aim of this paper is to reveal the forms of cooperation that NGOs use to cooperate with municipal institutions, the difficulties that are encountered during cooperation, and the factors that determine effective cooperation.

NGOs receive a lot of attention from scientists, researchers, and practitioners (see: Noreikienė and Žilinskas 2017; Beneševičiūtė 2015; Jazukevičiūtė 2014; Šilinskytė 2013; Marcinkutė 2011; Escher and Brzustewicz 2020; Young 2020; Prentice, Imperial, and Brudney 2019; Kurowska-Pysz and Szczepańska-Woszczyzna 2018; Wejcman 2011, Lewis 2003). Beneševičiūtė's (2014) research highlighted the aspirations of NGOs in developing the social participation of people with disabilities. This study also revealed that, in future, the activities of NGOs should be related to cooperation not solely with other NGOs. This demonstrates that the cooperation of NGOs with municipal institutions remains a relevant and researchable scientific problem.

As such, it is possible to formulate the following research questions: what forms of cooperation exist between NGOs and self-government institutions? What challenges do NGO leaders face? What prospects for NGO cooperation do NGO leaders envisage in

cooperating with authorities? The answers to these research questions might reveal the peculiarities of cooperation, which would allow for new ways of cooperation to be discerned alongside knowledge of how to strengthen the activities of NGOs more effectively. Cooperation with external organisations as understood here, according to Žalimienė et al. (2013), is important not only for ongoing activities but also for reducing routine, as opportunities are gained to improve skills through the acquisition of new knowledge and experience.

The aim of this empirical research is to reveal the experiences of cooperation between NGOs that concern disabled people and self-government institutions, and to analyse the results of this research. The research methods include: analysis of scientific literature; qualitative research performed using the interview method; and subsequent data processing using the content analysis method.

### **Literature Review**

Cooperation is an important capacity of NGOs in opening up assistance to people with disabilities. The directionality of NGO activities focuses on various forms of cooperation with municipal institutions. However, support for NGO projects and activities is paramount. Projects are based on ideas that are implemented in NGO activities which promote cooperation in communities (Lewis 2003). A review of Šilinskytė's (2013) research shows that not only human capital, but also financial resources are extremely important. The main task of NGOs becomes constant communication and cooperation in order to solve social problems and raise funds. One of the most relevant forms of NGO cooperation can be found where cooperation is based on human rights as a map of socio-political change. The human rights framework provides protection against abuses of power, and four values are important in the context of disability: dignity, autonomy, equality, and solidarity (Quinn and Degener 2002, 14–19).

It should be noted that inequality of power limits cooperation. Marcinkutė (2011, 35) observes that there is still insufficient cooperation between NGOs (both between NGOs working in different fields and between organisations representing the same social groups), which gives grounds to say that Lithuania does not yet have a deep tradition of cooperation between state institutions and NGOs, as well as among “non-governmental organisations” themselves. Noreikienė and Žilinskas (2017) add that the activeness of NGOs that concern disabled people in the public administration process in municipalities is low. The authors also revealed that the factors influencing the low level of NGO participation are negative public attitudes, bureaucracy, the passivity of the disabled, fears, and inadequate infrastructure. Gerasimova (2005) emphasises that cooperation between NGOs and government exists when it increases citizens' involvement in governance, and when it engenders greater accountability and transparency of bureaucracy, greater access to information, and a greater role for NGO cooperation in shaping disability policy. This also applies to NGO decision-making.

It should be emphasised that the cooperation of NGOs with government representatives, according to Appe and Barragán (2017), helps to reinforce the legitimacy of civil

society, promotes the sustainability of NGOs, and builds on the strengths of NGOs, whilst also contributing to the perspective of social development. The commitment of NGOs to the well-being of people with disabilities also contributes to this. Guilar and Loring's (2008) insights explain that cooperation promotes the creation of social networks, the formation of positive relationships, and dialogue with government officials. It is necessary to be aware that it is important not only to have dialogue, but also to support and trust the authorities in implementing the activities of people with disabilities. This would also encourage teamwork. Gumuliauskienė and Taputis (2005) aptly state that teamwork improves the quality of activities, employee action, and information transfer, whilst also providing employees with wider opportunities for self-realisation and involving their productive participation in change. Teamwork is also encouraged by mutual cooperation between NGOs themselves. In summary, according to Wejcman (2001), those working in NGOs are sensitive to other people's social problems and respond flexibly to those problems. NGOs are not involved in a manner that is directly related to government structures; they meet the needs of people with disabilities and make suggestions to the authorities.

### **Research Methodology**

This study is based on networking theory, which is significant in that it focuses on the experiences of NGO leaders working together. Networking is understood as a means of improving targeted cooperation between local authorities and NGOs. This theory becomes essential, as it helps to uncover new knowledge and to exchange information and experiences. Examining the features of networking, it can be observed that cooperation characterises the provision of information by NGOs to government officials about people with disabilities, and cooperation is based on mutual trust (Castells 2005). Networking theory allows us to reveal the forms of cooperation between disability-focused NGOs and local government institutions, the challenges that limit cooperation, and the factors that strengthen it.

The leaders of the Panevėžys, Radviliškis, Pakruojis, and Šiauliai cities and districts (N = 9) NGOs participated in the survey conducted as part of this research. All NGO leaders were women between the ages of 48 and 64 with limited working capacity. The timing of the study was agreed in advance with the study participants, and the researcher conducting the study met each respondent at the headquarters of their NGO. Some parts of some interviews were conducted by telephone, and the language of the study participants was not corrected. In order to maintain the confidentiality of research participants and research ethics, the names of these organisations is not published in this paper.

In order to reveal the experiences of the NGOs that concern disabled people in cooperating with municipal institutions, a qualitative study method was chosen, which allowed for a detailed look at the problem under consideration. A qualitative research strategy was applied, which was based on the knowledge of the research participant – in the sense of individual experience – and the perspectives of the participants, which focused on change, problem solving, policy, and cooperation (Žydžiūnaitė 2007). Qualitative research makes it possible to understand the depth of thought of respondents when it

comes to helping a group of marginalised people. This enables researchers to understand the language, motives, and challenges of the subjects (Hall 2013).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured interview encourages each participant to interpret their subjective experiences in their own way, focusing on the fact that the respondents have complex sets of knowledge. Knowledge includes assumptions that can not only answer questions, but that can also be constantly supplemented. In addition, it is a free form of communication between the researcher and the participants (Flick 2009).

During the research, one specific category was singled out, the content of which consisted of the targeting of NGO activities focused on forms of cooperation with municipal institutions (Table 1). This category is one of the forms of NGO cooperation that determines financial support for NGO projects and activities concerning people with disabilities.

**Table 1. The targeting of NGO activities focused on forms of cooperation with municipal institutions (N = 9)**

Category	Sub - categories	Illustrative statements	Frequency of the statements
Forms of NGO cooperation with municipal institutions	<b>Financial support for NGO activity projects</b>	“We are cooperating with the government of City X, and preparing projects for health activities for the disabled. Sometimes the municipality helps, but when the municipality cannot or does not help, we are clearly looking for additional sponsors. The government seems to be helping, but we still lack a lot, especially for the purchase of health equipment such as walking sticks and other supplies, which is really expensive. People with disabilities cannot be told that we do not have money and there will be no activities”; “In cooperation with the municipality, we prepare various programs, and it is clear that additional sponsors and like-minded people are being sought for their implementation”; “We submit projects to the municipality to get support”; “Well, of course we create projects anyway”; “We are creating projects for the district.”	9
	<b>Development of social services</b>	“For the mentally disabled to receive social services, we try to fight with the municipality to allow us to provide as many services as possible”; “Our main motive is to work together to provide social services for people with disabilities”; “In cooperation with the government, we really seek social services, because we go home to the disabled person and we support them so that they do not break down”; “In cooperation with the government, we really seek social services”.	7

Category	Sub - categories	Illustrative statements	Frequency of the statements
Forms of NGO cooperation with municipal institutions	<b>Provision of information to local government institutions by NGOs regarding the problems faced by the disabled</b>	“When we did such a meaningful action as when the blind walked with white sticks, this was just an unconventional display of how the disabled walk and what obstacles the blind face. It is very good here for the municipalities themselves to see the need to help the blind”; “It is very important that we understand that crucial information about the problems faced by people with disabilities, and their recognition, is the only way to work together”; “After all, one government is coming, then another is coming, and we are trying to make contacts again, which is very difficult. When another government comes, it needs to be informed all over again regarding the disabled. You have to work with the authorities to let them know that there are visually impaired people in City X.”	6
	<b>Prevention of the violations of human rights</b>	“To find people with disabilities who have been isolated; to represent them in their rights. I think maybe the rights of people with disabilities are not protected”; “But, on the other hand, the very essence of cooperation is that we encourage the protection of people with intellectual disabilities, their families, and their rights. Let us understand the disabled, because they also have rights – they’re still people. A person with a mental disability is still isolated”; “Parents are sometimes powerless; no one represents their interests, then our organisation helps and represents interests. Therefore representing the interests of the mentally disabled – their personal interests – and carrying out such prevention against discrimination is very important for us”; “All authorities must realise that a person with a disability is a person with rights.”	4
	<b>Consultations of NGOs with municipal representatives</b>	“It is necessary that the municipality should constantly advise us on where to get money, what projects to create – it would be very useful”; “Our cooperation is in consulting with the municipality. We go and hope to find out what opportunities our organisation will have.”	2
Total:			28

As the results of this research show, a common form of cooperation is the funding of NGO project activities. Financial support for NGOs is particularly significant because people with disabilities who experience social exclusion have the opportunity to participate in these activities (Rusare and Jay 2015). It should also be noted that financial support from government bodies to NGOs is sometimes insufficient, therefore NGOs themselves have to seek additional financial resources in order to carry out their activities. Social

services are identified as an important area of NGO cooperation, and NGO leaders observed that by providing social services to people with disabilities, people with disabilities receive help and become more independent. The results of this study show that the dissemination of information by NGOs is important as it promotes closer co-operation in developing awareness in municipal institutions of people with disabilities and the problems that they face. It should be noted that the interests of people with disabilities are more effectively represented when the prevention of the violation of human rights is in place. This research revealed that a form of cooperation such as consultation ensures the availability of information to the NGOs themselves, which opens up opportunities for them to carry out their activities.

The participants of this study singled out the challenges that lead to the limited cooperation of NGOs with municipal institutions (Table 2), and one of the key challenges limiting cooperation was the inequality of power.

*Table 2. Challenges limiting the successful cooperation of NGOs with municipal institutions (N = 9)*

Category	Subcategory	Illustrative statements	Frequency of the statements
Challenges limiting successful cooperation between NGOs and municipal institutions	<b>Inequality of powers directed at the lack of work experience in municipal institutions</b>	“It is difficult to solve the problems of disabled members, and we wish that this was not the case when it is necessary to do so. Somehow, our government does not recognize the highly specialised needs of the disabled. The government treats us as if we know nothing. Even though we talked today – well, it’s clear that there is a lack of municipal skills”; “What I have noticed from my practice is that the government is so unaware of the problems of the disabled”; “We see the main issue in the fact that municipal employees have absolutely no experience in working with people with disabilities. They do not fully understand the problems of people with disabilities, so how can we work together?”	9
	<b>Failure of municipal institutions to involve NGOs in decision-making processes in the formulation of disability policy</b>	“The municipality plans a budget for the disabled every year, but don’t even invite us to meetings – well, sometimes we can’t express our needs. This does not explain why the funds are being cut – if we ask, they do not understand properly”; “These disabled people are not included in any government”; “Far from making disability policy yet, we can’t decide anything”; “Well, what can we do if we don’t decide for the authorities, we can’t force the municipality to do things.”; “It only makes us applicants, not problem solvers. We want to set up a Disability Council to get involved in decision-making.”	7

Category	Subcategory	Illustrative statements	Frequency of the statements
Challenges limiting successful cooperation between NGOs and municipal institutions	<b>Bureaucratic barriers that reduce the effective representation of the interests of people with disabilities</b>	“Wherever we turn, there is bureaucracy. This must not be the case, especially when problems need to be resolved quickly”; “I just read those laws. There are a lot of them, but they don’t work. Right now, I am reading the catalogue of social services, but there is bureaucracy everywhere, and how will you provide those services? Still, there is a lot to change”; “We have to go through the threshold of authority. When you go, they promise and don’t fulfil. Well, they just procrastinate”; “We write a bunch of letters. We must constantly raise the issue and never let it go, because the bureaucracy will stop everything.”	5
	Competition between NGOs and local authorities	“But sometimes they don’t go to talk to us, it seems that we are such competitors to them. They think that we will tear out the money from the municipality.”	1
Total statements:			22

Based on the analysis of the research data, it can be stated that the main challenge of cooperation, according to the research participants, is the inequality of power between NGOs and municipal institutions. NGO leaders stressed that the representatives of the municipalities have little work experience in solving the problems of the disabled. Consequently, there remains a lack of experience in municipal institutions together with NGOs in solving the problems of the disabled. Assessing the content of the subcategory that was singled out, the participants of the study emphasized that cooperation is limited by the fact that municipal institutions do not involve NGOs in decision-making processes in the formulation of disability policy. In this way, cooperation is insufficient when NGOs are not seen as socio-political partners. This means that the tradition of cooperation is not formed, and as such the potential of NGOs as one of the main organisations providing assistance to persons with disabilities is not fully exploited. Limited cooperation is also affected by bureaucratic obstacles, which limit the effective representation of the interests of people with disabilities. Participants in the study stated that cooperation is limited by competing interest-groups seeking financial resources.

In today’s world, collaboration is one of the key determinants of success. In order to answer the questions of the research, the factors that strengthen cooperation between NGOs and municipal institutions have been identified. This study presents data indicating cooperation aimed at the commitment of NGOs themselves to contributing to the stronger and more active well-being of people with disabilities (Table 3).

**Table 3. Factors strengthening cooperation between NGOs and self-government institutions (N = 9)**

Category	Subcategory	Illustrative statements	Frequency of statements
Factors strengthening cooperation between NGOs and local authorities	<b>Cooperation on the commitment of NGOs themselves to contributing to stronger and more active well-being for people with disabilities</b>	“We inform the social support department regularly about what disasters happen to the disabled – what is wrong. Our contribution is really significant, but we also need the contribution of the other side”; “We have to build cooperation all the time. That is why we always want to contribute, we want to work – we are a strong foundation that gives a lot to the government”; “We can make an impact, if we are active – we are already influential”; “I took the initiative to resolve that they would not destroy our society. I am committed to working for the disabled. It was a nice collaboration”; “We can make a strong commitment to implementing the Convention.”	8
	<b>Cooperation aimed at supporting local government representatives in NGO activities and mutual trust</b>	“We would like the partnership itself to start with the support of people with disabilities, so that those activities are really necessary for people with disabilities, and the same government would support us. Support is very important”; “Well, mutual understanding”; “Government representatives have to trust us – we are the organisation that integrates people with disabilities into society. Everything would go smoothly and that cooperation would only take place if there was trust”; “The biggest change should be that the municipality should trust us more – this would mean everyone’s trust in each other.”	7
	<b>Cooperation aimed at constructive dialogue between NGOs and local government representatives</b>	“We need roundtable discussions as much as possible, and to invite journalists to publicize our problems. When considering the problems of the disabled, with the participation of the government and the members themselves, we can express our problems to the institutions. There seems to be so little needed – just a conversation”; “We are making that dialogue with the authorities just to be better for the disabled”; “Meetings here should often be with the mayor or administration”; “The change would be if we came to the municipality and they spoke to us like leaders of the organisations. It is required that they talk to us all the time, because there may be changes, because we hear each other”.	6

Category	Subcategory	Illustrative statements	Frequency of statements
Factors strengthening cooperation between NGOs and local authorities	<b>Cooperation, focused on teamwork, allocating work to increase responsibility</b>	“But it would be best for everyone to work as a team for people with disabilities who need help”; “We help each other – some do one job, others do another job, that’s how we work as a team”; “Throughout my difficult experience, I realized that the more we work, the more we reduce exclusion and the more the disabled person will be able to enjoy life”; “We are at the same time a responsible and proactive organisation, we can share work together, and we have a responsibility to help people with disabilities. That collaboration is very productive when we share work.”	6
	<b>Cooperation with other NGOs and institutions</b>	“We cooperate both with schools and the Early Correctional Council, as well as with all non-governmental organisations in District X”; “Both with schools and with other organisations”; “Cooperation with the confederation is very good.”	2
Total statements:			29

In the view of NGO leaders, the most important factor that determines the successful cooperation of NGOs is the commitment of NGOs. This means that the commitment of NGOs also strengthens civil society itself and helps to shape the influence of NGOs by contributing to the well-being of people with disabilities. NGOs also play a leading role in the formulation and implementation of disability policy (e.g., through involvement in the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities) (Kerwin 2009). Based on the analysis of the data, it is clear that the support of local authorities and trust in NGOs is important. According to Bauer (2020) and Kurowska-Pysz et al. (2018), with trust, a communication network is developed, which is more collaborative and more effective in representing the interests of people with disabilities. It should be noted that cooperation would be enhanced by constructive dialogue if everyone’s voices were to be heard. This would also encourage teamwork based on the distribution of work and responsibility, promoting equivalence, mutual help, and openness to each other’s opinions among all participants. Based on the data obtained during this research, it can be stated that the successful cooperation of NGOs with municipal institutions is determined by the cooperation of NGOs themselves with other NGOs and institutions. This encourages greater visibility of the problems of the disabled in municipal institutions.

## Conclusions

1. Forms of cooperation between NGOs and municipal institutions have been identified through access to qualitative research. One of the main forms of cooperation is financial support for NGO projects, as NGOs mostly survive from project

activities or additional support. NGO leaders mentioned that these forms of cooperation exist for the development of social services, which encourages greater involvement of NGOs in providing assistance to the disabled and in providing municipal institutions with information on the problems of the disabled. Cooperation is also related to the prevention of the violation of human rights and the promotion of consultations with local authorities

2. The results of this study reveal the challenges that limit successful cooperation between NGOs and local authorities. The research data showed that NGOs experience inequality of power when self-government institutions do not have sufficient work experience in solving the problems of the disabled. It has been observed that interaction with NGOs is avoided by excluding NGOs from decision-making processes, and as such the potential of NGOs remains unexploited. This analysis shows that cooperation is hampered by bureaucratic obstacles and interest groups competing for financial support.
3. The participants of the research defined the factors that would lead to the successful cooperation of NGOs with local government institutions in order to achieve the successful representation of the interests of the disabled. This representation determines the responsibilities of NGOs in contributing to the well-being of people with disabilities, which in turn means that NGOs are social partners in the formulation and implementation of disability policy. Support for NGO activities and mutual trust, which promotes constructive dialogue between self-government institutions, was mentioned as an important factor. The data obtained during the research show that teamwork is important for cooperation, increasing responsibility and the division of works among all participants. The participants of the research mentioned that this would not only increase the responsibility of NGOs, but also the trust of local government institutions in them. The results of the study also revealed that such cooperation would be more successful if NGOs were to cooperate with other NGOs and institutions.

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## **NVO bendradarbiavimo su savivaldos institucijomis patirtis atstovaujant neįgaliųjų interesams**

Anotacija

*Straipsnyje nagrinėjama NVO bendradarbiavimo su savivaldos institucijomis patirtis, įgyta atstovaujant neįgaliųjų interesams. Taikant kokybinio tyrimo metodus (interviu ir turinio analizę), atskleistas NVO bendradarbiavimo formos su savivaldos institucijomis, kaip svarbiausioji įvardyta finansinė parama NVO veiklos projektams ir socialinių paslaugų teikimas neįgaliems asmenims. Bendradarbiavimo formos tyrimo dalyvių buvo nurodytos kaip informacijos, konsultacijų teikimas savivaldos institucijoms. Tyrimo rezultatai parodė, kad NVO patiria iššūkių: tai galios nelygiavertiskumas, kai savivaldos institucijos turi mažai darbo patirties su neįgaliais asmenimis ir nepakankamai mato jų problemų. Tai lemia ir nepakankamas NVO įsitraukimas į problemų sprendimų procesą savivaldos institucijose. Nustatyti veiksniai, stiprinantys sėkmingą NVO bendradarbiavimą su savivaldos institucijomis. Remiantis kokybinio tyrimo rezultatais paaiškėjo, kad sėkmingas bendradarbiavimas susijęs su pačių NVO įsipareigojimais, kai jos prisideda prie stipresnės ir aktyvesnės neįgaliųjų gerovės. Tai lemia ir savivaldos atstovų palaikymą NVO veikloje, taip pat tarpusavio pasitikėjimą.*

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