

## **SENIOR COMMUNITIES WITHIN A CONTEXT OF SUCCESSFUL AGEING POLICY IN LATVIA**

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**Abstract.** Ageing societies have become a challenge for many countries including Europe and Latvia. One of the future challenges is to recognize that seniors as a socially active and healthy generation, which is able to sustain itself, is a significant resource for families, communities and society in general. This attitude leads to turning ageing problem into opportunity. The aim of this study is to summarize cases of the best practice highlighting activities of senior communities within a context of successful ageing policy in Latvian municipalities. Popularization of the best practice in wider society ensures sharing good experience and promotes initiatives to adopt it in other communities, thus, responding to senior needs for social contacts, social support and other social activities in order to prevent marginalization and risks of social exclusion in local communities.

The research is based on qualitative and quantitative data sources, which were used to identify best practices of activities in senior communities in different regions of Latvia. The results allow confirming the assumption that performance of seniors and their communities have to be acknowledged as a significant resource turning ageing society problem into opportunity within a future demographic context in Latvia.

**Key words:** senior communities, successful ageing, ageing policy, quality of life, examples of best practice.

**JEL code:** Z180

### **Introduction**

Ageing of society is one the biggest policy challenges in contemporary rapidly changing world. The year 1999 was launched as the International Year of Older Persons which envisaged initial proposals for society of friendly multi-generational relationships (AARP Office for International Affairs, 2009). Respecting new coming demographic challenges, progressively thinking states tend to formulate their policies related to social policy on the basis of massive studies and observations. These policies are focused on reasonable social planning emphasizing successful ageing of older generation which experiences high quality of life.

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Successive European Councils have recognized the need to tackle the effect of ageing populations on European social models. A key response to this rapid change in the age structure consists in promoting the creation of a culture of active ageing as a lifelong process and, thus, ensuring that the rapidly-growing population comprised of people who are currently in their late 50s and over, who are, on the whole, healthier and better educated than any such age group before them, have good opportunities for employment and active participation in social and family life, including volunteering, lifelong learning, cultural expression and sports. In order to accept this challenge, the European Parliament and the Council of the EU launched the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations in 2012 (The European Parliament and the Council of the EU, 2011). In a result the unique opportunity was proposed to mobilize senior knowledge and experience which in turn could be offered as contribution to society because seniors are great potential and opportunity rather than problem and obstacle. The main task of the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations was to increase awareness about senior's contribution to society and their support opportunities. Therefore, the government of the Republic of Latvia organized conference about population ageing on March 23, 2012. The aim of the conference was to raise discussions between legislator, policy makers, employers and employees on seniors as active, experienced and developed members of the society (Latvija norisinas konference..., 2013). In May 2013, the Demography Subcommittee of the Budget and Finance (Taxation) Committee of Saeima (the Parliament of the Republic of Latvia) emphasized problems related to ageing and stressed necessity to elaborate so called "Silver Policy", which would be based on experience of the EU countries and research conducted in Latvia (Dzives kvalitāte sabiedrības ..., 2013).

In the period from June 2013 to June 2014, Members of the Budget and Finance (Taxation) Committee of the 11<sup>th</sup> Saeima in cooperation with one the authors of the paper (A. Grinfelde) conducted research on initiatives related to successful ageing, which are planned and implemented in all municipalities in Latvia's regions. Results of working group discussions in regional senior forums were discussed in conference of the 11<sup>th</sup> Saeima in June 9, 2014 (Saeima diskute par..., 2014). In this conference, Bela B. emphasized necessity to popularize idea of active and healthy ageing by strengthening cooperation between researchers, developers of products and services, policy makers, NGOs and society (Bela B., 2014).

It is important to study the best practices in Latvia, which are already researched in many European countries, for example, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, and other world regions like Japan and Thailand. This will promote active ageing in rural areas and increase quality of life. It should be emphasized here that Thailand has developed the Second National Plan 2002-2021 for supporting old people. One of the policy instruments provides involvement of at least half of seniors residing in local communities in activities, which ensure healthy and active life in old age (Jitapunkul S. et al., 2009). Considerably that it is planned to start elaboration of mid-term policy in 2017-2018 related to population ageing in Latvia (Snikere S., 2014). Necessity for the policy based on researched positive experience supports the fact that on

December 11, 2014 the European Parliament established the intergroup "Active Ageing, Intergenerational Solidarity & Family Policies" (European Parliament, 2014).

In this study, senior communities (the concept is applied to senior NGOs) are defined as research object. The aim of this paper is to summarize cases of the best practice highlighting activities of senior communities within a context of successful ageing policy in Latvian municipalities. The authors defined the following tasks:

- 1) to discuss theoretically opportunities to study the best practices of senior communities for successful ageing of society;
- 2) to summarize activities of senior communities and to structure their domains;
- 3) to identify examples of the best practice of senior communities.

The authors seek to find answers on the following research questions:

- 1) How activities of senior communities are spread all across Latvia and which activities more frequently have been realized for ensuring successful ageing of society?
- 2) Which examples of the best practice should be popularised as positive experience for successful ageing of society?

Mixed methods were used in the research and both quantitative and qualitative data were obtained from a number of information sources: (1) document analysis was carried out when analysing responses from municipalities in all regions of Latvia (N=118) about successful ageing initiatives in municipalities and characteristics of senior communities within this context (information was obtained from the correspondence between Member of the 11<sup>th</sup> Saeima Inga Vanaga and representatives of municipalities); (2) in-depth interview with the chair of the board Terezija Mackare of the senior society "Rigas aktivo senioru alianse" ("Alliance of Riga Active Seniors"); 3) unpublished documents of the Lattelecom Ltd.

## **Research results and discussion**

### **1. Theoretical framework of researching the best practices of senior communities in the process of successful ageing**

Growth of population on the basis of population ageing raises demand for health and social care services. Individuals will be fostered to develop harmonic and positive relationships with relatives, because globalization, urbanization and international migration develop rapidly. Society needs to be active in every stage during the life course. This paper focuses on seniors as social group facing all these needs today, thus, older people expect attitude and preconditions that they are valued and needed. Many seniors are concerned that with an ageing their life will become worse, in contrary there is a widespread opinion in the society that old people care only about their problems and in general they are burden for younger generation.

High quality of life for seniors can be reached only through the process of successful ageing. In scientific literature the scholars use several concepts related to ageing of society: active

ageing, positive ageing, healthy ageing, and successful ageing. All these concepts comprise similar elements; however, they differ (Table 1.). On the basis of the study carried out by G. Ziemele – Trubaca (Ziemele-Trubaca G., 2014), the concept of successful ageing has been implemented in Latvia. Her study focused on analysis, which of the ageing concepts is more inclusive to focus on the result of the process – high quality of life.

Table 1

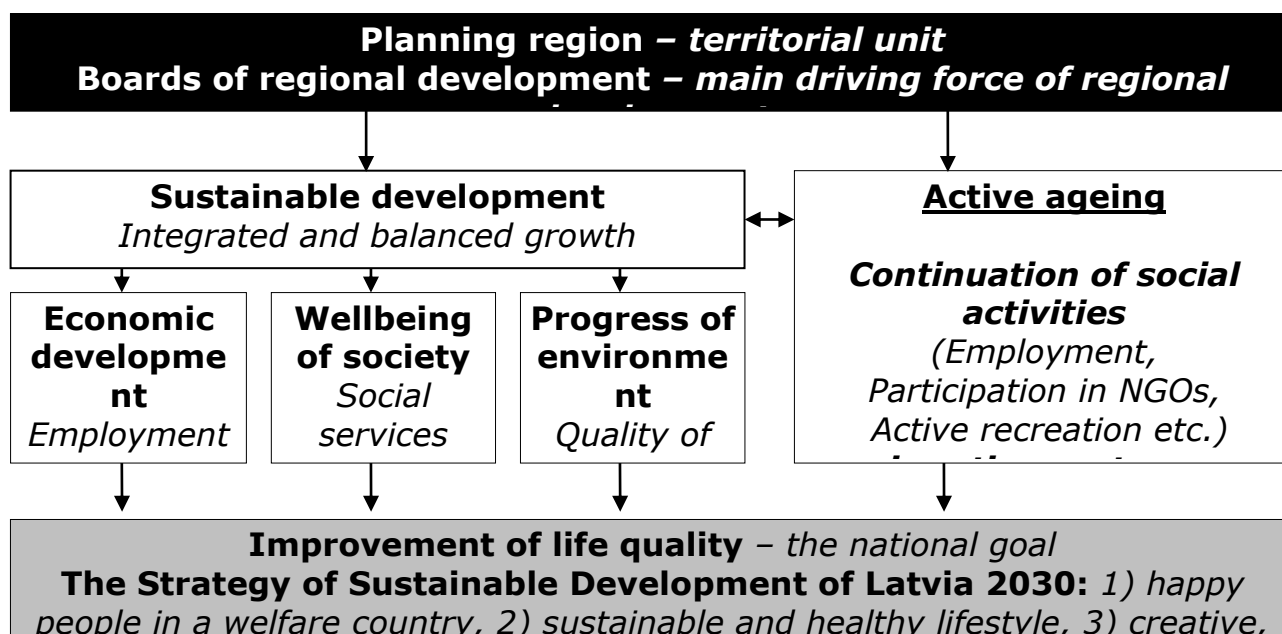
**Significant components of the concepts related to ageing society**

<b>Concepts</b>	<b>Significant components of the concepts</b>
<b>Active ageing</b>	-ability to sustain <b>productive life</b> - <b>participation</b> (social, economic, cultural, mental and civil) -maintenance of <b>healthy lifestyle</b> - <b>change</b> of previous <b>social roles</b> to alternatives
<b>Positive ageing</b>	- <b>ability to learn and adapt</b> , and accept positive changes - <b>optimization</b> of biological, social <b>resources and behaviour</b> (compensation of deficits) - <b>involvement in productive activities</b> (job, hobbies etc.) - <b>satisfaction and emotional balance</b> - <b>ability to change lifestyle</b> , attitude and skills
<b>Healthy ageing</b>	- <b>optimized opportunities of physical and mental health</b> in order to be inclusive without discrimination - enjoying <b>independent life</b> and good quality of life
<b>Successful ageing</b>	- <b>adaptation</b> to <b>looses</b> of the process of individual <b>ageing</b> - <b>active</b> and productive <b>functioning</b> (positive self-evaluation, attitude towards life) - <b>development</b> and <b>progress</b> in old age - <b>self reception</b> and <b>positive relationships</b> with other - <b>autonomy</b> , sense of <b>security</b> , maintenance of <b>meaning of life</b> -optimal <b>physical health</b> and developed <b>high cognition</b> - <b>welfare</b> -ability of unity and <b>adaptation</b> -ability of survival and <b>functionality, social integration</b>

*Source: authors' construction and display, based on Ziemele – Trubaca G. (2014)*

The authors of the paper use here the concept of *successful ageing* as they support opinion of Ziemele – Trubaca that this concept is the most appropriate for Latvia's context, because it has positive connotation and embraces all elements affecting high quality of life (Ziemele-Trubaca G., 2014). Seniors as social category in this paper are defined as individuals in age over 50. Still, the authors focus more on retired people; therefore, the term *people in retirement age* (62+) and *seniors* (50+) are used as synonyms in the paper.

In Latvia where the number of seniors significantly increases in demographic structure, studies on ageing, senior life standards and problems are few. However, these issues are topical also at regional level as there is a necessity to maintain even quality of life and balanced development in the state. In Latvia, strategic planning documents comprise human centred approach and gradual increase in quality of life, which is defined as objective for sustainable development leading to decrease of differentiation between different groups of population (Figure 1).



Source: developed by A. Grinfelde (Grinfelde A., 2010)

Fig.1. Monitoring of ensuring seniors' life quality in the regions defined by strategic planning documents of Latvia

Latvia is divided in five planning regions and current legislation does not obligate the administrative bodies to fulfil specific function related to active ageing of society. One of the future challenges might be delegating new function to the planning regions: improvement of cooperation between planning region development institutions and non-governmental organizations of seniors. The research results envisage five main directions of cooperation: (1) exchange of information; (2) methodological help; (3) study of seniors' life; (4) participation in planning; (5) seniors' as resources. One the most significant directions of cooperation are senior volunteering activities, because seniors need to feel useful. Very important directions in cooperation are participation in elaboration of regional development planning documents and information exchange. Examples of good practice in regions confirm senior ability to perform altruistically in development of the region and local municipality by taking care of raising quality of life for both seniors and other groups of society (Grinfelde A., 2010).

Senior communities in different regions of Latvia are still undervalued resource for providing successful ageing of society. C.B. Flora, J.L. Flora and S. Fey (2003) emphasize that the term *community* refers to both a location in which members of a group interact with one another, and a set of people who share a sense of identity held by a group of people who may or may not share the same geographic space. *Community* is the social system itself, the organization or set of organizations through which a group of people meet their needs. G. Brager, H. Specht and L. J. Torczyner (1987) agree that relationships between community members are based on a shared history, mutual expectations, predictable roles, values, norms, and patterns of status differentiation. All these elements may involve low to high degrees of reciprocity and alienation and all of them contribute to a psychologically and socially important sense of shared identity.

The role of the community is to fulfil specific purposes that its members cannot satisfy alone (Brager G., Specht H., Torczyner L. J., 1987:33-37). Communities involve particular structures of social networks.

Analysis of the best practice of senior communities is based on criteria grounded by E. Berdach: (1) originality of an idea (rarity of the particular senior activity among other senior communities); (2) importance in the context of successful ageing of society (the activity of senior communities make senior life better, more effective); (3) financial impact (the activity of senior community requires relatively small amount of financial resources); (4) experience adoption (the activity of one senior community is transferrable as new practice in other municipality or community) (Vesely A., 2011).

Senior communities that operate in different regions of Latvia provide opportunity for elderly people to be involved valuably in social life by involving them in plenty of different social, economic and political processes. Therefore, it is important to understand how widespread are senior communities in Latvia and what activities are mostly established for ensuring successful ageing.

## 2. Development of senior communities in the regions of Latvia

There is no available statistics about the number of seniors in local municipalities. The authors of the paper use data about unemployed pensioners (Table 2) to whom participation and activity in various social processes might be very significant as well as data about number of senior communities in regions, and conclude that senior communities are mostly spread in Pieriga and Vidzeme regions. Situation in Latgale and Riga is different, where seniors have bulk of opportunities to be involved also in many other communities.

Table 2

### Number of senior communities per 1000 unemployed seniors in statistical regions of Latvia

No.	Region	Number of unemployed pensioners	Number of senior communities (NGOs)	Number of senior communities per 1000 unemployed seniors
1.	Riga	166636	35	0.21
2.	Pieriga	91001	95	1.04
3.	Vidzeme	61068	62	1.02
4.	Kurzeme	75739	58	0.77
5.	Zemgale	68196	63	0.92
6.	Latgale	92730	48	0.52
7.	<b>Latvia</b>	<b>555370</b>	<b>361</b>	<b>0.65</b>

Source: author's calculations based on data of the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (2011) and incoming documents of the 11<sup>th</sup> Saeima (the Parliament of the Republic of Latvia) (2013, 2014)

Document analysis of available documents of the 11<sup>th</sup> Saeima reveals that there are no registered senior communities in seven rural municipalities of 109; however, seniors have opportunity to take part in other rural initiative groups. The number of senior communities in rural municipalities determines the fact that seniors are eager to realize community aims and tasks by consolidating individual capacities of community members. The research results approve an interconnection: the more successful cooperation between local governments and seniors, the more productive activities of senior communities in rural areas. More frequently activities of senior communities are related to *life-long learning* where acquiring of IT skills in cooperation with Lattelecom Ltd prevail (activity has been realized within a framework of the project "Piesledzies, Latvija!"). According to unpublished data of Lattelecom Ltd, almost halve (47%) of seniors in age 55-74 still have never used Internet. Therefore developing IT skills (usage of a computer in particular) expands senior opportunities to gain necessary skills for everyday communication with relatives, reading news and searching for information, paying bills on Internet or raising their competitiveness in the labour market. In the interview the chair of the board of the senior society "Rigas aktivo senioru alianse" (RASA) ("Alliance of Riga Active Seniors") Terezija Mackare informed that since 2015 society was responsible for further realization for the Lattelecom Ltd project. Thus, the society has accepted great challenge, which is to ensure that 2000 seniors will acquire IT skills. In rural municipalities senior communities in cooperation with local governments organize projects where seniors acquire health studies, Nordic walking, handcrafting (e.g. decoupage, crochet etc.), and English. The most frequent activities are sharing views, experience exchange trips to other municipalities or abroad, thematic evening, days of senior sports, exhibitions of handicrafts and cookery. Next section will focus on the best practices of senior activities targeted on seniors from rural areas.

### **3. Experience of best practice in senior communities for more successful ageing in rural areas in Latvia**

Capability of senior communities is more obvious in cultural and social dimensions, also political dimension (involvement in decision making at different levels) is strong. Economic capability is rather weak. However, the study revealed good examples in every dimension of capability. For example, senior society "Silukalna zilais lakatins" in Riebini municipality (Latgale region) has defined its aims in all dimensions of capability: defence of senior social-economic rights for promoting pensioners' material and mental wellbeing; cooperation with local government; cooperation with other NGOs in local municipality; cooperation with other pensioners' organizations in Latvia; promotion of pensioners' participation in resolving social issues and organizing spare time activities; improvement of pensioners' mental life. This society is a good example of cooperation between municipality and NGO where apparently people of older generation are great and healthy support for local society.

Economic and social dimension of senior capability is evident in the performance of the society RASA in Riga. In cooperation with the municipality, it has developed nannies services

(called "Vecmaminu kontaktbirza" ("*Grannies contact bureau*")), which aims to educate seniors in psychology, family psychology, pedagogy, family and children rights, first aid and gerontology. At the end of this programme seniors receive certificate of life-long learning and afterwards receive support in seeking nanny's job. Recently the RASA has launched a new initiative: reconciliation of married couples in situation of crisis in their relationships.

The RASA has shared its experience in 2014 by organizing senior discussion – conference "Seniors in a Contemporary Changing World" for old people from Latvia and the EU countries. Positively that the RASA tends to diversify forms of senior activities which leads to social integration and establishes good cooperation with similar senior organizations in both urban and rural municipalities in Latvia by taking the leading role in organizing activities and initiatives. As the chair of the board of the RASA T. Mackare states, "*[..] we cannot do big things in this world but we can do small and with love.*" She is very optimistic about future activities: "*We plan to establish the Centre of Social Competences either with support of the government or not. This is intended as a pilot project in Latvia. The aim of the centre would be promotion of dialogue between the state, municipalities and non-governmental sector in order to support that part of civil society, which is not represented neither in sectoral trade unions nor the confederation of employers, and other NGOs, because it is behind the scope of these organizations. These groups are, for example, people with special needs, unemployed people, and sick people.*"

As a good example of political and economic dimension of senior capability is the so-called Senior Academy established in Naukseni (Vidzeme region). Ten years ago, seven leaders of former soviet collective farms and enterprises joined together, later involving also many other leaders and representatives of administrative institutions and councils, who were concerned about Valmiera city economic development. Senior Academy is not a closed society; it involves still working entrepreneurs, who have significantly contributed to the development of Valmiera.

In Jaunjelgava municipality (Zemgale region), the society "Institute of Women Rights" is an example of the best practice. This organization implemented the project "Senioru cels" ("*Seniors' Way*"). During the project seniors were trained in psychological motivation. The society organised discussions about the role of non-governmental organizations and development of civil society, there were workshops on culture of conduct and public communication.

Crucial aspect of successful ageing of society is senior willingness to be active and useful. For example, in Pargauja municipality (Vidzeme region) seniors create souvenirs for local government. In Balvi municipality (Latgale region) seniors in cooperation with local municipality organize activity "Balto zekisu svetki" ("*Festivity of White Socks*") where newborn babies are welcomed with senior made white socks. This nice tradition and experience was adopted also in Jelgava city (Zemgale region) by the city council. Thus, the best practice of one senior community has been adopted in another, this is one the criteria in the methodology of the best practice analysis.



## Conclusions, proposals, recommendations

1. Senior communities are significant element of the political structure, which in rural municipalities performs as intermediate stage between individual seniors, small senior groups, municipalities and wider society. Activities of senior communities envisage well developed cultural and social capability of senior communities. They are visible also at political level; however, economic capability is rather weak.
2. More active senior communities are in Pieriga and Vidzeme regions but comparatively smaller activity was observed in Latgale region. Besides active involvement in senior organizations in rural areas, old people take part also in other local initiative groups. This sometimes is treated as alternative if there is no particular senior organization. This fact allows concluding that further investigations should be carried out to explore what is senior integration in local rural communities.
3. The more successful cooperation is between municipalities and senior communities, the more productive is performance of senior organizations in rural areas. Most of the senior activities are related to organizing life-long learning courses and thematic initiatives.
4. In order to promote inclusion of particular support instruments in development strategies of rural municipalities related to policy of successful ageing of society, the planning regions should be delegated a function of increasing seniors' quality of life and improvement of cooperation between senior communities at local and regional levels in order to disseminate the examples of the best practice.
5. The results allow confirming the assumption that performance of seniors and their communities have to be acknowledged as a significant resource turning problem of ageing society into opportunity within a future demographic context in Latvia.

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