

URBAN IDEA



Meeting with Artova activists in Arabianranta in Helsinki. Photo: Teele Pehk

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ON THE MEANING OF THE GOOD COLLABORATION PACT

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Good pact¹ for organising the co-operation between Tallinn city government and local NGOs more clearly is drawn up on the assumption that there is power in co-operation, and dialogue always leads to a more considered solution. The Good Pact document includes only the bare necessities to keep it from becoming unnecessarily long. Since the process of composing the good practice document has been long and arduous, as Teele writes in this issue of U, there are quite a few bare necessities.

Although no one questions the need for engagement anymore, whenever we're meeting with the representatives of the city government, we still have to explain the basics of engagement.² When speaking about co-operation, everyone must understand it in the same way and realise it is not just an empty phrase. Engagement in governance means a fundamental reorganisation of activities, and accordingly, making actions clearer, more transparent and more focused on the city resident (as opposed to the current focus on bureaucracy). This change has to take place in the entire city government.

Also, the representatives of the city have a very modest idea about the fields in which NGOs operate and their role in a democratic society – they are not

1. The text of the Good Collaboration Pact is based on the Good Engagement Code of Practice (www.valitsus.ee/en/government/engagement-practices/good-engagement-code-of-practice) and it was written with the help of neighbourhood associations and other NGOs active in Tallinn. The entire text is three and a half pages long and the latest draft is available on the homepage of Urban Idea (www.linnaidee.ee).

2. See 1.1 of the Good Collaboration Practice.

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merely knitting clubs and amateur choirs, instead, neighbourhood associations, for example, have a very thorough understanding of the problems and needs of their regions. As experts on local life, the neighbourhood associations want to have a say in improving their living environment and that is why the text names NGOs as strategic partners.

In Tallinn, no general principles of engagement have been set so far. The present laws do provide for the essential points where you really can't do without disclosure and engagement, but the specific way this is carried out is up to the authority and official in charge – as a rule, engagement is neither fish nor fowl. Usually, a draft legislation or development plan appears somewhere, and if you're lucky, someone is asked to comment on it, and then it disappears into a haze again (for example, the development plan for public transport³) or resurfaces unexpectedly as a finalised decision.

Therefore, the Good Collaboration Pact includes a description of the engagement process as specific obligations of the stakeholders: which issues definitely require engagement, which stakeholders should be included, and at which stages the engagement should take place. Since engagement requires openness and clarity in the actions of all parties, we have included in the obligations of the NGOs basic requirements on the openness of the associations themselves, and have described how to form a position that is presented as a joint standpoint. This way, it is perhaps possible to avoid the question that keeps popping up: who does the association (whether a neighbourhood association, an association of disabled people or any other organisation) REALLY represent?

As real life rarely follows textbook examples, the rights of parties include the option to modify the agreed engagement practice according to specific needs. This way, the city does not always have to engage with only the associations that have been active themselves, instead, it can notify the public more extensively or engage it in other ways. The Good Collaboration Pact increases the number of ways NGOs can take part in city life – for example, they can appoint their representatives in the administrative councils and in the city council committees, which is a great opportunity to form a shared and balanced opinion at a very early stage.

As was stated above, our experiences tell us that even if formally there is engagement, it is usually followed by a muddled vagueness. If they're lucky, the engaged parties get a reply to their suggestions, stating that unfortunately their proposals could not be considered. This leaves a bitter taste in the mouths of NGOs – the mistrust of those who carry out the process grows and the wish to stake one's free time and will the next time diminishes. To avoid the common disappointment of the engaged parties in the process, articles 7 and 8 in the Good Collaboration Pact deal with informing parties about the results of engagement and assessing co-operation, which should actually be elementary.

The Good Collaboration Pact, which we plan to implement in Tallinn and which has been reconciled with the different departments of the city government⁴, is really nothing revolutionary. However, it does contain an absolutely essential shared understanding with the aim to better govern the city in the future.

3. *The draft legislation for the public transport development plan was open to the public in the summer of 2011 and after a multitude of comments and suggestions from NGOs, a special committee was formed, which decided to put the plan on hold. A few months later, the city government came up with the idea of free public transport, which was not even mentioned in the development plan and the development plan is still on hold.*

4. *At the moment, the team of Urban Idea and the neighbourhood associations are waiting for approval of the city government, so that the text could be put to a vote in the city council.*