




THE IMPACT OF CHANGE AGENTS ON THE LONG-TERM VIABILITY OF THE LATVIAN STATE

 **Elita Jermolajeva**¹, Dr.oec., leading researcher/ professor;  **Baiba Rivza**², Dr.habil.oec., professor/ leading researcher;  **Inta Ostrovskā**³, Dr.paed., researcher/ assistant professor

^{1, 2}Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies; ³Daugavpils University

Abstract. There are many players in the process of sustainable development of Latvia, including the long-term viability of the country: state and local government institutions, companies, non-governmental organizations, as well as various informal interest groups and every inhabitant. As the regions of the country have different socio-economic development results, it is important to find out who and how can influence these processes.

The scientific novelty is the survey developed by the researchers of the National Research Program EKOSOC-LV in order to find answers to the question: What is the long-term viability of the country and what affects it? During four years, 946 respondents from Pierīga, Vidzeme, Kurzeme, Latgale regions were surveyed about the most important influence factors of three groups of change agents: state institutions; local governments as local government bodies; communities or residents of the municipality.

The results of the survey show the following trends (the Kruskala-Wallis Test showed that the differences were not statistically significant): the state's impact was generally positive in the years under review and had increased slightly. However, the impact of the other two groups of change agents was on a downward trend - for municipalities as local authorities and for communities living in the municipality. According to the individual assessment of each respondent, the most important agent of change was not the state institutions, but local governments or residents of the community, which is a positive indicator, because the development of the area can be most influenced by people living in its social groups, etc.

Keywords: long-term viability, change agents, impact factors.

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Introduction

The viability of a country is a measure of the potential success of a particular action or set of actions. Socio-economic development is the process of implementation of different social and economic activities in a society and it is measured with different indicators, such as GDP, life expectancy, literacy and levels of employment. There are many impact factors influencing this process and the main 'players' are state and local government institutions, enterprises, non-governmental organisations, as well as various informal interest groups and every citizen. The individual person or group that undertakes the task of initiating and managing change in any organization, region or state (the authors of the article below designate them with one word - *object*) is known as a change agents and they can help and transform socio-economic development of the country, inspiring and influencing others or vice versa (Education for Good..., n.d.); Socialo parmainu petniecība..., b.g.).

Change agent is a facilitator of change in the perception of the situation, whose main task is to help the representatives of the target group to identify and solve their own problems by attracting the necessary resources for solutions. Profiling and needs research of the potential target group of motivation and support services (Motivācijas paaugstināšanas un ..., 2017). Change agents are individuals or types of agencies that influence the decisions of units of adoptions in a desirable direction, at least from their perspective (International Encyclopedia ..., 2020).

British sociologist Anthony Giddens introduces man as an agent in theories of social change. In his opinion, in the case of any action, the individual is "guilty" in the sense that he could act differently at any time during that action. Agents have some understanding of the causes and consequences of their actions

1 elita.jermolajeva@gmail.com

2 baiba.rivza@llu.lv

3 inta.ostrovskā@du.lv

- not only do they constantly monitor the progress of their activities and expect the same from others in relation to their activities, but they also control the social and physical aspects of their activities in the usual way (e.g. according to societal norms) (Giddens A., 1979).

Given the different results of socio-economic development in the country, it is important to find out what and how these processes can be most affected, whether it is public policy and decisions, local government actions or national initiatives to promote the long-term viability of the country (Jermolajeva E. et.al., 2018; Rivza B. et.al., 2018).

The scientific novelty of the study is the separation of three groups of change agents and the development of a survey by the researchers of the National Research Program "Economic Transformation, Smart Growth, Governance and Legal Framework for Sustainable Development of the State and Society - A New Approach to the Creation of a Sustainable Learning Community/ EKOSOC-LV" Baiba Rivza, Maiga Kruzmetra and Elita Jermolajeva. In 2015, the questionnaire was created in order to find answers to the question: What is the long-term viability of the country and what affects it? The survey was conducted for four years – 2015, 2017, 2019 and 2020.

The Kruskal-Wallis Test was used to check the statistically significant differences in the assessments of the state, municipalities and the population. All data are original and have not yet been published internationally.

The questionnaire should indicate the most important influencing factors in the **three groups of change agents: (1) state institutions; (2) local governments as local government institutions (deputies - employees); (3) communities or residents living in the territory of the municipality.** Six impact factors were suggested for each group of change agents and possible ratings were: "high", "medium", "low", "negative" or "no opinion", which were rated "5", "4", "3", "2" or "0". The total number of respondents was 946, and the survey participants represented Latvian national cities and four regions: Pieriga, Vidzeme, Kurzeme and Latgale. In 2015, 110 people filled in the questionnaires, in 2017 - 371, in 2019 - 364, in 2020 - 101 people.

The aim of this article is to analyse the survey data in Latvia and link it to a discussion of the impact and role of different change agents. The article also shows the main steps how to form a strategy for country regardless of the level of economic development based on information of World Economic Forum and necessity to create the system to support lifelong learning and investing in human capacity. These measures can contribute to the overall development of the population, institutions and the country as a whole.

Research results and discussion

Every change of the *object*, whether large or small, requires one or more change agents. A change agent is anyone who has the skill and power to stimulate, facilitate, and coordinate the change effort. Change agents may be either external or internal. The success of any change effort depends heavily on the quality and workability of the relationship between the change agent and the key decision makers (Luneburg F. C., 2010).

The findings of the scientists suggest that the varied previous experience of internal change agents gives them credibility with the people they work with; it requires careful political management; draws on personal and professional confidence and is time-limited (Randall J. et. al., 2018). The context in which different ideas are disseminated is an important variable that determines the quality of their implementation in policy. The degree of perception of the political system and the likelihood of policy change depend on

political demand and contradiction, that is, the prevailing narratives and discourses among policy makers, and the extent to which new ideas play a key role (Goetschel L., 2011; Aleksejeva L. et. al., 2018).

For example, a social worker or organization providing a social work intervention is defined as an "agent of change", it should be noted that "change" is often understood as "transformation". Changes at the micro (individual or family), meso (group or organization) and macro (community or society) levels of society can be achieved through quantitative changes - increasing or decreasing funding, material support, amount of service, duration of benefit or service etc.; however, it is important to achieve qualitative change at the levels mentioned above (Wei-he, G. et. al., 2010).

Besides extension agents, local authorities and formal leaders can also play the role of change agents: they exercise power by virtue of their positions and can have considerable political and social influence given the command they exert over local resources and the prestige and prominent position they occupy in the local network. They may also wield considerable power over collective decisions and can play a legitimizing role over the activities of other external change agents (Monge M. et. al., 2008).

The former Minister of Environment Protection and Regional Development of the Republic of Latvia Juris Puce emphasized the progress of the administrative-territorial reform in 2021, its ideological meaning and the goals to be achieved, so that there are "change agents" or leaders in the organizations who share experience and help ensure methodological management of planning regions and municipalities (Puce: Pasvaldibam jaklust ..., 2019).

As a result of an innovative approach, public administrations are able to better adapt proactively to change, uncertainty, complexity and uncertainty, and their employees are more open to change, more flexible and more willing to engage in new approaches and innovations. There are "change agents" or leaders in organizations who share experiences and support other employees in the process of change and service improvement (Plans "Publiskaja parvalde ..., 2021; Likums "Par Publiskaja ..., 2021).

Various change agents have a significant role in the formulation and implementation of public policy and their impact was demonstrated by the results of the survey in Latvia mentioned in the introduction of the article. The survey shows the following trends - in Latvia as a whole the influence of the state as a set of institutions in the years of the study showed a positive trend and had slightly increased on a weighted average basis (+0.34). The other two change agents of change - local governments; communities or residents of the municipality - the impact was generally negative and, although slightly on a weighted average basis, was reduced for municipalities as local authorities and communities living in the municipality (Table 1).

Analysing certain influence factors in the group of the state as a set of institutions, it can be concluded that the highest assessment was in 2020 for ensuring the availability of European Union (EU) funding - 4.11, but the lowest - in 2019 it was 2.76 for targeted grant offers. In addition, these indicators were also the highest and lowest scores in all three change agent groups as a whole.

The highest assessment in the group of local governments as local government structures was 4.05 in 2017 for *the management skills to attract and successfully use EU structural funds*, but the lowest was in 2020 - 3.31 for the factor *development program implementation results are systematically evaluated and local media*.

In the communities living in the territory of the municipality, the highest and lowest indicator was in 2020, respectively, with 3.77 *the readiness of the population to acquire new knowledge was assessed*, but with a factor of 3.33 *the population cooperates not only in cultural and sports activities, but also forms economic cooperation chains or even cooperatives*.

Table 1

Impact factors of change agents and their weighted average in the 2015, 2017, 2019, 2020

Impact factors	Weighted average by years				
	2015	2017	2019	2020	Progress
The state as a set of institutions					
Maintaining a favourable economic situation in the country	3.49	3.51	3.51	3.92	+
Maintaining legislative stability	3.38	3.60	3.54	3.87	+
Development of a tax system promoting economic activity	3.46	3.25	3.29	3.41	+
Ensuring access to EU funding	3.87	3.85	3.82	4.11	+
Successful operation of the Financial Equalization Fund	3.69	3.25	3.06	3.51	+
Targeted grant offers	3.31	3.25	2.76	3.18	+
Average total	3.50	3.45	3.33	3.67	+ 0.34
Municipalities as local authorities (deputies - employees)					
Management skills to attract and successfully use EU structural funds	3.97	4.05	4.01	3.99	-
Purposeful, coordinated action of the deputies in the development and implementation of the development strategy	4.00	3.73	3.57	3.54	-
Competence of municipal employees in county development planning and project management	3.90	3.96	3.84	3.80	-
The results of the implementation of the development program are systematically evaluated and the population is informed about it through direct contacts or through local media.	3.97	3.88	3.72	3.31	-
The municipality maintains close, business-like contacts with local entrepreneurs, addressing issues of mutual interest.	3.59	3.81	3.56	3.75	+
The municipality creates favourable conditions for the activities of NGOs and other groups in society, actively involves them in discussing and implementing important development issues	3.90	3.79	3.33	3.58	+
Average total	3.89	3.87	3.67	3.66	- 0.01
Communities and citizens living in the municipality					
The willingness of local residents to participate in solving practical issues by actively participating	3.59	3.63	3.68	3.34	-
Readiness of the population for economic activities to increase personal income	3.38	3.64	3.74	3.64	-
Citizens' readiness to learn and disseminate innovative change ideas	3.67	3.70	3.45	3.44	-
Citizens' readiness to acquire new knowledge (attend lectures, participate in seminars, take courses, etc.)	3.49	3.63	3.66	3.77	+
Citizens not only cooperate in cultural and sports activities, but also form economic cooperation chains or even cooperatives	3.49	3.40	3.34	3.33	-
The community is ready to accept change in work, in society, in the environment	3.46	3.61	3.39	3.62	+
Average total	3.51	3.60	3.54	3.52	- 0.02

Source: author's calculations based on 2015, 2017, 2019, 2020 survey data

The standard error of the average rating of a country as an institution ranges from 0.07 to 0.13 with an average value of 0.09. In turn, the standard error of the average assessment of a local government as a local government structure ranges from 0.08 to 0.11 with an average value of 0.10. But the standard error

of the average rating of the community living in the municipality ranges from 0.08 to 0.10 with an average value of 0.09.

Kruskal-Wallis Test was used to check whether there are statistically significant differences in the assessments of the state, municipalities and the population, the results of which are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Impact factors of change agents and their weighted average in the 2015, 2017, 2019, 2020: Kruskal Wallis Test results

Test Statistics ^a			
	The state as a set of institutions	Municipalities as local authorities	Communities and citizens living in the municipality
Kruskal-Wallis H	3.665	5.825	1.284
df	3	3	3
Asymp. Sig. a. Kruskal Wallis Test	0.300	0.120	0.733

Source: author's calculations based on 2015, 2017, 2019, 2020 survey data and Kruskal Wallis Test

As shown by the results of the Kruskal-Wallis Test (Table 2) in all three cases, Asymp.Sig. > 0.05, which means that the differences in the average ratings of the state, local government and community are not statistically significant.

By analysing the survey data in more detail (Table 3), the individual weighted average score of each respondent for each change agent was calculated, and the operation of the influence factors of the three result groups was compared. The obtained results showed that the respondents consider the most important agent of change not to be state institutions, but to be local governments (42.03%), i.e. local government. The second place was taken by community residents (37.64%) and only in third place by state institutions (20.33%). Thus, according to the respondents, the municipalities and the communities living in their territory, which are closest to the local population and one of the pillars of a democratic society at the local level, were assessed more positively as the influence of the Latvian state.

Table 3

Individual evaluation of respondents for change agents' groups in 2019 and 2020, % of the total number of survey participants

Change agents	Rating scale					
	5.0 points	4.00 – 4.99	3.00 – 3.99	2.00 – 2.99	1.00 – 1.99	0.0 - 0.99 points
State	1.10	19.80	54.40	22.20	2.20	0.30
Municipalities as local authorities	2.75	36.81	45.15	13.19	1.10	0
Communities and citizens	2.47	26.10	55.77	14.56	0.82	0.27

Source: author's calculations based on 2019 and 2020 survey data

The 2019 and 2020 surveys analysed the evaluation of change agents (Table 3). The proportion of respondents' individual assessment of each of the change agents shows that for all three groups of change agents the highest assessment was from 3.00 to 3.99 points, in other words, more than half of the respondents marked their individual assessment for communities, citizens (55.77%) and state institutions (54.40%), but less than half - local governments (45.15%).

Table 4

Evaluation of change agents in 2019 and 2020, % of the total number of survey participants

Change agents	Rating scale		
	Above average	Average	Below average
State	46.15	13.19	40.66
Municipalities as local authorities	47.52	12.09	40.38
Communities and citizens	50.50	11.80	37.60

Source: author's calculations based on 2019 and 2020 survey data

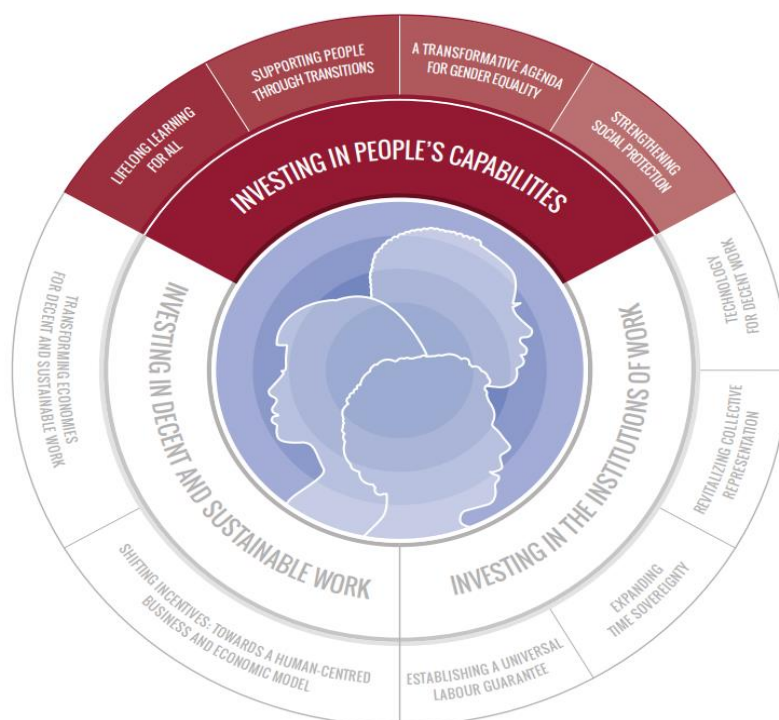
In 2019 and 2020, the respondents of the survey had the highest assessment of the impact of the population or local communities - in 50.5% of cases it was above the average, but the impact of municipalities was 47.52% and state impact – 46.15% (Table 4).

In general, the survey data show that respondents rated the impact of local authorities and communities on socio-economic processes higher. However, as it is known, territories have different development indicators, so further in-depth research is needed to find out what affects the specific territories - regions, cities and counties and how the influence of different agents of change - national, local and local communities - can be improved.

Participants of the World Economic Forum in 2019 discussed about three practical steps for the country's development, involving more investment in people, while improving social inclusion and economic growth. Increased investment in people is essential not only to strengthen a country's growth in a time of rapid technological changes. It can also lay the foundations for a new, more people-centred model of development, which may be the best hope for sustaining the global economy (Fig. 1).

First, there is a need to increase public and private investment in the capacity of citizens to develop quality education and skills, which is the most important way to increase their long-term productivity growth. There is a need to create a universal system to support lifelong learning. Secondly, governments together with employers and workers organizations, need to improve the rules and institutions that apply to work, as they affect the distribution of job opportunities and wages, and thus the level of purchasing power and aggregate demand in the economy. Third, countries need to increase investment in labour-intensive sectors of the economy that deliver wider societal benefits: sustainable water, energy, digital and transport infrastructure, care, rural economy and education, training (Ryder G. et. al., 2019).

These three steps form a strategy for all countries, regardless of their level of economic development, to strengthen both social justice and economic growth - and thus public confidence in political institutions. Both the World Economic Forum and various other high-level conferences and scientific studies have concluded that investing in human capacity is one of the most important development drivers of any territory (city, county, region and country as a whole).



Source: Ryder G., Samans R., 2019

Fig. 1. World Economic Forum. 3 ways countries can boost social inclusion and economic growth

The sustainable development of any area is influenced by a number of factors, including society and its interaction with the environment in the broadest sense. This is explained by the ecological economy, whose basic idea - economic processes are also natural processes in the sense that they can be considered biological and physical-chemical. The quality of life of the population is influenced not only by the macroeconomic indicators of the country, but also by the territory and environment of the particular municipality, which is an important aspect in most areas of human life, including green goals of EU (Trusina I., 2021; Vitola Z. et.al., 2021).

Regardless of the three dimensions of environmental, economic and socio-political sustainability, the content of the goals and the resources needed to achieve them are open to discussion and research (Goetschel L., 2011).

Thus, Latvia's long-term viability depends to a large extent on the knowledge, skills and competencies of both individual "players" and various groups of change agents, as well as on the interaction between these groups. In addition, various internal and external factors can influence development and should therefore be taken into account on a case-by-case basis. These are not short-term solutions, but serious long-term processes that require additional and more detailed research, especially in terms of Latvia's regions and counties after the administrative-territorial reform in Latvia in 2021.

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Conclusions and proposals

- 1) There are various change agents in the development process of each *object* - country, region, organization etc. ECOSOC-LV researchers conducted a survey on the impact of three groups of agents

in the process of sustainable development in Latvia: state institutions; local governments as municipal structures; community or municipal residents.

2) In the survey of change agents effects on the long-term viability of the country, the results of the Kruskal-Wallis Test in all three cases (three groups of agents) showed that differences in the average ratings of the state, local government and community are not statistically significant, but the results of the survey show the following trends: the state's impact was generally positive in the years under review and had increased slightly. However, the impact of the other two groups of change agents was on a downward trend - for municipalities as local authorities and for communities living in the municipality.

3) According to the individual assessment of each respondent, the most important agent of change was not the state institutions, but local governments or residents of the community, which is a positive indicator, because the development of the area can be most influenced by people living in its social groups etc.

4) Both individual Latvian change agents and the country as a whole would need to cooperate more closely and enhance the development of foreign and domestic scientists and practitioners in order to better ensure the country's sustainable existence.

5) In order to ensure the long-term viability of the country, it is necessary to pay more attention to public lifelong education and investing in human capacity, especially in regions. The development of the territory could be most directly influenced by local governments, as they are "closest" to the population, but further detailed research is needed to prove it, especially after the administrative-territorial reform in Latvia in 2021. In order to find answers to these questions, in-depth studies are needed, in particular by analysing and evaluating the role and impact of the aforementioned players.

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