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BEYOND SERVICE PROVISION: THE ROLE OF NGOS IN YOUTH PARTICIPATION - CASES FROM TAMPERE AND LUBLIN[1]

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Abstract
Over the years, NGOs have accumulated significant experience and developed expert knowledge in many fields, contributing to their growing prominence. On the one hand, the third sector has been perceived as market-based actors, delivering high-quality services. On the other hand, NGOs play a crucial role in decentralisation and democratisation processes. This change reflects a broader shift from government to governance. As a result, the third sector has moved from a traditional focus on project-based work centred on 'doing' to a more 'influencing' role. This paper aims to examine the role of the third sector in youth participation through two cases: Tampere (Finland) and Lublin (Poland). The issue of youth participation in decision-making is a cross-cutting topic, particularly in light of declining voter turnout and a systematic decrease of civic engagement among young people. This paper analyses both the theoretical framework and the practical outcomes of the empirical research conducted in the investigated cities. Data were gathered through desk research and semi-structured interviews with NGOs, decision-makers, public officials, teachers and young people. The research outcomes suggest that in both cities, the pivotal role of most NGOs is still in service provision and advocacy. In both Tampere and Lublin, NGOs also take on an additional roles as interpreters or mediators, though these remain narrow and limited. However, in Lublin, the third sector plays a more developed role that extends beyond mere facilitation.

Keywords: *Participation, Young people, NGO, City, Local government, local governance*

INTRODUCTION

Since the emergence of discourse on civil society in 1990s, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have become key actors at various

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levels of governance – local, national and international (Kontinen, 2007; Lefi-Faur, 2012). Over the years, NGOs have gained significant experience and developed expert knowledge in many fields, contributing to their growing prominence. By the turn of the twenty-first century, they were responsible for carrying out most tasks associated with governing complex social issue. This indicates that their roles have expanded and evolved. Several factors have influenced on the emergence and proliferation of NGOs in the public space. Among the most significant is the 'New Policy Agenda', which arose from disappointment in the state's capacity to implement improvements (Edwards, Hulme, 1995). Consequently, the diminishing role of the state and the promotion of the free market came to the forefront. This new approach simultaneously redefined the roles and relationships between the state, the market and the third sector (Ibidem; Saari 2023). On the one hand, third sector has been perceived as market-based actors, who deliver high quality services. On the other hand, NGOs have a crucial role in the processes of decentralisation and democratisation as a representatives of 'civil society'. This undergone change reflects a broader shift from government to governance. According to many scholars, this shift involves a transformations from government being responsible for both the 'steering' and 'rowing' of the policy boat, to focusing primarily on 'steering', while the market and society take over the 'rowing' (Osborne, Gaebler 1995; Jordana, Levi-Faur 2004; Levi-Faur 2012). It signifies a transition from a centralised regime with direct service provision to multi-stakeholder governance model that is governed through networks and contracts (Levi-Faur, 2012). Furthermore, the past few years have been difficult due to new wicked problems and increasing complexity in both society and the governing process. As a result, in recent years, the third sector has moved from a traditional focus on project work centred on 'doing' and passive participation in the governing process to an 'influencing' role, where they are understood as a 'bridge builders' focused on enhancing their impact, meaning and practice (Clark, 1992; Pearce 1993; Muller-Hirth, 2012). The role of the non-governmental sector in the public space is still evolving, and thus remains somewhat vague.

The study aims to examine the specific role of the third sector in youth participation by analysing both the theoretical framework and the practical outcomes from two cities: Tampere, Finland and Lublin, Poland. The issue of youth participation in decision-making is a cross-cutting topic, particularly in light of falling voter turnout and the systematic decline in civic engagement among young people (European Commission, Council of Europe 2023). Both countries and cities have distinct democratic histories, models, and

approaches to youth participation. Nevertheless, both are influenced by democratic governance, market economics, and interest in citizen engagement in the public sphere, including young people. The article seeks to answer the following research questions: 1) What are the specific roles of NGOs in youth participation in the selected case studies? 2) What are the relationships between NGOs and city authorities in supporting youth participation in Tampere and Lublin? 3) Can NGOs in Tampere and Lublin significantly boost youth participation, considering the differences in the local and organizational contexts? The paper is based on desk research and qualitative data gathered from interviews with different groups of stakeholders: NGOs, decision-makers, public officials, teachers and young people.

Current studies indicate different roles of NGOs in the public space, but it do not describe them in a comprehensive way, especially in relation to youth. Scholars have pointed out that NGOs often serve as intermediaries between young people and decision-makers, offering platforms for dialogue (Camino, Zeldin, 2002; Checkoway et al. 2003). Additionally, research has indicated that NGOs can empower youth by equipping them with skills that enable them to become involved in governance (Bessant, 2004; Loncle et al. 2012). However, some studies argue that these efforts are often constrained by limited resources, hierarchical governance processes, and a lack of systematic support for youth engagement (Farthing, 2012). This article addresses this gap in comparative research on how NGOs operate in different local contexts to enhance youth participation.

The study is organised as follows. The first section introduces the theoretical framework and defines the key roles of NGOs in society, shaped by the transformation of governing processes. In the second section, the methodology and case study are described, then in the third part the results of the empirical research are presented. Finally, the article ends with a discussion and conclusion.

1 THE TRANSFORMING ROLES OF NGOS

The shift from government to governance reflects a fundamental change on how public affairs are governed, moving from a centralised model to a collaborative one. Traditional government was perceived as the sole authority responsible for the governing process, including the development of policy and the delivery of public services. However, under the influence of the governance paradigm, public administration has shifted from a centralised government model to one based on networks with various stakeholders,

including NGOs in policy-making and decision-making processes (Levi-Faur, 2012). Governance now encompasses decentralisation, participatory practices, and cross-sectoral collaboration to address complex societal challenges, including youth participation in public life. The role of NGOs has evolved significantly in this context, influenced by New Public Management (NPM), which has led governments to adopt market-based mechanisms. Consequently, NGOs have taken on a critical role as service providers, filling gaps in public service provision that were previously managed by the state. NGOs are valued for their flexibility, cost-effectiveness, and capacity to target vulnerable and marginalised groups, such as young people (Lundström, Svedberg, 2003) Scholars have noted that young people are often disempowered, underrepresented, and excluded from public decision-making (Loncle et al. 2012). Lightbody (2017) critiques the tendency to label youth as 'hard-to-reach' and argues that a more accurate term might be 'easy to ignore,' highlighting the systemic barriers that limit their inclusion. These barriers are rooted in perceptions that young people's opinions lack political relevance and that policies are predominantly designed with an adult-centric approach (Tisdall, Davis, 2004).

Under the governance paradigm, NGOs have expanded their role beyond service provision. They now act as partners, intermediaries, and advocates, bringing their expertise to policy-making processes. In this context, NGOs are crucial actors in creating platforms for dialogue between young people and decision-makers, facilitating engagement through initiatives such as youth councils, capacity-building workshops, and participatory budgeting processes (Checkoway et al. 2003; Camino, Zeldin, 2002).

While the broader roles of NGOs in governance and service delivery have been extensively studied (Lundström, Svedberg, 2003; Pollitt, Bouckaert, 2011), research on their contributions to youth participation is still limited. Some studies emphasize the potential of NGOs to foster youth engagement by creating participatory spaces, providing empowerment initiatives, and promoting advocacy efforts (Camino, Zeldin, 2002; Checkoway et al. 2003). This shift underscores the growing importance of NGOs as facilitators of youth engagement, a topic that remains underexplored. According to academic literature and practical examples, NGOs play at least five distinct roles in the governance process: service providers, advocates, mediators, interpreters, and facilitators. This multifaceted involvement demonstrates their significant contributions to addressing societal challenges. In the context of youth participation, these roles provide the theoretical foundation for the analysis presented in this article.

Firstly, NGOs serve as service providers, delivering services to marginalised groups, including youth in areas where state mechanisms are either insufficient or absent. They are often perceived as gap-fillers, providing services at a lower cost while maintaining high quality (Lundström, Svedberg, 2003). The assignment of this role was made possible by the adaptation of NPM, which encouraged governments to downsize, sub-contract, and outsource public services (Pollitt, Bouckaert, 2011; Levi-Faur, 2012). Collaboration is typically structured through public-private partnerships or contracts with NGOs delivering services such as social welfare, human rights, education, healthcare, and youth-related issues. They provide targeted programs such as employment training, mental health resources, and educational opportunities, crucial for empowering youth and preparing them for active citizenship (Camino, Zeldin, 2002; Checkoway et al. 2003; Loncle et al., 2012; Bessant, 2004). Youth-focused NGOs also address local challenges through community-based projects, such as leadership development workshops.

Secondly, a growing number of NGOs operate as advocates for the collective expression of goals and interests, or take action on causes, ideas, public policies, and decisions made by institutional elites (Casey, 2011). In addition to service provision, where they are merely '*doing'* the task assigned to them (Pearce, 1993), advocacy involves NGOs in '*influencing*' decisions-makers or shaping civic agendas to build political will for action (Schmid et. al. 2008; Gen, Wright, 2013). Existing literature confirms an increasing shift from '*doing to influencing'* (Clark, 1992; Pearce 1993; Gen, Wright, 2013). According to Hopkins (1992), NGO's advocacy approaches include: 1) programmatic or issue advocacy – where organizations present their position on public policy related to their work; 2) legislative advocacy, or lobbying of legislators – which relies on political campaign activities supporting or opposing legislation; 3) demonstrations – organising public support around an issue or policy; 4) boycotts – promoting or opposing business dealings with targeted entities; and 5) litigation - using legal action to advance a cause. Other scholars add grassroots advocacy and public opinion engagement to this list, as well as capacity building for policy advocacy (McCarthy, Castelli, 2002; Morariu et al. 2009). Furthermore, participatory advocacy has emerged, aiming to advocate for changes in policy and decision-making processes to make them more transparent and accessible to the public, and to raise awareness of public issues (Chapman, Wameyo, 2001; Gen, Wright, 2013). Regarding policy change, the goal refers also to adopt, modify, or reject specific policy options (Sewerin et.

al. 2020). The raison d'etre of NGOs in advocacy is to contribute to policy development. Policy advocacy is widely seen as a prominent feature of non-profit organisations, allowing them to represent poor, marginalised, disadvantaged, excluded, and vulnerable populations. The outcomes of advocacy are related to various stages of policy cycles. First, it amplifies that previously excluded voices are heard. Second, it supports decision-makers in designing policy changes. Third, it ensures that policy changes are translated into new regulations. Fourth, the new policy is implemented as proposed by the advocacy organization. Fifth, the goal of the new policy is to create the desired changes. Finally, the new policy gains acceptance from various groups (Casey, 2011). As advocates, NGOs strengthen the voices of young people, lobbying for youth-friendly policies and regulations. Their advocacy initiatives aim to increase youth representation in local governance, including youth advisory bodies, and to ensure that education policies reflect the needs of disadvantaged youth (Checkoway et al. 2003).

Thirdly, NGOs act as a bridge between communities and public authorities, fulfilling two key communication roles: interpreters and mediators. Some scholars view these roles as distinct and separate, while others see them as interconnected, with a fluid and blurred boundary (Wang, 2017; Arumi Ribas, 2017; Alomommani, 2024). As a result, while these roles are varied, they also complement each other (Martin, Phelan, 2010; Arumi Ribas, 2017). This distinction has appeared because interpreters are not trained in intercultural conflict resolution, while mediators are not proficient in linguistic translation services (Ibidem; Wang, 2017). Both professions require linguistic and cultural knowledge, but they served different purposes, and utilise distinct methods and tools (Phelan, Martin, 2010; Almommani, 2024).

Traditionally, interpreters focus on linguistic competence, bridging language gaps rather than fostering social interactions (Roy, 2000; Wadensjö, 2014). This approach suggest that interpreters act as the voices of both parties, faithfully conveying messages without personal opinions or advice (Almommani, 2024). Consequently, interpreters are expected to maintain neutrality, impartiality and ethical standards. However, recent discussions have contested this view, positioning interpreters as cultural brokers or even cultural mediators, who contribute to joint interactions (Arumi Ribas, 2017; Almommani 2024; Gustafsson et.al 2013). As Pöchhacker's notes, "*every interpreter is a mediator (between languages and cultures), but not every mediator is an interpreter*" (2008, p. 14). This statement emphasises the need for interpreters to consider social and cultural contexts to facilitate

communication, moving beyond language translation (Wadensjö, 2014). This understanding is linked to community-oriented approach, which is frequently associated with the needs of marginalised populations in public services, including the legal, social or educational sectors (Carr et. al. 1995), and therefore often associated with young people

In contrast, mediator serve as cultural bridges, facilitating communication and decision-making processes. They inform individuals, including young people, about their rights, help them understand cultural complexities, and empower them to express concerns (Martín, Phelan, 2010; Angelelli, 2006; Almommani 2024,). Mediators may also advocate on behalf of individuals, particularly in service provision, ensuring their needs and concerns are heard and adequately addressed (Martín, Phelan, 2009). In conflict situations, mediators work with both parties to resolve misunderstandings and reach agreements. Mediation therefore plays a crucial role in supporting social integration for marginalised groups, including minorities, vulnerable individuals, immigrants, and newly arrived populations. Pérez Crespo (2005, p. 256) identifies four areas where mediation is needed. First, when immigrants require access to resources and the adaptation of public services. Second, in the realm of foreign policy. Third, in actions promoting citizen participation. Fourth, in fostering intercultural harmony between diverse populations.

As a result, the key distinction between interpreters and mediators lies in their dynamics. Interpreters maintain a passive role, simply translating messages without responsibility for the content, while mediators actively shape dialoge to benefit all parties (Wang, 2017). Thus, interpreters focus on technical linguistic translation, whereas mediators navigate the complexities of cross-cultural communication (Wang, 2017; Arumi Ribas, 2017; Almommani, 2024; Carr et. al. 1995). As mediators or interpreters, NGOs act as a bridges between young people and decision-makers. Within the role of mediators, they foster dialogue, ensuring that youth voices are effectively communicated and considered in public discourse. Additionally, as interpreters, they translate complex policy language into accessible terms that young people can understand, ensuring informed participation (Tisdal, Davis, 2004; Loncle et.al. 2012).

Last but not least, NGO play facilitative role in fostering dialogue between communities, governments, and other stakeholders to address social issues and promote collaboration. Facilitation generally aims to resolve community problems through a capacity building process, enabling citizens to identify, access, and structure their own problem while making informed decisions

(Vidal, 2009; Diaz Puente et.al 2013). This approach focuses on inclusiveness and community empowerment (Escobar 2019; Diaz Puente et.al 2013), employing various tools to create group dynamics (Vidal, 2009; Diaz Puente et.al 2013), cultivate trust, build a sense of identity among participants, and achieve specific goals. Therefore, facilitators take on multiple functions, including: 1) teachers or guides, imparting new skills; 2) consultants and advisors, supporting the implementation of ideas from group discussion; 3) trainers, providing instructions tailored to participant's needs; and 4) leaders, encouraging active participation and proposing alternative solutions; 5) intermediaries in participatory processes, implementing programs dedicated to specific groups and fostering meaningful participation (Diaz Puente, 2013; Molle, 2013; Escobar, 2019; Mueller-Hirth, 2012). Facilitators serve as neutral coordinators, guiding discussion without dominating them, and working in the following key policy areas: public service reform, social justice, and democratic innovation (Escobar 2019; Bynner et. al. 2023). NGOs play a crucial role in facilitation, as they are equipped with the resources and skills to support various forms of participation. Some NGOs are service-oriented, while others are project-led (Nelson-Nuñez 2019; Lanon et. al 2020). With extensive experience in mobilising community members and building their capacities, NGOs ensure diverse community voices are heard (Cameron et al. 2011). Facilitators simultaneously teach, ask questions, invite dialogue, guide discussions, and ensure active participation, empowering individuals with confidence and ownership of the issue being addressed (Douglas, 2023; Lehtonen, Radzik-Maruszak 2023). According to Escobar (2019) facilitators in the context of democracy fulfil several functions. One role refers to mini-publics, where they act as a process designers and are responsible for group facilitation using deliberative methods. The second is related to participatory budgeting processes, where facilitators mobilise various stakeholders, and the third focuses on creating space for public dialogue.

NGOs that advocate for youth in this role offer non-formal education tailored to the specific needs of young participants, such as mental health awareness, leadership skills, and public speaking (Camino, Zeldin, 2002; Checkoway, Gutierrez, 2006). Further research confirms that they also create inclusive programs or platforms where young people can engage in participatory processes, such as deliberative forums, participatory budgeting, and youth councils, participatory budgeting and other democratic innovation tools. NGOs support the implementation of ideas emerging from youth-led discussions and ensure that these ideas are integrated into decision-making processes (Tisdall, Davis, 2004; Loncle et al., 2012).

2 METHODS AND CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

This article is based on two case studies examining NGO activity in youth participation in Finland and Poland, two countries with distinct democratic histories and participatory traditions (Loughlin et. al. 2012). In Finland, NGOs have evolved within the Nordic welfare state model, known for high-quality service provision (Abrahamson, 1999). In contrast, the development of NGOs in Poland has been more complex, shaped by the post-communist regime, and administrative reforms (Ekiert et.al. 2014).

In Finland, the role of NGOs is primarily defined by the Finish Associations Act (Yhdistyslaki, 503/1989) and the Finish Foundations Act (Säätiölaki, 487/2015), which define key legal frameworks, including functions and cooperation with public authorities. These laws recognise NGOs as serving the public interest, complementing government in service provision. The Finnish Register of Associations reported over 108,475 active associations in 2024, alongside approximately 2,700 registered foundations in 2023 (Finish Patent and Registration Office: prh.fi).

In Poland, as in Finland, NGOs operate under two primary legal forms: associations, governed by the Act of 7 April 1989 – The Law on Associations (Journal of Laws of 2020, item 2261), and foundations, regulated by the Act of 6 April 1984 on Foundations (Journal of Laws of 2020, item 2167). However, the most significant legislation is the Act of 24 April 2003 on Public Benefit and Volunteer Work (Journal of Laws of 2024, iteam 1491) which define the roles of NGOs and their interactions with public authorities, emphasizing public interest and partnership. In 2021, Poland had 138,000 NGOs, including associations and foundations (Chrzczonowicz, 2022).

The study focuses on Tampere in Finland and Lublin in Poland, cities chosen for their contrasting levels of civic engagement and social trust. Finland is often considered a model of active civic participation, while Poland, as a post-transition country, faces challenges with low social trust.

Tampere is the third's largest city in Finland, located in the southern part of the country with approximately 235,000 inhabitants. The city is governed by a 67-member council and city board, with the mayor as a head. In 2024, it was awarded as a UNICEF Child-Friendly City (City of Tampere, tampere.fi). Tampere is regarded as one of Finland's leading municipalities due to the quality and efficiency of its public services, and citizen involvement (Radzik-Maruszak, Bátorová, 2015). The city has deep-rooted traditions of participatory practices, and is known as a 'city of actions' (Digital and Population Data Services Agency: suomi.fi).

In contrast, Lublin with a population about 343,000, is a major city in eastern Poland. Power in the city is divided between a 31-member city council and directly elected mayor. Key reforms in Lublin begun in 2010, when the newly elected mayor emphasized participative governance, including close cooperation with civil society, and introducing innovative tools for citizen engagement. In 2023, Lublin became the European Youth Capital, reflecting its innovative approaches to fostering direct citizen involvement in local democracy (Szulc-Wałecka, 2021; Lehtonen, Radzik-Maruszak, 2023).

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study approach to examine the roles of NGOs in youth participation in two cities. Data were gathered through desk research and semi-structured interviews. Desk research involved reviewing legal frameworks, policy documents, reports, and online resources from local governments and NGOs. Primary data consisted of 26 semi-structured interviews conducted between 2022 and 2024 with decision-makers, public officials, NGO representatives, teachers, and young people. A snowball sampling method was used to identify key interviewees. All interviews were recorded with consent, transcribed, and analysed. The data were processed using MAXQDA software, where key themes were identified through systematic coding. These themes were then grouped into broader categories aligned with the study's objective and research questions. The coding process was guided by both existing literature, and themes specific to the local contexts of Tampere and Lublin. MAXQDA facilitated a systematic and transparent approach to the analysis, enabling the connections between themes and insights from interviewees Additionally, findings from desk research were triangulated with interview results to validate the study's conclusions (Gibbs, 2015).

3 RESULTS OF THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH: CASE STUDIES OF TAMPERE AND LUBLIN

Using the theoretical framework described in this paper, the empirical research analyses the role of NGOs in both cities, categorizing the findings into four main areas: 1) the professionalisation of NGOs in service provision; 2) their role in advocacy and policy influence; 3) their function as interpreters and mediators; and 4) their role as facilitators.

3.1. Professionalisation of NGO in service provision

Scholars and practitioners emphasize that NGOs are seen as innovative responses to social challenges (Sama, Järvelä 2008), with increasing professionalization in service delivery (Sama, 2017). This trend emerges with the implementation of NPM norms, followed by governance practices, and is also evident in the cases examined in this paper. A representative from the non-governmental sector in Tampere commented on this as follow:

> *''NGOs are fulfilling the field of the public services, offering something that the state doesn't offer. We are like filling the gaps, it's like a puzzle where everyone is working in their own area. When some pieces are missing, then we are (NGOs) fill the gaps'', (NGO, Tampere)*

A similar perspective was shared by the third sector in Lublin, indicating its active participation in the implementation of statutory task imposed on the city, including those related to youth services. Although both Tampere and Lublin rely on NGOs for public service provision, their approaches are slightly different. First, a crucial issue is the relationship between city authorities and youth organizations, which significantly influences the role of NGOs in service provision. Informants noted that youth work in Finland is *'mainly handled by cities'*, closely linked to the organisation of public services for young people, which are managed by the city. Therefore, youth policy is implemented through Youth Services, while some additional services outsourced to NGOs. Furthermore, non-governmental organisations heavily rely on public funding – both central and city sources (Sama, Järvelä, 2008; Trägärdh 2010). Local organisations that cooperate with the city to deliver youth services benefit from operational stability and continuity. However, this dependence also poses challenges, as any disruption in city funding threaten their ability to operate.

In contrast, youth participation in Lublin is coordinated by the Social Participation Office (SPO) and Youth Policy Office (YPO). Notably, the SPO consists of individuals who previously worked in the non-governmental sector. As a result, they understand the needs of the community and are well-regarded by them. The YPO was established when the city gained the title of European Youth Capital 2023 (EYC), reflecting the needs and changes in the city's policy. Many initiatives and projects also arise from cooperation with the third sector, with a broader financial support for youth participation than in Tampere. Beyond traditional statutory task assigned to NGO by the city,

funds are also dedicated directly for young people, such as the Youth Inspires the District program, coordinated by a local NGO. The EYC title provides NGO with new opportunities to access funding sources. One informant remarked that, while the title itself does not guarantee funding, it facilitates access to external resources. Nevertheless, some organisations in Lublin express concern that the city sometimes shifts responsibility for public task to NGO, providing inadequate funding. As they underlined, many city-assigned task, including those for youth, are underestimated. In consequence, NGOs often cannot sustain activities throughout the whole year, and they are forced to conduct shorter and non-sequential projects. Larger, well-established NGOs, driven by their mission, frequently cover funding shortfalls from their own resources. One youth organizations commented as follow:

> *''Commissioned tasks, which fall under the city's responsibility, are often very poorly financed, they are severely underfunded. Expectations are high, and since we are NGO, we are expected to do this work for free, without adequate compensation. We do it out of a sense of mission and duty, because someone must take care of this group (youth, ESW). That's why we continue to do it, regardless of how much we have to contribute ourselves'', (NGO, Lublin)*

Aforementioned quotations indicate several issues. First, they refer to the unique nature of the social sector, which relies on philanthropy and has often been used as an argument for reducing the costs of certain public services. The second issue pertains to the higher capacity of youth-organization in leading youth activities. As scholars note, NGOs were created to fill gaps where neither governments nor the market were able to provide services for all and serve in the interest of the whole society (Ibidem; Schmitz 2015). In both, Tampere and Lublin, NGOs have recognized the need to support these group, particularly as city authorities face challenges in reaching hard-to-reach-groups, such as disadvantages, immigrants, minorities or other vulnerable populations (Sama, 2017). Scholars argue that this results from NGO's ability to mobilize community for participation, address unmet needs, and provide social services as trustworthy contractors (Ibidem; Sama, Järvelä, 2008).

3.2. Advocacy and policy influence

This role is primarily based on NGO participation in advisory bodies and councils, where they initiate and provide input on issue aimed at influencing

public decision-making. These bodies include youth representation, allowing organizations to present their position, opinion and proposals on youth public policy. In Lublin, advisory bodies are directly dedicated to young people, as reflected in their names and main focus, for example the Children and Youth Committee.

Nonetheless, differences are evident between the two cities. In Tampere, this distinction stems from the fact that Northern NGOs are known for their advocacy, particularly within development scheme, where they have been active for decades (Kontinen, 2007). Consequently, in addition to service provision, development cooperation has become a key objective for Finnish NGOs. Scholars have noted a shift from project development (service provision) to joint political advocacy (Ibidem; Smillie 1995). In the Finnish context, development cooperations entails close cooperation between NGOs and the government. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs plays a pivotal role, allocating funds to organisations involved in development projects and programs (Kontinen, 2007). As a result, Finish NGOs work alongside state actors, adhering to national guidelines in development policy, which emphasises strong commitment to humanitarian aid, human rights, and sustainable development.

In this regard, the third sector in Tampere fulfil two main functions. First, as described by Hopkins, its programmatic and issue-based advocacy, with local public authorities participating in NGO meetings, and Steering Committee sessions with various stakeholders, including representatives from the third sector and the public one. As informants indicate, these meetings are held once or twice a year, and serve as a platform for exchanging information and experiences. Their aim is to foster collaboration in developing solutions for youth, particularly through project development, the creation of new services, and policy proposals submission to achieve policy change. Second, advocacy approaches in Tampere are strongly linked to Hopkin's theoretical framework, which also involves negotiation and discussion of key youth-related activities with decision-makers, persuading them to allocate funding for critical initiatives. One youth-organisation mentioned that they had demonstrated in front of City Hall due to difficulties in financial support from the city. They commented as follows:

> *''We had intense negotiations with the City of Tampere. I don't actually know what affects that the finance from the city was cut. It seems the system will become more centralised, than decentralised, but it's*

easier to cooperate with the city, making the system more efficient (…)'', (NGO, Tampere).

According to this statement, youth organisations recognize the importance of maintaining strong relationship with local authorities and building political support for their activities, particularly to secure funding for their daily operations.

In Lublin, the role of NGOs in advocacy is broader, as decision makers view NGOs as genuine partner in collaborative efforts to develop strategies, policy documents and reports, that define objectives for youth initiatives. Local NGOs have taken initial steps in identifying the needs and expectations of the city's youth in the document: We Need Information! Report, which examines the situations of young people in Lublin, and the Youth Guide, a comprehensive report on social involvement, youth information and structured dialogue in the city (EYC 2023 Application). Another important step was Let's Talk! the youth recommendations, an outcome of Erasmus+ KA3 Youth scheme, underling the beginning of structured youth policy implementation in Lublin. There are several examples of joint efforts between youth organisation and the city, such as City Development Strategy 2030, which includes separate youth policy component, the foundations for the Children and Youth Program, and the collaborative preparation of the European Youth Capital 2023. This process, fully coordinated by one of the youth organisation, strengthen collaboration between the administration, youth, and the nonprofit sector in Lublin. As local politician pointed out:

''A lot of activities are indeed implemented with the help of NGOs. We select them through a competitive process where we specify our priorities, for example, right now the competition is for youth policy. (…) It's best to entrust it to an organization that has experience, a nationwide perspective, and often a Europe-wide view, so that the document created will truly be something we are proud of, and here we have an excellent partner to whom we are not afraid to entrust this task'', (*decision-maker, Lublin).*

Aforementioned quotations draw attention the crucial contributions of youth organisations to policy changes across several areas. First, the idea of Lublin's bid for EYC 2023, which became a milestone in developing youth policy in the city, was initiated by the non-governmental sector. Youth organizations advocate for changes in policy and decision-making processes,

resulting in the creation of new policy documents that directly addressed young people. Moreover, NGOs focus on raising awareness of youth issue, ensuring that marginalised and excluded voices are heard. Additionally, local organisation participates in preparation and implementation of the proposed policies, actively creating meaningful change. Finally, city authorities recognize the potential and competencies of NGOs, and assess them as valued partners with unique capabilities, especially in carrying out youth-focused activities. As one decision-makers emphasized:

> *''They are truly a great partner for us, primarily because NGOs typically focus their attention on specific issues, such as those affecting the younger generation. As a result, we often benefit from and enjoy listening to what they have to say'', (decision-maker, Lublin).*

This statement also emphasizes that NGOs are more adequate for youth initiatives due to their easier access to this target group, a better understanding of their needs and more informal, day-to-day contact. In addition, young people are more willing to cooperate with local organization, than with local authorities due to their bureaucracy and formal structure. According to one interviewee, decision-making processes related to youth participation are often designed by adults, with limited input from young people. In this context, local organizations from Tampere stressed that:

> *''Young people are not so willing to participate in city-organized activities like participatory budgeting or youth councils, because there are so formal (…). They feel if somebody is not really interested in their ideas, or if it's just a formality, and if the participation is real or it is just about what the city would say formally. It's created by adults, and the adults think what should be done, how the process should be organized'', (NGO, Tampere)*

In this regard, public authorities tend to work for youth, rather than with them, as opposed to NGOs (Quick, Bryson, 2016, p. 162).

3.3. The roles of interpreters and mediators

The role of interpreters, as originally defined in the theoretical framework of this paper, does not apply in a detail in either city. In Tampere, this role is only partially fulfilled by NGOs, mainly through the development of new public

services for young people from specific populations, such as immigrants. Most interviewees described Tampere as multicultural city. There are at least 160 languages spoken. In addition to Finish, the most common languages include Arabic, English, Spanish, Farsi, Chinese, Kurdish, Somali, Russian and Estonian. As a result, the city tries to respond to the needs of these individuals, many of whom are young people (City of Tampere: tampere.fi). One local youth organization observed that city authorities value the expertise of NGOs, and through various consultations and recommendations from them, dedicated services are created for young migrants:

> *''Based on our information and knowledge, they (city authority, ESW), can also build different kind of services for the city of Tampere and for immigrant groups especially', (NGO, Tampere).*

Therefore, in Tampere, the third sector plays a role in interpreting the needs of marginalised and multicultural groups across various public services. This role is rooted in a community-oriented approach that includes the cultural specifics of these young people and maintains fully independent and autonomous communication. Mediation also contributes to integrating immigrants with the local community to achieve balance within diverse and multicultural populations. Some NGOs undertake projects focused on debates and discussion, encouraging young immigrants to participate in community life, including local and national elections or Erasmus projects. Organisations in Tampere are not focused directly on promoting citizen participation, they emphasize their role in providing social services. They also partially fulfil their roles as advocates, mediators and interpreters, although the activities related to these roles still refer to public services for marginalised groups, such as young people.

In Lublin, the role of an interpreter is primarily reflected in a platform that seeks to define the needs of young people, representing their voice in dealing with the city administration. This process also includes input and advisory opinion from youth organizations. As a result, NGOs take a more active role, placing them between interpreters and mediators for this group. One NGO addressed the issue as follows:

> *''These young people are afraid to enter the City Hall, but thanks to the fact that we (NGO) know how to navigate the rigid dynamics of the institution (...), we can guide them safely through the process'', (NGO, Lublin).*

This quotation confirms that NGOs coordinate dialogue and mutual understanding between city authorities and young people, addressing the complexities of cross-cultural communication. The third sector also plays a role in informing youth about their rights, and empowering them to express their views, aiming to ensure their voice are heard by the authorities (Lundy, 2007). The importance of social organisations in youth empowerment within the city was stressed by one of the youth organisations, as follows:

> *"There is a lot of pressure from young people and from social organisations to take young people seriously (...) to become a subject in the discussion and I see they are starting to be seen as a priority", (NGO, Lublin).*

The aforementioned quotations draw attention to a persistent issue in the literature: the portrayal of young people as objects rather than subjects of policymaking (Lehtonen, Radzik-Maruszak 2023). The statement also highlights the importance of NGOs in encouraging young people to participate in the urban sphere and speaking on their behalf. It also emphasizes the relevance of key areas defined by Lundy for meaningful youth participation, such as: space, voice, audience and influence (Lundy, 2007). Additionally, in Lublin as in Tampere, NGOs support social integration, but focus on youth as a whole, rather than only on immigrants.

3.4. NGOs as Youth Facilitators

In Finland, the role of facilitation is not as prominent as it is in Poland. This is noticeable because the role of NGOs is more limited, and schools play a more significant role in fostering youth participation. Decision-makers and teachers emphasise that schools ensure young people's voice are heard. Local youth organisations also strongly focus on schools and collaboration with them in youth activities and projects.

There is facilitation potential in Finland's Cultural Houses, developed in 2009 based on the Functional Peer Support (GFP) model and implemented by NGOs or supported by municipal institutions. Of the 20 Cultural Houses in Finland, a few are also located in Tampere. Although the Cultural Houses approach is based on planning, implementing and evaluating activities in cooperation between citizens and trained peer supporters, the focus remains on providing services rather than encouraging active participation (Cultural Houses: kukunori.fi; The Baring Foundation: baringfoundation.

org.uk). NGOs in Tampere have noted that these spaces provide valuable support for young people, especially for those with mental health problems. This model offers a limited form of participation, where young adults gain skills and lead volunteer activities through peer support. Tampere has two Cultural Houses: Laikku, managed directly by the City of Tampere as part of public cultural services, and Virta, which operates in partnership with NGOs, primarily under the Sosped Foundation (City of Tampere: tampere.fi).

NGOs in Lublin stand out significantly as facilitators of youth participation. Youth organisations initiate many activities for young people, which they implement independently or in cooperation with the city. They are also invited by the city to participate in various initiatives. Local NGOs often serve as a driving force, pushing youth participation and its framework. Consequently, these collaborative efforts have led to the development of tools aimed at youth inclusion, enhancing a positive '*bottom-up*' approach to build participatory activities for young people. Furthermore, cooperation between the city and NGOs in creating and expanding offerings for young people has intensified in recent years. One youth organisation emphasises the need for collaboration between the public and nonprofit sectors in creating and developing participatory spaces in the city:

> *''I have the feeling that some of the impetus comes from NGOs, but without the involvement of each party (decision-makers, public officials, NGOs, ESW), nothing would happen'', (NGO, Lublin)*

The quotations above highlight the importance of the relationship between city authorities and NGOs in addressing social issues and promoting collaboration. In this relationship, the key to success lies in the cooperation of all actors. According to Escobar's theoretical framework described above, within the context of democracy, youth organisations in Lublin participate in the participatory budgeting process. The first Youth Participatory Budgeting (YPB) initiative, aimed at children, youth, and students was launched in 2019 by a local NGO (Youthpb.eu, 2022). Due to the pandemic, the initiative required adjustments and was transformed into School Participatory Budgeting (SPB) in 2020. In this process, the role of NGOs is crucial: the pilot action of YPB was coordinated by the third sector, while in SPB, the city took responsibility. Nonetheless, the revised edition still includes NGOs, which provide mentoring to working groups in schools implementing SPB. Another example involves Lublin obtaining the title of European Youth Capital, an achievement that

originated from a local NGO. As the NGO described the 'story' behind the application for the title:

> *''In the team, we thought, it would be great if Lublin became the European Youth Capital. After all, it's such a youth-oriented city, and we have so much energy in social organisations, and there are so many young people - why aren't we utilizing this? And what we thought, we decided to turn into action. The former president (of the NGO, ESW) went to a meeting with the vice mayor, and she said, 'Alright, if you write the application and carry out all the consultations, then let's do it*'', (NGO, Lublin)

Importantly, as the NGO noted, the city administration was 'supportive' of this idea, expressing interest in the initiative. Nevertheless, it was the nonprofit sector, with its substantial expertise and knowledge in this area, that persuaded decision-makers to apply for the title. Based on this collaboration with the city, NGOs took on the role of coordinators throughout the application process. As the nonprofit sector emphasised:

> *''It was a significant process, and we had to convince the city, which lacked the competencies to work with young people, as these are individuals who work in offices and don't have much interaction with youth. So, it was more about the city trusting us and believing that this potential truly existed'', (NGO, Lublin)*

The aforementioned quotations highlight two key points. First is the potential among youth themselves, and within the organisations who work with them. Second, youth organisations in Lublin have strong potential and competencies. As the lead organisation in EYC noted, it was essential to have a clear understanding of the objectives, key action directions, and an overview of youth policy to make the city more youth-friendly through fully participatory approaches.

A key issue is also the creation of Youth Spaces, places designed by young people for young people. There are eight Youth Spaces in Lublin in various districts of the city, coordinated by non-governmental organisations. This issue aligns with the concept of *invited spaces* created by city authorities and NGOs, where young people can initiate and actively develop their self-organizing capacity in society (Cornwall, 2004; Taylor, 2007). Similarly, since 2013, the Centre for Youth Information and Development has been run by

youth organisations in Lublin. This place is unique on a national scale. The centre focuses on youth information and encouraging them towards active civic engagement.

Additionally, officials and NGOs acknowledge their role as *intermediaries* and linkage between the city authorities and young people. Decision-makers define NGOs as the '*youngest voice'*, recognising them as a key entity that can accurately diagnose the needs of this group. Local NGOs emphasises their role in empowering youth, using specific methods such as street work to be closer with young people and encouraging them to take on initiatives. In this facilitative role, youth organisations act as teachers, trainers and leaders. They are even perceived as the "*cool adults*", supporting young people, guiding them in civic participation and demonstrating the value of involvement. Furthermore, the institutional structure of NGOs is much more encouraging for young people to cooperate and engage in open dialogue than the city. Youth organisations offer non-formal education, training, workshops, and information on youth rights, as well as capacity building opportunities, allowing for learning through play. Even the City Youth Council (CYC) defines youth organisations as partners in their daily activities and tasks. The Chair of CYC described this relationship in the following way:

> *''I can't complete the project on my own. I need a good team and strong partners. For example, at the Congress (full name of event: Young People Have a Voice, ESW), we had around four or five partners. It was the NGOs that conducted workshops for us free of charge'', (Youth, Lublin)*

This quotation highlights the important role of youth organisations, which are prioritized as entities that young people want to collaborate with and trust.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study highlight the evolving role of NGOs in recent years and their impact on youth participation. In both, Tampere and Lublin, these organisations play a significant role shaped by different local governance models.

In Tampere, NGOs primarily fulfil service-oriented role, complemented by advocacy groups (Sama, Järvelä, 2008). Collaborations between NGOs and the city allows Finnish youth organisations to supplement public

resources effectively. However, this dynamic places them as gap-fillers in service provision, with limited influence on youth empowerment or policy change (Kontinen, 2007). Conversely, in Lublin, the role and scope of NGOs have expanded beyond service provision due to decentralisation and development of civil society. They frequently engage in policy advocacy, acting as key partners in the design and implementation of youth-centred initiatives (Szulc-Wałecka 2022; EYC 2023 Application). This participatory framework, supported by the city's recent designation as the European Youth Capital, empowers NGOs in Lublin to advocate for young people's rights and needs, and to actively shape the city's youth policies. Furthermore, the result of the research provide evidence that NGOs in Lublin also frequently act as facilitators and mediators in youth participation, creating spaces, engaging youth directly, and enhancing their sense of agency and ownership in decision-making (Young et. al. 2024; Lehtonen, Radzik-Marszak, 2023).

One significant observation from the study is the varying levels of collaboration between NGOs and city authorities regarding youth participation. In Tampere, the relationship is service-oriented and formalized. NGOs work closely with local authorities but remain largely dependent on city funding, which restricts their capacity to adopt other roles. Local government relies on NGOs to support youth-focused services but maintains significant control over their management. Despite the potential of the Cultural Houses model, the focus remains more on service provision than promoting active participation**.** In contrast, in Lublin, there is a more collaborative and partnership-oriented relationship between NGOs and public authorities. As a result, NGOs not only provide some services, but also shape youth policies and other youth-oriented initiatives, such as Youth Participatory Budgeting and School Participatory Budgeting, the European Youth Capital application, and promoting youth rights and participation (EYC 2023 Application). This collaborative approach enables youth organisations to act as facilitators, allowing youth to participate more meaningfully (Lundy, 2007). Research further demonstrates that they play important roles, positioning them between interpreters and mediators.

As the research findings confirm, there are notable distinctions between the cases analysed in fostering youth participation**.** In Lublin, NGOs are crucial in empowering youth through advocacy, policy changes, new initiatives, and participatory spaces. These efforts increase the visibility of youth activities and voices in policy making, as well as ensuring greater opportunities for them to take action (Lightbody, 2017; EYC 2023 Application). Nonetheless, in Tampere, the NGOs' impact on

youth participation is more limited. They mostly deliver services rather than directly engaging young people.

The research results suggest that the functions and roles of NGOs also depend on local governance structures and cultural context. In Tampere, youth organisations operate within a relatively stable welfare state model that gives priority to service provision. Conversely, Lublin adopts a more integrated and participatory approach, reflecting a more flexible governance model that incorporates civil society into the governing process. Consequently, the potential of NGOs to boost youth participation varies significantly, depending on the structure and framework of local governance.

CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis presented in this paper, focusing on two cities, demonstrates that changes in public policy, social complexities and governance challenges influence not only the public sector but also the role of civil society organisations. Tampere and Lublin, with their distinct traditions and governance models, present contrasting roles of NGOs in youth participation. Although the role of NGOs in Tampere appears to be evolving, with advocacy emerging as a secondary function alongside service provision, attempts to adopt new roles focused directly on youth engagement remain limited. Meanwhile, Lublin exemplifies a more comprehensive approach that combine service provision with advocacy and facilitation in youth participation and engagement. Furthermore, NGOs in Lublin have emerged as influential actors in shaping youth-oriented policies and participatory tools. The research suggests that Lublin represents collaborative model, where NGOs work closely with city authorities, offering valuable contributions and driving dynamic change in youth participation. Consequently, more collaborative frameworks appear to be significantly conducive to boosting youth participation. Future research should explore how these roles continue to evolve in response to changes in local governance and context, including shifting policies and funding.

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