

**WATCHDOG
PUBLIKACJE**

Democracy's vital health statistics

LOCAL EXPERIENCE OF CIVIL CONTROL

Karol Mojkowski
Citizens Network Watchdog Poland

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INTRODUCTION

A civil control is to check how government bodies, chosen by citizens and subordinate to them, are operating. This, however, cannot be learnt from a book. Not because the issue itself is not of interest to academics. Bookshelves groan under the weight of work concerning transparency and controls on government administration. This is a relevant and pressing issue and has already been taken up by opinion formers in the media and on social media websites. However, to what degree does law enforcement or standards of openness of administration influence daily practice in Poland? Do those already engaged and interested in the workings of local government encounter a professional and cooperative attitude in government offices?

It seems that growing knowledge and legal experience are still not having a concomitant impact on the anticipated growth in the level of citizenship of this control, or in a more authentic and systematic engagement of the most committed, meaning local people, or even an understanding that a well conducted civil control is in everyone's interest, including government officials.

In the material presented in this publication the reality of civil controls is based on experience from watchdog actions carried out in twenty-one local communities (from small rural districts to provincial towns and cities) between 2010 and 2013.¹ As a result of observations, analysis and conversations on actions carried out we not only elaborate on the results showing the significance of civil control and determining the necessary conditions for its actual existence in the local community but we also reflect on the subject of real difficulties encountered in developing watchdog momentum at local level.

It appears therefore that local civil control is, on the one hand an expression of the development of civil society, while on the other, an area of civil engagement requiring the continual building of an atmosphere of trust and co-operation as well as systematic support which would allow independent and professional action.

¹ The material is based on conversations, analysis and the observations of established watchdog initiatives carried out in 2013 by more than twenty people in ten voivodeships. Each person had at least three years' experience in conducting watchdog activities as well as cooperating with residents on long term watchdog initiatives. This work uses statements from local watchdog activists participating in the research as well as selected examples from their watchdog initiatives.

CIVIL CONTROL FROM A LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

CONTROL AND WATCHDOG ACTIONS

Civil control, also known as watchdog actions, is the systematic checking of specially chosen authorities and their subordinate administrative bodies by local people to check that they are functioning as well as proposing essential changes to improving the quality of their work. This not only encompasses public institutions but also private organisations and firms which manage public money. It also decides their effectiveness and whether they are being conducted in a consistent, independent and ethical way. Watchdog actions require long-term planning, raising awareness and broadening knowledge of those involved in watchdog work as well as being governed by specific values and avoiding conflicts of interest.

Well planned watchdog actions are the result of reliable assessments of how public authorities currently work based on information gathered and analysed. They should be conducted with the aim of changing the quality of how public administration works as well as residents' interest in the work of the control in a particular field.

An important aim of a watchdog activist is to draw the attention of public authorities to the needs of local people and undertake action to meet them.

Watchdogging is more than checking documents and government moves. It is also reacting, attempting to verify what appears in the media and proposing change. The goal is to show the authorities that they have to talk with people and that it is their duty to do this. For the authorities to change and be reminded of their responsibilities require someone to make them aware of this the whole time. The best is to ask about specific matters.

Kamil Nowak, Kędzierzyn-Koźle

CHALLENGES

→ **Watchdogging involves, on the one hand the watchdog activist getting involved in the life of a local society while on the other, leading to an increase in the involvement of other local residents.**

Projects from within national watchdog campaigns include: formulating proposals and lodging complaints, participating in court proceedings, taking part in public hearings or monitoring legislation.² Local communities are taking similar actions which, although concern individual administrative bodies, municipal offices or local government institutions, are on a country-wide scale that significantly influence standards of openness in public life.

² Katarzyna Batko-Toluć, Krzysztof Izdebski, *Watchdog Organisations in Poland. The Current Situation, Challenges and Perspectives*, Institute of Public Affairs, Warsaw, 2012.

One of the examples of a watchdog action by local watchdog activists becoming a national civil action is the petitioning (under the Administrative Code of Conduct) to compile and publish a register of public institutional contracts.

This work entails pursuing available information on the Internet about every contract issued by a municipal office and publishing a list of such agreements with their number, completion date, contractor, work done and fee. This works preventively as certain contracts are not generally concluded, so it also allows the local community to understand how their money is spent, discuss the desirability of such work and even the level of expenditure involved. Prior to elections it can be an important source of information to assess how the local community is being run.

LOCAL WATCHDOGS – WHO DOES IT MEAN?

Individuals or organisations who are systematically observing the work of government with the aim of improving their functioning, raising the bar of responsible administration through their actions and legal accordance are known as watchdog activists.

Local watchdog activists are gathering information about how government and administration is working. They present proposals for amending law and procedures concerning the functioning of public institutions so as to carry out their duties more effectively. Through their actions (e.g. demanding for public information, analysing and making available agreements signed by local government officials to other residents) they set out to improve how local budgets are managed.

Open and transparent decision-making processes in public institutions, as stipulated and enforced under the law by local watchdog activists, ensure a high standard of service, concerning, amongst others education, health and local communal security. It also prevents incidents of corruption or conflicts of interest from developing.

Watchdog activists therefore fulfil important social functions: informative and educational as well as pre-emptive and overseeing. They also often initiate bottom-up civil actions, independent of local authorities and led by the very residents from the area concerned.

Despite the undoubted benefits that civil control can bring it still arouses mixed feelings in Poland. People involved in it tend to be perceived as pushy, pedantic and looking to pick holes in everything while their actions are presented as an irritation for the government, wantonly putting up stumbling blocks for civil servants or simply and most commonly litigiousness. Even courts supplicate themselves to the general mood emanating from government and begin to be reluctant to the civil control activities.

CHALLENGES

→ **Changing the hostile attitude of the authorities, public administration, the courts and even local people themselves towards civil control and watchdog activists is as difficult as convincing the authorities that they are not the sole arbiters and distributors of public information. One of the reasons for this is a lack of knowledge about who local watchdog activists are and what motivates them.**

The work of activists only occasionally receives official recognition, although it allows local government to spend money less wastefully, more rationally and in accordance with people's needs. In Poland, we still have local areas where civil control simply cannot take place.

There are, however, exceptions. Marzena Czarnecka from Szklarska Poręba received a distinction in the competition *Action Acacia Action Oak – Unusual Residents of Lower Silesia 2012*. The mayor of Szklarska Poręba nominated her for an award for the action she had been monitoring and which she wrote about in the local newspaper, *The Szklarska Poręba Voice*. It was awarded in recognition of almost ten years of regular watchdog activity as well as for other undertakings in local society.

Despite a lack of widespread acceptance and understanding for watchdog activities, in the last few years new local initiatives have sprung up. Currently, there are estimated to be, on the basis of regular monitoring, around three hundred.

Civil control conducted on the local level is firstly, carried out by individuals, informal groups or local non-governmental organisations. Watchdog activists differ in age, gender, profession, financial status, interests, family, political outlook and often, even if they are from the same area, a vision of their town's long-term development. Activists include business people, farmers, teachers, technicians, pensioners, etc. What connects them is their independence from public institutions which they are monitoring.

Watchdog activists inspire each other and benefit from the knowledge gained from others. They understand the importance of preparing professionally in order to carry out watchdog actions in terms of knowing how public institutions basically function as well as the workings of administrative procedures.

They also care about the sustainability of watchdog initiatives by educating local residents about their rights. They are also looking for bodies which could support local watchdog initiatives whether it is working on material collected, a particular stage of a court case or financial or in-kind support (e.g. purchasing microphones, cameras or software).

Every watchdog activist who goes through the preparation process for their new role leads to a growing 'critical mass' of people in the local environment who are verifying the work of the authorities by being educated in legal tools, ethics, methods of planning and developing watchdog actions and raising awareness of civil law.

Grażyna Rojek, Stronie Śląskie

Where does the need of individual engagement in local society come from? How does a local activist become a watchdog activist? What is it like to be a local watchdog activist? All of this is discussed by actual activists as participants in the School of Watchdog Initiatives organized by the Citizens Network Watchdog Poland.

CHALLENGES

→ A local watchdog initiative requires the watchdog activist to be constantly and personally engaged as well as developing their skills in tandem with continuous funding of educational-information activities (e.g. on-line communication).

I can't imagine the situation where the local authorities would sponsor their own controller.

Strażnik z województwa opolskiego

The development of a watchdog organisation is more difficult than building up a more typical association because it should systematically implement its stated aim over the long term which is not the case for other kinds of local social actions.

A local watchdog initiative cannot use local government sources of finance or those that might give rise to a conflict of interest. This would undermine the credibility of any monitoring as well as the whole watchdog action. The vast majority of watchdog activists finance their own activities and do not depend on receiving grants. They are both economically and professionally independent from local government in which they are active.

In the case of some watchdog activists an economically independent way of working entails restricted opportunities to earn money in the place where they live as financing a watchdog organisation or initiative does not constitute support from central institutions or grant programmes in Poland.³

CHALLENGES

→ Conducting watchdog activities requires the activist to be self-motivated and enormously determined but also be able to sincerely assess their own motivation and situation. So why do we want to join in civil controls, independent from both local government and local public institutions? What makes us take on such work? Can we count on the support of others? Will we be able to clearly communicate the goals and results to interested local people, etc.?

³ An exception is the grant programme of the Stefan Batory Foundation introduced in 2004 to support the development of watchdog organisations. However, local watchdog initiatives often do not take the form of non-governmental organisations. One solution could be support from the Fund for Civil Initiatives which offers to finance informal groups or other types of initiatives. Although it would require a great deal of awareness on the part of those assessing projects and appreciating and understanding watchdog actions. This very publication could turn out to be helpful in this.

THE RIGHT TO INFORMATION IN LOCAL ACTIONS

People, organisations and informal groups are keeping an active watch on the authorities, particularly using the right to access public information which is a means available to everyone and a basic human right enshrined in national and international law.

Accessing public information is in the interest of every government: the greater the transparency of the workings of administration, the more it will indirectly affect the availability of services provided by a public institution for people. Despite this widely held belief, the practice of applying the law, both at central and local level, still looks unsatisfactory.

Article 10: Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers.

European Convention on Human Rights

Article 61: A citizen has the right to obtain information on the activities of public authority bodies as well as persons performing public functions.

The Constitution of the Republic of Poland

Article 1: Each piece of information about public affairs is public information within the meaning of the Act and subject to the availability and renewal of the principles and procedures laid down in this Act.

Law on Access to Public Information

More on the right to public information in Poland can be found at www.informacjapubliczna.org

Local watchdog activists, involved in significant cases in local communities include:

- requesting (among other things) maintaining and publishing records of contracts by local governments and bodies using public funds
- watching the process of adopting local zoning plans and how those regulations were implemented
- taking care of the level of open information in order to assess educational institutions
- drawing attention to the exactitude of local legislation

- recording and sharing the progress of local council sessions and commissions with residents
- mobilising local people to protect the local environment based on public information of waste management
- monitoring the *cork fund* [money for preventing alcohol and drug abuse] – amounting to over seven hundred million zlotys at national level

If I have to fight merely for information then I'm wasting time and energy. So there will be less for other activities for society which is a sure sign of wasted resources....

Gaining information about public affairs helps local watchdog activists as a starting point for action on behalf of local people..

Grażyna Rojek, Stronie Śląskie

Local residents' awareness when talking about the opportunity to exercise their rights is still very low. Although the law on access to public information is already twelve years old, it's only now that you can see local people beginning to use it more widely.

Krzysztof Marusiński, Orzysz

CHALLENGES

→ **Educating and informing local people about their rights as well as watchdog actions are key to long-term watchdog initiatives as well as long-term changes initiated by watchdog activists.**

Each time their work requires using the right to public information, which should be the basis of contact between public administration and residents. Far too often they come up against the inaction of public administrators as well as unjustified decisions of refusal regarding access to public information.

Repeatedly drawing on the right to information inevitably leads to some kind of court action and this is what distinguishes watchdog initiatives from other work by social organisations or informal groups. According to watchdog activists merely their involvement in court cases improves the work of public institutions by making access to information quicker. Citizens Network's lawyers estimate that just lodging a complaint in court resulted in access to public information in one third of cases concerning foot-dragging by a public administration body.

From the common experience of gaining access to information, local watchdog activists also point out that in local communities where they are actively informing residents about their activities, the number of people exercising their right to information is increasing.

THE WATCHDOG AND THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

Watchdog activities primarily depend on working with the authorities, administration and local people. The basic work of local watchdog activists is information from public institutions. Their analysis, conclusions and proposed recommendations reach local people in different ways: via the Internet, media, meetings, etc.

LOCAL PEOPLE

The support of local people is the most important and most valuable of every watchdog initiative, irrespective of its level or subject. Local people represent the main source of information for local watchdog activists and are the direct beneficiaries of any watchdog action undertaken. They can also be a source of support for local watchdog initiatives, e.g. checking, commenting on and petitioning for the completion of the register of agreements. The experience of working with local people also has a fundamental impact on the long-term duration of the watchdog initiative. Those watchdog activists wishing to remain independent from local authorities should look for long-term partners and sources of finance for their activities from the very same local people.

As equally important as conducting monitoring is informing and educating local people about this field. Good communication is essential for each local watchdog initiative. This can take the form of local meetings with residents or by reaching out to bloggers, social media and the Internet with information updates.

Contact with local people is also key to ensuring the long-term prospects of local watchdog initiatives. This depends to a large extent on whether an activist can create partners from local people for his/her work. Where there is no real local interest then a watchdog initiative has no sense.

The watchdog activist's role is interesting people in local government. As people become interested in local government it quickly turns out that people are not just passive observers. They want to know more, they also have something to say and they want to take part in governing.

Aleksandra Puławska, editor of *Stacja Tłuszcz* – an independent newspaper

The watchdog's role is to show you can do something different. At the beginning everyone was focused on who the winner is – us or the authorities. We were informed that everyone was waiting to see how long to hold out for. This might have made us bored and indeed it did. As it happened it was exactly then that people began to see it completely differently, that we are able to fight for ourselves. That people really do have rights, they can read about this and see we don't give up – we continue.

Katarzyna Treter-Sierpińska,
A watchdog activist from the district of Jeziorany

Nobody is going to fight with a local council because you can lose 300 zlotys in tax relief. It's not clear that these 10 redemptions have anything to do with what we all lose as the result of a lack of policy evaluation. We would all profit if money leaking from the community were saved. But many people are committed to the principle: I don't care, it's not my problem.

Local watchdog activist,
Warmian-Mazurian Voivodeship

The question usually causes astonishment: what are you carping on about? Everything works fine so why change something. Officials lead us to believe that the interest, the consulting, the questioning is not appreciated, that it riles people. Everyone is scared that asking will only result in a spot of litigation. People are beginning to check that any written correspondence and behaviour towards officials is as solicitous as possible.

Local watchdog activist,
Silesian Voivodeship

CHALLENGES

→ **The biggest challenge is encouraging the local community to support and join watchdog activists. On the one hand, people feel inhibited and scared and on the other, watchdog activists sometimes lack the requisite communicative skills to disseminate information on its activities and build relations with locals.**

The idea of local community control of authorities work is still met with a large degree of misunderstanding from local people. Although watchdog actions are closely watched by local people, if only because they are coincidentally pioneering by nature, the challenge is still for the local watchdog activist to convince people that carrying out such actions is to everyone's benefit.

In smaller towns many people and organisations depend on local or regional authorities for financial support. It is one of the reasons it has been so difficult to look for partners for watchdog initiatives from among local people or non-governmental organisations who are not involved in these types of activities up till now. Many local organisations just decide to avoid asking any questions to the authorities for fear of losing their funding. This anxiety also concerns people whose families are professionally connected to the local authorities or are in some other way directly dependent on them.

A watchdog organisation has to primarily check power. It is not the typical relation between authorities and NGOs involving the exercise of public duties in exchange for support from the local budget, hence the difficulty in reconciling watchdog actions with the actions in other types of organisations. Those involved are easily identifiable, as they are not that numerous in their work – either in watchdog initiatives or in other local organizations. They are always there, asking questions or inquiring if the local authorities are working in accordance with the law and if not, then threatening sanctions. Watchdog activists must be aware of this which is why they limit their other activities so as to avoid self-censorship, creating conflicts of interest or harming others. Therefore, conducting business, especially at local level, can have a major impact on other social work undertaken by the activist.

LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND ADMINISTRATION

An awareness of the benefits related to the civil control of local authorities is also slowly growing among representatives from public administration. In local and district communities internal actions are undertaken to improve transparency within the administration, improving the quality of services for local people, monitoring public policies and evaluating implemented programmes. More frequently, research is undertaken on local people's needs and documentation setting out the strategic directions of development of local government is made based on reliable diagnosis.

The observations of selected initiatives show however, that watchdog activists, in connection with their activities, either experience various kinds of pressure from local authorities or they feel that the mere possibility of 'exposure to power' affects the development of their watchdog initiative, especially in the field of building co-operation with representatives of local government.

The local authorities' disapproval of watchdog initiatives sometimes directly affects those involved in a civil control. In the case of those watchdog initiatives analysed for the purposes of this material, they included detailed building inspections of watchdog activists' places of residence, work place inspections, blocked co-operation with local authority institutions and accusations of defamation. However, these did not adversely impact the continuation of these initiatives.

One frequent reaction of the local authorities to the start of a watchdog action is the proposal of *crossing to the other side* which means the chance of employment in a local government institution in exchange for dropping the watchdog action. Offers also arise concerning political engagement. As research from the Institute of Political Studies and the Parliamentary Office of Analysis point out, 'convincing those who have earned respect in their communities unconnected to politics to run for a parliamentary seat or position in local government is difficult'.⁴ For watchdog activists the function of a control is key to how democracy itself works is more important than taking part in the administrative apparatus of local government.

Paradoxically, local watchdog activists also do not find partners in local authorities for watchdog work which acts in their own interests. They cannot rely on the engagement of local inspectorate bodies such as the municipal auditing commission or local and district councils due to their reliance on the executive bodies of administration. 'The position of municipal councils as well as the councillors themselves has dramatically depreciated to merely "tools" of control over municipal boards and officials. The council committees do not possess the skills to control and the councillors are not in a position to stand up to dominating officials. These officials are growing in number and are also relatively well remunerated and in small local commu-

I don't feel pressure as the local authorities cannot hurt me. The mayor cannot phone anyone and say "take this guy in hand"! I am independent but on the other hand I have a problem finding people to undertake watchdog activities in my town because everyone knows that such a phone call could potentially happen. People like me cannot count on the support of the local council if they want to remain fully independent and unaffiliated with any faction in the local or district councils.

Local watchdog activist,
Silesian Voivodeship

Then a wave of inspections came in my company. The mayor also requested the local police one day to go with me. They went everywhere with me. Such a thing makes an impression at the beginning. Later, formal and informal pressure began to be applied by the local municipal offices. At this point, it merely increased my motivation.

Local watchdog activist,
Pomeranian Voivodeship

⁴Zofia Kinowska, *The Condition of Civil Society*, The Parliamentary Office of Analysis, Warsaw, 2012

Answers to watchdog activists' questions can be extensive but rarely to the point. What if someone does not understand, gives up and will not take the matter further? The authorities often don't see what a watchdog activist's role is in democracy... it's an indispensable element of the democratic process, while in the authorities' opinion a question remains a subversive act, revolutionary and the one asking it a thorn in their side. This atmosphere is changing in government offices but very slowly.

Ireneusz Kowalkowski, Kraków

This state of affairs can be described as secret of culture country. It is the belief that the job of administration is to protect information. However, in a democracy openness is a basic principle which is restricted only in exceptional circumstances. This culture is very difficult to change. Thanks to the work of watchdog activists they are gradually succeeding in bringing to people's attention how wide areas of public life are open coupled with the necessary introduction of mandatory rules for regular monitoring in public services based on open and available data.

Zenon Michajłowski, Nowa Sól

nities it is the most lucrative employment. Meanwhile, councillors do not have the money to bring in experts. However, the occasional expert opinion commissioned by council offices is blocked by administration. In practice, council offices are subordinate to local government.⁵

There are still many places in Poland where local authority decisions are taken without ever consulting local residents. Instead, decisions are made between the mayor, officials and to a limited degree, according to watchdog activists, councillors. In this way, the quality of how the authority conducts its procedures and documentation declines. Institutions and individuals participating in the decision-making process are not disclosing all the documents and therefore do not care about the quality of the justifications, additional opinions or expert reports (if any were done at all). The authorities, of their own volition, deprive themselves of the chance for a free social audit whose aim is to improve the workings of public administration.

An important issue with which watchdog activists have to cope in their work is the selectivity and incompleteness of the information found in Public Information Bulletins. The experience of watchdog activists confirms research carried out and publicly available data. According to a report from the Supreme Chamber of Control at the end of 2006 over 80,000 entities and public institutions were obliged to run Bulletins. In August 2013 the Ministry of Administration and Digitization announced that they had registered just 16,700 institutions running Public Information Bulletins. Even these, in experts' opinions, 'are not current and very often incomplete. Moreover, it is not particularly appreciated when a citizen asks'.⁶

CHALLENGES

→ Cases between watchdog activists and local authorities often end in court. This is not particularly beneficial in building mutual trust. Local authorities are still making it difficult to obtain public information and do not respond to the recommendations of a watchdog activist. The challenge therefore is to change the approach of both sides in this dispute and find a place where they will be able to look at the situation objectively, learn from it and reach an understanding.

⁵ The writers are referencing a 2013 published report headed by Jerzy Hausner, *Growing Dysfunction, Fundamental Dilemmas & Necessary Actions. A Report on the State of Local Government in Poland.*

⁶ Dziennik Gazeta Prawna (*The Daily Legal Journal*), 30.08.2013, no. 168

MEDIA

Every resident has the right to demand reliable information, allowing them to assess decisions taken by local authorities which serve the public interest, as well as to some degree meet the expectations and requirements of local people. If we do not have our own experience from conducting civil controls of local authorities nor knowledge of the actions of local government employees, we start by looking for information. We check a local authority's achievements on the basis of information found in the Public Information Bulletin, we search the Internet and newspapers. However, the most informative (meaning the most critical) descriptions of local authority work will most probably not be found in the local press since a substantial section of local titles are financially dependent on the largesse of local officials.

There would be no point scouring these papers for precise accounts or information concerning our municipal problems (why a school has to close, what changes have been made to public transport, what analysis was carried out for justifying the building of an aqua park, who are municipal agreements signed with and for how much, what kind of offers were submitted for running a health centre, etc.), although they all concern public information. In the best case scenario, we will merely discover a publicised tender or locals having fun at the opening of a long-awaited investment. In the obligatory photograph accompanying the story will be the mayor and sometimes an entire photo report covering his/her tenure. It therefore follows that the aim of local government papers is not to be too informative.

In an expert report prepared in March 2013, Lidia Pokrzycka presented the state of the local press market in Poland and how it is divided between local government and private (independent) publishers. *Independence means no permanent subsidies from municipal or party funds, just the need to survive on advertising revenue. Thanks to this it can perform a check on behalf of the local community - the basis for the true development of a democratic society. Local government press cannot fulfil this function.*⁷

The writer also underlined the uneven competition that exists between independent and local government press.⁸ *The latter is often free or sold at a reduced price (subsidised from public sources) which seriously undermines fair competition for an independent press. Government titles do not meet the conditions for enforcing checks and balances on government power which is very important for local communities. Instead they resemble press releases, excessively praising local authorities and promoting government, the papers' own employers, all of which leads to cronyism. The problem also lies in how commercial advertising is placed in local government press, adversely affecting how independent titles can finance themselves. Such advertising in the government press can also develop into cronyism between advertisers and local authorities.*⁹

The lack of easy access to such information is most often the impetus to undertake a watchdog action by directing questions to a public institution. Cases brought by local watch-

What if somebody bought a national newspaper and sung the government's praises? The distribution of local government newspapers is a waste of money.

Daniel Długosz, NOWa gazeta trzebnicka – niezależny tygodnik lokalny

⁷ Lidia Pokrzycka, *State of the Local Press in Poland*, the Parliamentary Office of Analysis, Warsaw, 2013 [http://orka.sejm.gov.pl/WydBAS.nsf/0/9BF6DC961C01A577C1257B2C0045687F/\\$file/Infos143.pdf](http://orka.sejm.gov.pl/WydBAS.nsf/0/9BF6DC961C01A577C1257B2C0045687F/$file/Infos143.pdf) p. 1

⁸ According to research by Lidia Pokrzycka local government press is edited by local government employees who dare not criticise their superiors. According to data from the Press Research Centre at the Jagiellonian University in 2005, 39% of all local press publications were government ones while 37% were private. This does not mean that all the private titles were independent of local government. The remaining titles belonged to churches, associations or political parties.

⁹ Op.cit., p. 3

dog activists are on the most important subjects affecting the life of a local community. Where there is little or even no communication between government employees and local people in places where watchdog activists are active, it is often the activist who takes over the role of information provider. They try to fill the gap with blogs, websites, printed material or newspapers.

CHALLENGES

→ Having your own 'media' is becoming an obvious element in local watchdog activities. Nowadays, it no longer poses a challenge. However, there are many other conditions that need to be met, such as attention to objectivity, reliably and accurately documented material, an ability to communicate information as well as persuade others of your case. This requires continual learning, both in practice and training.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

It is worth bearing in mind when trying to get an idea of the role of the watchdog activist in local society that local watchdog initiatives, despite their increasing numbers, are still not that numerous. Yet it would be wrong to come to the conclusion that local watchdog activists have no impact on the reality around them. **At the moment the biggest challenge is establishing a sound foundation for watchdog actions in the local community as well as ensuring their long-term prospects.**

Thanks to experience gained, information exchanged and greater integration, local watchdog activists are learning from and supporting each other, becoming more and more visible and effective. The credibility and, in many cases, efficacy of local watchdog actions is gradually overcoming local people's concerns about getting involved in a civil control.

A necessary element for supporting local initiatives is also **investing the necessary resources in improving the level of knowledge and skills** in terms of determining and communicating objectives and in shaping the attitudes of local leaders.

In connection to this, the majority of watchdog initiatives has often grown without taking any organisational shape and has, primarily, been conducted using activists' own resources and documented without the help of local media. It is also worth bearing in mind that **the growth in programmes offering small grants awarded on a fast-track basis in order to strengthen local watchdog initiatives.**

The development of local watchdog initiatives and their current concomitant needs provides a challenge for those actively wanting to support the watchdog movement in Poland. Some of those are running non-governmental organisations operating at national level (e.g. Citizens Network Watchdog Poland). These activities, which do not involve other institutions, organisations or other individuals, are far too few.

Participating locations in the study:

Bielsko-Biała
Dziemiany
Gdańsk
Jeziorany
Kędzierzyn-Koźle
Kraków
Legnica
Lidzbark Warmiński
Lublin
Milanówek
Nowa Sól
Oława
Orzysz
Stronie Śląskie
Szczecin
Szkłarska Poręba
Rabka-Zdrój
Tłuszcz
Trzebnica
Warszawa
Wrocław

sieć obywatelska WATCHDOG[^]

Citizens Network Watchdog Poland upholds the law on the right to information as a fundamental element of a healthy democracy. The organisation believes that government transparency and accountability can only come about, both at national and local level, through civil engagement. In order to achieve this, the organisation reinforces the idea in citizens that they have the right to discover how both the government and public institutions function as well as influence decision-making and the management of public property. It also shows them how to act effectively in situations where civil servants do not respect citizens' rights by providing legal assistance.

On the national level, the organisation advocates openness and strengthens the voice of citizens in decision making. Apart from the organizational website, it also provides expert online services at: informacjapubliczna.org, watchdogportal.pl and funduszesoleckie.pl.

www.watchdogportal.pl provides information on local activities described in this publication, having the potential to achieve greater transparency and accountability in government. They are usually conducted at local community level with a large contribution of time and finance by the activists running them.

It is advised to come up with ideas for organising systematic public, community and business support for such activities. Citizens Network Watchdog Poland offers help to anyone who would like to join in supporting the development of local watchdog work; either through direct involvement or by providing financial, material or organisational assistance.

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Citizens Network Watchdog Poland
Ursynowska st. 22/2
PL 02-605 Warsaw
tel.: +48 22 844 73 55
biuro@watchdogpoland.pl
www.watchdogpoland.pl

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