

## Community-based governance at the local level

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**The community-based governance model presents one way to ensure people's welfare in the midst of 'evil' problems and crisis situations, doing so through mutual cooperation with local governments and communities and other actors.**

A community-based approach as a form of governance means **the systematic and permanent network-based involvement** of persons (legal and physical) located in the local government territory: involvement in the form of information, consultation, joint discussions, and joint decision-making (i.e. co-creation). The form of involvement depends on the specific occasion and purpose. It is important that the involved people know from the beginning what form they will be involved in for each specific case in order to avoid disappointment where the parties expected co-creation, but the involver meant consultation.

A community-based approach is set as a strategic goal for the Cohesive Estonia development plan and Internal security development plan. The community-based model works both vertically and horizontally and across sectors at both central and local government levels.

In order to implement the model at the central government level, different ministries must plan the work together. Here is what is needed: development plans, and a methodology for their preparation that must be designed jointly and across sectors. The means of cooperation are, for example, government commissions and steering committees for development plan programmes, which are cross-sectoral and create the necessary prerequisites for a more comprehensive approach to development. For example:

- Under the leadership of the Ministry of the Interior, the 2020 cross-sectoral prevention concept was completed (<https://www.siseministeerium.ee/media/692/download>).
- The ministers in charge of cross-sectoral prevention (Minister of Justice, Minister of Education and Science, Minister of Culture, Minister of Finance, Minister of Social Protection, Minister of Health and Labour and Minister of the Interior) agreed in 2021 on the principles of the mentioned area, which guides further cooperation and joint activities (<https://www.siseministeerium.ee/media/691/download>). In order to implement these principles, the Prevention Council was formed by merging three government commissions – the Council for Child Protection, the Council for Crime Prevention and the Government Commission for Drug Prevention. This shows that we are moving towards consolidation and a more complex solution to challenges.
  - At county level, an important component of the implementation of the community-based approach is the unions connecting local governments. Safety or welfare councils have been formed to implement the model (<https://www.siseministeerium.ee/ministeerium-ja-kontaktid/kaasamine-osalemine/turvaliste-kogukondade-estli>). The process of forming the safety councils considered that their function in the future would start to be oriented towards the community much more widely across the county and that they would be places where people's welfare is considered as a whole through various areas of life. Development in this direction has already taken place in several counties and safety councils have become welfare councils.

- Initially, safety councils were formed in county governments, but in 2018, county governments were abolished (<https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/104072017001>) and their role in safety and welfare was taken over by county development organisations (MAROs).

Considering the effects of the disappearance of county governments and the desire to more clearly enforce safety or welfare councils, during the reform, the tasks to be performed jointly by local government units were defined by amendments to the Public Health Act (<https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/104012021013>), which according to § 10 are:

- 1) designing a living environment that supports the health, welfare and safety of residents;
- 2) preparing a health and welfare profile of a county or region and taking into account the information contained in it when preparing a county or regional development strategy;
- 3) implementing activities that support the health of the population and providing health-support services in the county or region at least for managing the priority health factors reflected in the health and welfare profile;
- 4) supporting national public health activities in the county or region;
- 5) creating networks necessary for managing public health and closely related fields at the county or regional level and organising their work.

The last point aims to create networks both at the county and regional level. In the county, an already established safety or welfare council is suitable for this network, which can be further developed if necessary. The safety or welfare councils that have already been established can effectively contribute to the fulfilment of the tasks performed jointly by the municipalities, including the preparation of health and welfare profiles both methodically and by applying the network they have created and the acquired involvement skills and experience, and ensure that the profiles are prepared and implemented.

The minimum content and compilation frequency requirements of § 11 of the Public Health Act have been established for the welfare and health profile. According to this, the document must at least reflect general data about the inhabitants of the administrative unit or region and have an overview of the state of the health and welfare of the population of the administrative unit or region, as well as health factors. The analysis of these data and a summary of the priority health and welfare indicators and the main health factors of the administrative unit or region are also stored there. The health and welfare profiler must update this at least once every four years. More information about the welfare and health profile and related methodology can be found on the health information website (<https://www.terviseinfo.ee/et/tervise-edendamine/tervise-edendamine-paikkonnas/seadusandlus-ja-strateegiad>).

County safety or welfare councils and networks are doing good work and are helpful in introducing a community-based approach and promoting cooperation with local authorities. The collection of best practices from the county safety councils has been completed (<https://www.siseministerium.ee/media/2306/download>), which makes it possible to learn from neighbours and share knowledge about well-functioning activities.

It is necessary to move from county level forward to the local level to implement a community-based model, focusing on systemic cooperation between the local government and the community.

For this purpose, the community-based model at grassroots (i.e. community) and local government level, will be discussed below. I describe the nature of the model and its various components so that individuals, communities and local governments can use it as an aid to building their own unique model that takes into account the local situation.

## Levels of community-based approach



### What does a community-based approach enable?

Applying a community-based approach as a mode of governance:

- increases social (community) cohesion and consideration for each other at the grassroots level;
- develops a cooperation culture and forms of involvement between people and between different institutions (from information to co-creation);
- raises society's awareness of the functioning, capabilities, problems and risks of various areas of life;
- raises people's awareness of situations and hazards, and skills for avoiding hazards and coping with them;
- increases the general sense of safety and security (we can do it) and resilience;
- increases the relationship of trust between the state (central and local government) and people through the presence and cooperation of various authorities;
- creates a common resource picture and awareness of capabilities for solving specific problems;
- enables the resources available to various parties to be used more purposefully and effectively to solve local problems (here and now).

The implementation of the model increases mutual trust between people and authorities, the legitimacy of the authorities and, at the same time, people's sense of security and welfare. The approach where one office or official solves a problem or shapes the living environment around us is outdated, simplistic and usually rolls the problem from one place to another. In today's world, we have to be able to see development needs and challenges as well as problems as complex and treat and solve them as such. As a result, people's welfare and sense of security cannot be guaranteed only by the central government. Neither can it be done by local government alone. It cannot exist or take place somewhere far away or be impersonal. On the contrary, it must be personal and take place as a joint coordinated action of local residents, communities, municipalities, private sector and state institutions. The parties concerned must participate. From an individual's point of view, it is not the only solution to wait for or demand a service from the local government or state office. Our own contribution to our own welfare and to the improvement of the environment around us is also crucial. Understandably, here too, each party must generally stay within the limits of their duties and fulfil the duties assigned to them by the law. However, you have to look for and find ways to help solve common problems within the framework of your tasks.

One of the important pillars of the model is honest and transparent communication. All parties need to understand what the actual local resource and capacity is to solve problems. Problems of cooperation and misunderstanding often arise from attributing greater abilities to each other than really exist. In this way, excessive expectations are simply placed on each other out of ignorance. In reality, however, considering their resources and capabilities, not all agencies are able to respond to specific expectations either to a certain extent or quickly. Such a situation causes dissatisfaction and mistrust towards the state in a wider sense, or more narrowly, towards some office or local government. Preventing the consequences of many problems does not depend so much on the activities of the respective sectoral authorities, but rather on the behaviour and capabilities of the people themselves, as well as on the feeling of fear, which arises primarily from a lack of awareness and worsens in the face of the unknown. The model makes it possible to achieve the best result by combining resources and capabilities.

### **How should a community-based model work?**

The most important element is local government involving people regularly and systematically. People must know in advance that they will be involved in a certain period every year. In this way, people and communities can prepare for this cooperation. It is also not enough that only the regional development plan is discussed. Cooperation must take place regularly, both within and between different groups and institutions. The local government must create an appropriate form for such regular cooperation. **A suitable form could be the establishment of a welfare council.** A welfare council does not mean that people always have to physically gather in the form of a round table. Modern online options can also be used. Neither does it mean the formation of a new council beside the existing one. If necessary, existing councils can be used if their activities are in line with the elements and goals of the community-based model.

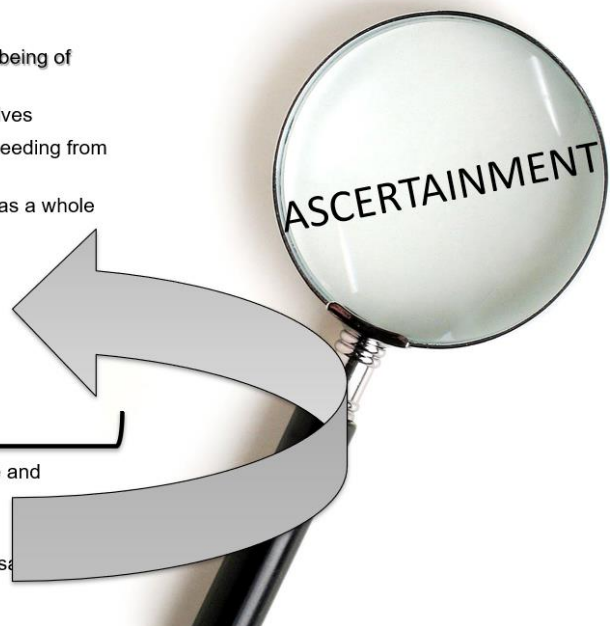
An important stage in the model is the identification of problems that disturb people's welfare. The methodology necessary for this must be agreed upon and jointly adopted at the initiative of the local government. The local government provides everyone with the necessary format (for

example, based on a health and welfare profile), according to which those involved can independently clarify their interests and expectations. Each community discusses its living environment and welfare issues with its community members, finding out what the problems are that bother the members of that community the most, which is why they want to highlight it in the welfare council and find a solution. Based on their expertise and analysing the situation, the state authorities, for their part, clarify the problems of the region in their own field. The local government also does this, looking at its territory as a whole. Both local government and state institutions use all their official information, statistics and expertise as a basis.

The local government gathers the obtained results, systematises and prepares the materials for a meeting with the welfare council. In the next stage, the representatives of the involved parties gather in the welfare council where their expectations and conclusions are stated and substantiated. Once the range of problems has been identified and agreed upon, their thorough analysis follows. In the community-based model, the main focus is on well thought-out preventive activities. This means preventing, avoiding and anticipating undesirable consequences instead of dealing with them. Here, the emphasis is on methodically identifying the root causes of problems, understanding them and eliminating them. **It is important to determine how and which of the involved parties, given local conditions and resources, have the opportunity to eliminate the root causes of the problems or to mitigate the consequences.** They must be highlighted in the analysis because a joint action plan can then be based on this and agreed upon.

## Community-based approach

1. Identification and prioritization of problems disturbing the well-being of people **in different groups**:
  - Community level – community members among themselves
  - Sectoral level – each central government institution proceeding from its expertise in the field
  - Local government – in the view of the local government as a whole
2. In welfare council:
  - analysing the problems described by the participants
  - prioritization, highlighting the most important
  - creating a health and welfare profile
  - preparation of a unified action plan
3. **Implementation of a joint action plan**, each with its own role and capabilities (with existing resources)
4. Evaluation of the execution of the action plan; review, if necessary



It requires commitment on the one hand and expertise on the other. The main role in this phase of the analysis must be played by the relevant experts who are thoroughly familiar with the area of the problem to be solved. For this purpose, there are relevant sectoral state institutions and local government experts. Using theoretical models and considering local conditions, they must describe the problem to be solved in a way that highlights and enables the parties to understand the actual conditions of the problem and the methods and possibilities for resolving it.

All the information is gathered, for example, into a health and welfare profile, the compilation of which is required by the Public Health Act. Once the problems have been analysed, the next step

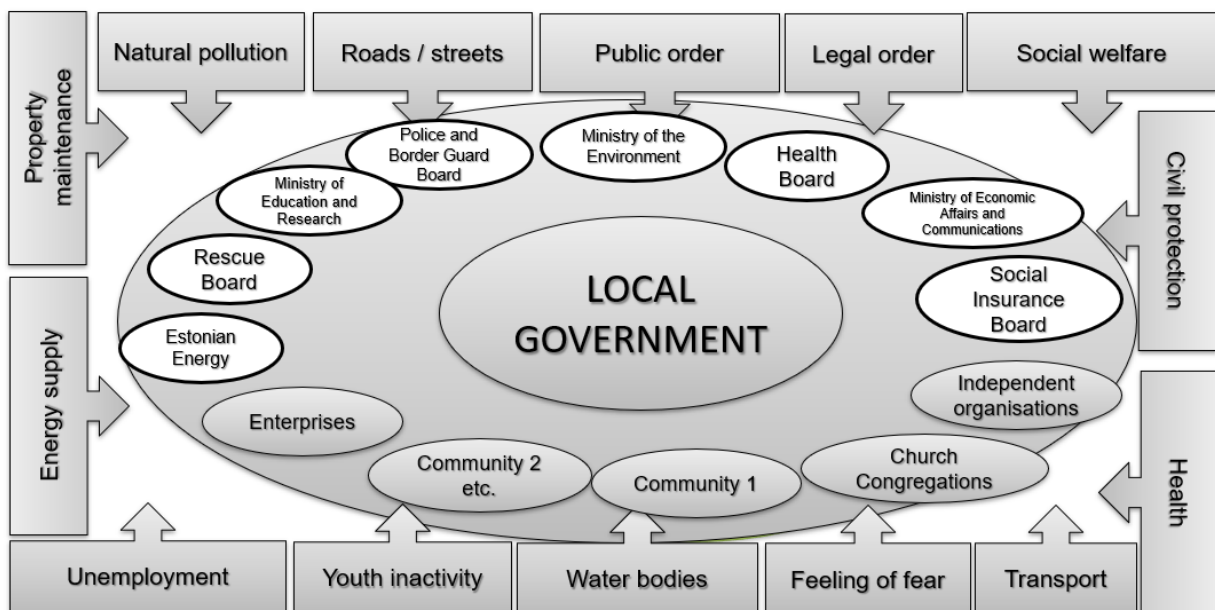
is to think about how to deal with them. What existing resources and capacities exist on-site to resolve them.

Once these discussions have been held and it has been agreed which problems will be dealt with, when, how and by whom (different parties), it is also necessary to draw up a precise action plan. The plans can involve different levels of detail for different problems but it is important that the welfare council can still monitor them. The monitoring frequency must also be agreed upon and fixed.

**Who should be represented in the local welfare council?**

- Local government.
- Representatives of regional communities.
- Representatives of civil society NGOs and other important interest groups, including churches and congregations.
- Representatives of private enterprises (various companies).
- Representatives of the central government. Through representatives of ministries directly, or if they have on-site agencies, representatives of these government agencies through their on-site experts. An example is the police through their prefectures and police stations.

**Welfare Council as a platform and form of work**



**What are the expectations for the role of the local government in the welfare council and the model?**

- Taking a leadership role.
- Implements a community-based model – systemic collaboration and involvement.

- Defines its regional communities together with the population and systematically involves them in the work.
- Forms a network of regions (i.e. by involving partners), creates a welfare council at the local government level as a platform (planning and implementation) and ensures its functioning.
- Participates with its expertise in the activities of the welfare council.

The figure shows a selection of welfare areas where challenges can disrupt the well-being of local people. This list of areas is indicative and not exhaustive. The actual list of areas and problems will become clear if they are systematically and consistently identified and resolved year after year. For example, civil protection is a modern field that needs to be dealt with systematically.

### **What prerequisites need to be created to implement a community-based approach at the local level?**

Implementing a community-based approach at the grassroots level requires that:

- Each local government must define regional (neighbourhood) communities in cooperation with its residents.
- Regional communities must be motivated to initiate their own internal democracy.
- Each regional community must choose its own spokesperson who represents them in the common interest of their community in relations with other communities and the local government, and who belongs to the welfare council.
- Communities must be motivated to cooperate in order to define and represent common interests at the grassroots level and ensure their well-being.
- The local government must form a welfare council as a platform for cooperation and it should include representatives of regional communities, as well as representatives of state service providers, private companies and civil society.
- The local government defines the working order of the welfare council and systematically and regularly organises its work, involving elected representatives of the communities. It must become a systematic and routine activity in a good sense.

### **How to define a community in a community-based model?**

There are many different kinds of communities, and from the point of view of civil society, they are all important. In most cases, communities are formed based on interests. In the implementation of the community-based approach, a regionally definable group of people acting for a common goal, a neighbourhood, located and operating within the territory of one municipality, and feeling a certain sense of social cohesion with this area, is central. All the important features are highlighted: the community is located in the same territory, they form a neighbourhood with each other, their common interest is the welfare of this area as a physical environment. Here, welfare is meant in a broader sense and depends very much on the expectations of the people in that community, but also on the geographical and other characteristics of the area, such as the natural conditions of the area and whether it is urban or rural. Are there water bodies, hills, forests or fields in the area? What kinds of companies operate there? Is it a tourist or industrial area? etc. An example can be a village in a rural area as a single

community. But under certain conditions several villages can also form one community. In towns, the situation is somewhat different because the population is significantly larger.

Communities cannot and must not be defined from a power position. It is a creative activity that must be carried out in cooperation with communities and local government. As a result, one must come to the conclusion of how many such neighbourhood communities there are in one or another municipal territory. In the view of the community-based approach, it does not matter whether these communities function in the form of a legal entity or not. The requirement of a legal form may arise if a party wants to enter into contracts or share finances with this community. The appropriate legal form in this case is a non-profit association (MTÜ). For example, there are various associations (village associations, etc.) in many parts of Estonia that already represent certain regions. If such societies exist and the population accepts them as their representatives, then the first step has already been taken and forming new ones is not necessary.

### **What are the expectations for the neighbourhood community and its representative?**

The community should play out different risk situations (be they natural or man-made hazards) and think about how to resist them in the best way, taking into account its own resources. We are all part of this process. Each of us has a smaller or bigger role and opportunity. The community-based model creates opportunities for people to participate, raises people's awareness, helps them understand the nature of problems and their own opportunities to prevent them. On the other hand, the role of the community is to think through and agree among themselves what most disturbs the welfare of that community. These problems can be related to very different areas of life; for example, unemployment, emigration, the school system, public order and accidents. It is important to describe them together with other community members and forward them to the welfare council of the municipality through their representative.

Here, the representatives of the communities are expected to actively participate and, considering the capabilities of their community, consider and offer solutions, as well as pass on relevant information and awareness to the members of their community.

**Private companies and other interest-based communities involved in the model have a similar role.** On the one hand, to express concerns and expectations, and on the other hand, to search for solutions to these questions with their abilities and opportunities.

### **What are the expectations for representatives of churches and congregations in the said model and welfare council?**

Churches and congregations are part of a regional community or several neighbourhood communities. The members of the congregations in turn form a community. In the context of the community model, it is important that the congregation also informs the local government of its capabilities (e.g. spiritual care in the field of mental health). Churches and congregations are also an important party in the model, and they help identify problems and at the same time propose solutions. They also have a special role to play in being there for people and helping community members understand the nature of welfare issues.

### **What are the expectations for experts from central government institutions in the model and the welfare council?**



Central government institutions have a very important role. They are experts in the field who help describe problems and develop solutions. Central government institutions participate in the community model primarily with their local resources and capabilities. Their role is to clarify their strategic objectives on-site, fitting them into the local context. They also offer solutions to challenges and problems using their expertise in the field. First, the central government must explain the adopted strategic decisions considering the local effects, and propose solutions on how to implement them on-site to ensure the maximum welfare of the people.

Second, they must clearly communicate the capacity and response speed of the service they offer on-site. It is not important what speed of response has been promised by the minister or director general of the sector, but how quickly the problems of people in a particular community are actually responded to. It also helps the community to understand more clearly what situations should be better prepared for.