

COMPARISON OF CHAMBERS OF AGRICULTURE IN THE BALTIC STATES

Jonas PUPIUS^{1*}, Piotr MARCINIAK²

¹*Institute of Economics and Rural Development, A. Vivulskio str. 4A-13, 03220 Vilnius, Lithuania*

²*Institute of Law Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, Nowy Świat 72, 00-330 Warszawa, Poland*

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Abstract. The chambers of agriculture play a crucial role in shaping agricultural policy, supporting rural development, and representing the interests of farmers and agribusinesses in rural areas. This research provides a comparative analysis of the Chambers of agriculture in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, focusing on their historical development, governance structures, legal frameworks, membership principles, and relationships with public authorities. Although all three Baltic States transitioned from planned to market economies after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the re-establishment of chambers of agriculture took place in different years. In Lithuania as early as 1991, Estonia followed in 1996, and Latvia re-established its Chamber in 1999. The research highlights differences in membership models, financial structures, and engagement with government institutions. Estonia demonstrates a more integrated and efficient Chamber model, with higher participation rates. Lithuania and Latvia, despite having similar frameworks, show lower membership engagement and economic impact. The findings focus on the best practices for enhancing the effectiveness of agricultural chambers, particularly in post-Soviet economies undergoing institutional transformations.

Keywords: chambers of agriculture, rural development.

JEL Classification: O4, H11, K20, K23, L30, L31, L38, L50, L88, M10, P00, Z18.

1. Introduction

The end of XX century brought a lot of huge changes in Europe: Fall of Berlin Wall (Sarotte, 2015), the end of the Cold War (Hogan, 1992), the collapse of the Soviet Union (Kotkin, 2008) and many more. All these changes had a direct impact in particular the countries of Central and Eastern Europe – their institutions and all their socio-economic spheres.

This research focuses on the current status of chambers of agriculture in Baltic states (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia), supplemented with the most important historical references. These organizations were established in 1989/1999. All operate as voluntary associations – one in each country. However, their establishment time, membership base, structure, tasks and position in relation to other agricultural organizations vary. They all support the development and representation of farmers, enterprises and cooperatives acting in agriculture in dialogue with public authorities. Now, after around 35 years, it can be summarized how the process of chambers' activities was effective or not, and what influence for economy it

had, because an effectively operating chamber can have a huge impact on the development of the economy of the entire country. Research into the organization of the business environment is an important element in finding an answer to the question of how to build institutions Guziejewska and Marciniak (2021) in order to most effectively transition from a planned economy, in which investment, production and allocation of capital goods take place in accordance with economy-wide economic plans and production plans (Nove, 1987), to a market economy, in which decisions regarding investment, production and distribution to consumers are made on the basis of price signals generated by supply and demand forces (Stuart & Gregory, 2004).

When discussing agricultural Chambers, it is worth remembering that they are a form of chambers of commerce Pilgrim and Meier (1995) dedicated to the agricultural sector. However, in most countries of Central and Eastern Europe, if they have been established, they operate based on their own regulations and specific sector requirements. This justifies their separate discussion.

* Corresponding author. E-mail: jonas.pupius@ekvi.lt

The objective of the study is to conduct a comparative analysis of chambers of agriculture in Baltic states in order to identify institutional differences, evaluate their effectiveness in representing the agricultural sector, and determine best practices for improving their impact.

To achieve this, the study employs a qualitative comparative methodology, analysing legal documents, organizational statutes (Appendix), public reports, and secondary literature. Emphasis is placed on the dimensions of membership principles, governance models, funding sources, and institutional cooperation with public authorities. By synthesizing these elements, the study contributes to understanding how institutional design influences the performance of agricultural Chambers in transitioning economies.

2. General overview of chambers of agriculture in the Baltic States

The first common feature is that chambers of agriculture in all three countries, although based on dedicated regulations at a similar time to the chambers of commerce, they were established as separate entities. Membership in them is voluntary, but members include various entities.

The area of agricultural land is also an important factor to consider. Among the three Baltic states, Estonia has the lowest percentage of usable agricultural land relative to its total area – twice as low as in Lithuania and half as much as in Latvia. This information is indicated in Table 1.

Table 1. Useful agricultural area in 2022

	Lithuania km ²	Latvia km ²	Estonia km ²
All area	65 200 (OSP, 2022)	64 589 (FAO, n.d)	45 228 (Aunap, 2015)
Useful agriculture area	29 145	18 725	9850
Pct of agriculture area	44.70% (56 in 1990) (Jarašiūnas, 2016)	28.99% (39,4 in 1990) (Ministry of Agriculture of Latvia, 1995)	21.72% (29 in 1990) (Peterson & Aunap, 1998)

2.1. Establishment and history of the Chambers

In Lithuania, the draft law on the Chamber of Agriculture was historically first submitted to the Parliament on 16 November 1924. According to this document, the Chamber of Agriculture provided for two types of representation of farmers: direct representation of farmers and representation through farmers' organisations (Chamber of Agriculture, n.d.-a). The establishment was approved in 1926. The chamber was acting till the second World War. On 27th August, 1940, by Order No. 174 of the People's Commissar of Agriculture, the former Minister of Agriculture, the Liquidation Commission of the

Chamber of Agriculture was established. The chamber was liquidated in the same year.

On 22th June, 1941, the war between the German Reich and the Soviet Union began. Soon the Germans entered Lithuania, displacing the Russians. Even before the Germans occupied Kaunas on 23 June, they formed a Provisional Government announcing the restoration of a free and independent Lithuania. In connection with this, the Ministry of Agriculture and the organizations uniting farmers, including the Chamber of Agriculture, were established (Chamber of Agriculture, n.d.-a). However, the activities of the restored chamber did not last very long, it was liquidated on 24 July 1942, on the instructions of the Germany Commissioner-Generalated.

The incorporation of the Baltic States into the Soviet Union after World War II meant that discussions on Chambers of agriculture were resumed only after they regained independence in 1990/1991 (Lithuania on 11th March 1990, Latvia on 21th August 1991, Estonia on 21th August 1991) (Chamber of Agriculture, n.d.-a)

In Lithuania, the restorative conference of the Chamber of Agriculture was held in 1991 (Chamber of Agriculture, n.d.-a). As the result chamber of agriculture was established as voluntary organization for all agriculture subjects. It should be noted that in 2018, the Lithuanian Farmers' Union, together with the Association of Lithuanian Agricultural Companies and the Lithuanian Grain Growers' Association, established the Lithuanian Agriculture Council (Lithuanian Farmer's Union, 2018). This action has taken part of members from the chamber, because some members moved out and joined to the council.

Latvian agriculture chamber was first established in 29th March, 1935 (The Baltic Times, 1940). This chamber system was liquidated on 28th June, 1940 as a result of the occupation of Latvia (Valters, 2001). After regaining independence, this chamber in Latvia operated only in the years 1999–2018 (Lursoft IT database, n.d.). Before it was closed down, a new, broader Latvian Chamber of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries was established in 2016 as a public law organisation (Latvian Chamber of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, n.d.). It is worth to mention, that this association represents only about 360 subjects of agriculture. This states that such an association cannot be considered as the representation of farmers only. Another sectoral organization with the largest number of members is nowadays the Cooperation Council of the Latvian Agricultural Organization, which in Latvia is called the biggest organization representing subjects of agriculture.

The Estonian Chamber of Agriculture was first founded in 1932 (The Estonian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, n.d.). This chamber operated as a successful organization until 1940, when the chamber and all other private organizations were also forced to close down by the Soviet occupation (Estonian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2022). The Estonian chamber of Agriculture and Commerce (2022) was restored in

1996. It unites agricultural producers and their unions, processors of agricultural products and their unions and companies providing services to the agricultural sector (The Estonian Chamber of the Chamber of Agriculture and Commerce, 2022).

Table 2 below represents comparative situation between different countries agricultural holdings number, which is reflecting possible number of agricultural enterprises and entities compering the real number of members.

Table 2. The number of entrepreneurs and chambers' members in Baltic States (Source: Chamber of Agriculture, n.d-b; Portal of the Agricultural and Rural Business Register and the Farmers' Farm Register, n.d.; The Latvian Agricultural Organisation Cooperation Council, n.d.; Latvian Public Media, 2024; EPPK, n.d.-b.; ERR News, 2024)

	Current number of the agricultural enterprises and entities represented by the chambers	Number of agricultural holdings in country
Lithuania	41 asociations and unions (names are public)	147 535
Latvia	12300 farmers, individual and legal entities (no public names) and 50 non-governmental agricultural organisations of national producers and processors	57 400
Estonia	30 000 directly and through other organizations but only around 7000 farmers (names are public).	10 700

After comparison of these 3 countries, the special situation has Latvia, where there are two private law, voluntary organisations representing farmers. Comparing Baltic countries – all of them restored chambers of agriculture in different time, where the first was Lithuania (1991), the second Estonia (1996) and the third Latvia (1999).

2.2. Comparison of legal basis

The main legal act about Lithuanian Chamber of agriculture is the 20th May 1997 Law No VIII-220 of the Parliament of the Republic of Lithuania (Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, 1997). This act establishes state and municipal earmarked funds and the right to participate in the profits of enterprises established by the chamber as a source of financing its activities. It can also provide consulting services and receive income from this. In summary, this legal act provides 10 financial resources for the activities of the chamber.

Chamber of agriculture in Latvia got the beginning after the restoration of independence only in 1999 and was closed in 2018. After their closure, a new wider chamber was established under the name of Latvian Chamber of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (Lursoft IT database, n.d.). This chamber was established on the

basis of the Law on Associations and Foundations (Saeima, 2003) and then adopted its own statute containing detailed rules of operation. Also, this legal act provides 4 financial resources for the activities of the chamber.

In Estonia, on 25th September 1995, the Law on the Organization of the Market in Agriculture Products was passed. Interestingly, this act also accelerated and facilitated the establishment of the Chamber of Commerce, and also enabled the state to support the chamber's activities during the first three years Report of the Estonian Agriculture-Chamber of Commerce for 2022.

The Estonian Chamber of Agriculture and Commerce (2022) is a private non-profit association of farmers, processors of agricultural products, forest and rural entrepreneurs, founded on 28th June, 1996. Its statute includes the name of the chamber translated into English, and a very precise description of its member groups: 1) farmers, 2) processing industry (mainly food industry), 3) rural economy, 4) forestry (EPPK, n.d.-a). In this legislation act 3 financial resources for the activities of the chamber are foreseen.

2.3. Organisation of the chambers

The organizational structures of agricultural Chambers and Councils in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia reflect their commitment to effective governance and sectoral representation. Each country uses a hierarchical framework to ensure the smooth functioning of decision-making, administrative tasks, and stakeholder engagement. From general assemblies to specialized committees and working groups, these bodies are designed to address the unique needs of agriculture and rural development while fostering collaboration among their members.

A comparative review of their governance systems indicates the following differences.

Chamber of Agriculture of the Republic of Lithuania acts as umbrella for 41 organisations (Chamber of Agriculture, n.d.-b). In Lithuanian the chamber's governing bodies are: congress, council, presidium. The supreme governing body of the chamber is the congress. It decides on the election of the Chairman of the Chamber, Vice-Chairmen, composition of the Audit Commission (Article 7). Also Chamber has special thematic committees (6), but their exact names are not mentioned in main legal acts (Chamber of Agriculture committees, n.d.). Special feature, that under the statute of the chamber (article 18), administration of the chamber is one of the highest governing body (Statute of the Chamber of Agriculture of the Republic of Lithuania, n.d.).

The highest decision-making body of the *Latvian Council for Cooperation of Agricultural Organisations* is the General Meeting of Members convened by the Association's Board. Other bodies are: Association's Auditor, Board of the Association, Board of Governors. The sectoral working groups are as follows: arable crops, milk, meat, horticultural, energy, the implementation of non-traditional sectors and the LEADER approach (ENRD,

n.d.), the expert Council on Food Processing and Agricultural Education. The executive body of the Association is the Board of Governors, which consists of thirteen members of the Board (Article 5) (Latvian Statute of the association „Cooperation Council of Agricultural Organizations“, 2022).

The Estonian Chamber of Agriculture and Commerce (2022) consist of the following bodies: the Council of the Chamber, the Board of the Chamber, the General Meeting, the Management Board or the Supervisory Board. The Supervisory Board elects a Chairman and up to three Vice-Chairmen. Also there is executive Board. The members of the Management Board are elected by the Supervisory Board, the Chairman of the Management Board. The management is separated according to sectors: The agricultural group, The Processing Industry Group, The rural economy group, The forestry group. The highest body of the Group is the Group Meeting. The Group shall be managed by a Management Board of up to six members. The Group elects a Chairman and up to five Vice-Chairmen from among its members, chamber committees (Article 4, 8, 9) (Statute of the NGO Estonian Agricultural Chamber of Commerce, 2019).

Agricultural Chambers and Councils in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia demonstrate a structured approach to governance, with clearly defined decision-making and administrative bodies. Lithuania emphasize leadership through general assemblies or congresses and rely on directors to oversee administration. Latvia and Estonia address complexity with specialized sectoral working groups and management boards tailored to different sectors of the agricultural and rural economy and Lithuania has special thematic committees, but it is foreseen only in inner documents, approved by the Council decision.

2.4. Principals of membership

This chapter reviews and compares the situation and membership rules of agricultural chambers in each country. The main goal and basic task of agricultural chambers is to help solve agricultural problems and represent the interests of its members to public institutions. It should be noted that the representation of the interests of chamber members really varies depending on the country.

As already noted, the common feature of all three chambers of Baltic states is, that membership in them is voluntary but the membership structure varies.

The Lithuanian Law on Agricultural Chambers states that non-profit farmers' organizations (societies, unions, associations, etc.) representing the interests of agricultural producers, processors, traders of these products and providers of industrial and intellectual services to agriculture may be members of the chamber. The chamber must have at least 3 members (Article 2.1) (Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, 1997).

The Statute of the Latvian association Cooperation Council of Agricultural Organizations states, that any

legal entity promoting agriculture, forestry, fisheries, environment and rural development may join the organisation as an associate member by submitting a written application to its board. The candidate attaches the decision of the own decision-making body, information on the number of members, contact details of authorized representatives (addresses, telephone numbers and electronic communication details) (Article 3.1, 3,2) (Latvian Statute of the association „Cooperation Council of Agricultural Organizations“, 2022).

In Estonia, the Chamber's members voluntary can be farmers, agricultural product processors and other rural entrepreneurs, as well as non-profit associations and commercial cooperatives, whose members are as above farmers, agricultural product processors, forest and rural entrepreneurs or their associations (Article 3.1) (Statute of the NGO Estonian Agricultural Chamber of Commerce, 2019). Under the Law on the organization of the market in agricultural products all farmers and processors have the right to be part of the Chamber's member (Article 6.1) (Republic of Latvia, 1995).

Based on the above information, conclusions can be drawn. Lithuania and Estonia prioritize the inclusion of farmers, processors, and service providers. Latvia has an intermediate model, allowing a broad range of legal entities to join but requiring formal application and specific documentation.

2.5. Relationship with public authorities

Agricultural chambers and organizations across Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia play a crucial role in shaping agricultural policy, supporting rural development and representing the interests of farmers, producers, and rural entrepreneurs. While their specific responsibilities and operational frameworks differ, they share a common goal of promoting sustainable agricultural practices, enhancing the rural economies, and fostering cooperation between stakeholders. These chambers act as intermediaries between the agricultural sector and government bodies, influencing policymaking, providing market insights and supporting the implementation of agricultural initiatives. The following analysis explores their distinct roles, contributions, and approaches in each country. The Standing Committee on Agricultural Research's Strategic Working Group on Agriculture Knowledge and Innovation Systems (SCAR AKIS) made the recommendation that the function of agricultural chambers should include active participation in the formulation of the national agricultural policy (Vuylsteke, 2016; Zegar, 2007). Information how it is implemented in different countries is provided below.

Lithuanian chamber of agriculture represents its members in state, government and management institutions. Participates in the preparation and consideration of programs for agriculture and rural development, drafts laws and other legal regulations related to the interests of members. Proposes and participates in consultation

processes on setting quotas, prices, subsidies, taxes and import and export tariffs for agricultural products and food products. Organizes and supports exhibitions, competitions, fairs and other mass events (Article 5) (Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, 1997).

Latvian Cooperation Council of Agricultural Organizations represents the interests of producers, processors and rural entrepreneurs of agricultural, forestry and fishery products in negotiations with the Ministry of Agriculture, other state administration institutions and international institutions and organizations. This organization also submits proposals for the development and implementation of agricultural, environmental protection and rural development policies. Participates in the development and evaluation of draft laws and other regulations on agriculture, environmental protection and rural interests. It creates conditions for the involvement of representatives of the Association members in the work of government working groups covering the assessment of European Union regulatory documents and research and assessment of differences in the guidelines of government institutions and non-governmental organizations.

The Council also proposes and evaluates proposals to improve the functioning of state institutions subordinate to and supervised by the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development, as well as the framework for their cooperation with each other and with non-governmental organizations (Article 2) (Latvian Statute of the association „Cooperation Council of Agricultural Organizations“, 2022).

The task of the Chamber of Agriculture in Estonia is to communicate market information to farmers and processors, their associations and the Government of the Republic. It also submits proposals to the Government of the Republic regarding the regulation of imports and exports of agricultural products (Article 6.3) (Republic of Latvia, 1995). The statute of the Estonian Agricultural Chamber of Commerce stipulates, that the Chamber explains to the state and the public the situation and needs of farmers, processors of agricultural products, forest and rural entrepreneurs and makes proposals for the implementation of appropriate regulation measures. It also participates in consultations on draft legislation and policy-making (Article 2) (Statute of the NGO Estonian Agricultural Chamber of Commerce, 2019).

Agricultural chambers in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia play a vital role in advocating for farmers, rural entrepreneurs and producers. At the same time, they influence agricultural policy and rural development. Lithuania emphasizes representation and organization of events. Latvia fosters collaboration and member involvement in policymaking. Estonia prioritizes market communication and advocacy. Despite their different approaches, these chambers strengthen agricultural sectors and promote sustainable rural development across the region.

3. Conclusions

1. This study reveals significant variation in the structure, function, and effectiveness of agricultural chambers in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. Estonia's chamber system is the most cohesive and efficient, with strong government relations, sectoral integration, and high member participation. All this situation is well represented in Table 2 and Appendix.

2. Lithuania and Latvia share similar governance frameworks, but both countries have lower membership rates and receive lower dues from their chambers.

3. Estonia's chamber operates as a strong intermediary between the agricultural sector and the government.

4. The agricultural representation of Latvia and Lithuania is fragmented. In both countries, in addition to agricultural chambers, there are also competing organizations, such as the Latvian Agricultural Organization Cooperation Council and the Lithuanian Agriculture Council. This reduces the effectiveness of national agricultural representation.

5. Despite these differences, all chambers share the common goal of supporting the agricultural sector through institutional representation and engagement with public authorities. A well-functioning chamber can serve as a bridge between public policy and private sector needs, which is especially critical in transitioning and post-Soviet economies.

4. Recommendations for strengthening and improving the effectiveness of chambers

Based on low participation rates in Lithuania and Latvia, chambers should develop strategies to increase member involvement through clear value propositions, transparent governance, and tailored services.

Consider developing a joint official initiative/platform of Baltic agricultural chambers to strengthen lobbying power at the EU level.

Given the fragmentation of representation in Lithuania and Latvia, it is essential to encourage cooperation or mergers between chambers and other sectoral organizations to build unified advocacy platforms.

Chambers should enhance communication efforts to increase their visibility, report annually on outcomes, and participate actively in national and EU-level policy consultations.

Understanding historical influences should be evaluated at a deeper level including especially: the legacy of the Soviet system and regional patterns of cooperation (e.g., Finland influencing Estonia). This research should assess the impact of historical factors on the development of chambers, including their current social perception and political and economic position, and as a result facilitate the search for more effective model solutions in the future.

The research revealed a lack of comparative studies of agricultural chambers in the Baltic countries, hence

this study is based on a query of legal acts and publicly available information. Due to the existing research gap, it is advisable to continue the research and refer its results to chambers of this type operating in neighbouring countries.

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APPENDIX

Table A1. Comparison of chambers of agriculture

	Lithuania	Latvia	Estonia
Relationship with public institutions	<p>It represents its members in state, government and management institutions. Suggests and participates in the preparation and consideration of programs for agriculture and rural development, drafts of laws and other legal regulations related to the interests of members. Suggests and participates in consultation processes on the establishment of quotas, prices, subsidies, taxes, import and export tariffs for agricultural products and foodstuffs. Organizes and supports exhibitions, competitions, fairs and other mass events (Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, 1997).</p>	<p>The Chamber develops and represents the opinion of the members of the association on issues of agricultural policy, environmental protection and rural development. Ensures openness in addressing key challenges in the agricultural sector, environmental protection and rural development. Represents the interests of producers, processors and entrepreneurs of rural agricultural, forestry and fishery products in negotiations with the Ministry of Agriculture, other state administration institutions and international institutions or organizations. Submits proposals for the development and implementation of agricultural policy, environmental protection and rural development policy. Participates in the development and evaluation of draft laws, draft Cabinet regulations and other laws and regulations affecting agriculture, environmental protection and rural interests. Involves members representatives in working groups of administrative bodies to evaluate EU regulatory documents or to examine and evaluate differences in the guidelines of non-governmental organisations and administrative institutions. It compiles proposals submitted by non-governmental organizations, in which it presents aggregated opinions to state institutions on measures to support the development of agriculture and rural areas. Proposes and gives opinions on proposals to improve the functioning of state institutions subordinate to and supervised by the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development, including ideas for improving cooperation between these institutions and non-governmental organizations. Assess the internal and external market situation and related problems. Proposes options for their solution (Latvian Statute of the association “Cooperation Council of Agricultural Organizations”, 2022).</p>	<p>The Chamber’s task is to provide market information to farmers and processors, their associations and the Government of the Republic. It also submits proposals to the Government of the Republic regarding the regulation of the import and export of agricultural products (Republic of Latvia). The statutes of the Estonian Agricultural Chamber of Commerce constitutes that chamber explains to the state and the public the situation and needs of farmers, processors of agricultural products, forest and rural entrepreneurs. It also submits proposals for the implementation of appropriate measures and participates in related legislation and policy-making (Statute of the NGO Estonian Agricultural Chamber of Commerce, 2019).</p>
Bodies of the chambers	<p>The congress, the council and the presidium. The supreme governing body of the chamber is congress. It elects the president of the chamber, vice-presidents and members of the audit committee (Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania , 1997).</p>	<p>The General Meeting of Members convened by the Association’s Board. Other bodies are: Association’s Auditor, Board of the Association, Board of Governors (Latvian Statute of the association „Cooperation Council of Agricultural Organizations“, 2022).</p>	<p>The Council of the Chamber, the Board of the Chamber, the General Meeting, the Management Board or the Supervisory Board (Statute of the NGO Estonian Agricultural Chamber of Commerce, 2019).</p>

End of Table A1

	Lithuania	Latvia	Estonia
Membership level	Low (Members of the Lithuanian Chamber of Agriculture, (41 organisation) (Chamber of Agriculture. (n.d.-b)	Low (LOSP, n.d.) (12300 farmers, individual and legal entities (no public names) 50 non-governmental agricultural organisations of national producers and processors,)	High (EPPK, n.d.), Members of The Estonian Chamber of the Chamber of Agriculture and Commerce EPPK. (n.d.-b.) (30 000 directly and through other organizations but only around 7000 farmers)
Sources of financing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Entry fees, membership fees and other targeted contributions. 2) Income from services provided. 3) Funds and assets transferred free of charge by natural and legal persons. 4) State and municipal funds for specific purposes. 5) Donations from non-state organizations, international organizations or foundations. 6) Interest on funds deposited in financial institutions. 7) Testamentary bequests in favour of the Chamber. 8) Share in profits of companies owned by the Chamber. 9) Loan funds. 10) Other legally received funds (Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, 1997). 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Entry fee and annual membership fees. 2) Remuneration for contract work and completed projects. 3) Voluntary contributions and donations from companies, organisations and individuals. 4) Other income from sources of financing that are not prohibited by law (Latvian Statute of the association „Cooperation Council of Agricultural Organizations“, 2022). 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) In the form of subsidies from the state budget. 2) Membership fees. 3) From other sources (Statute of the NGO Estonian Agricultural Chamber of Commerce, 2019).