

## COHERENCE OF THE SPENDING OF EU FUNDS IN THE SZCZEBRZESZYN MUNICIPALITY IN POLAND IN 2014–2020: EXPECTATIONS OF INHABITANTS FOR LOCAL DEVELOPMENT AND IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF LIFE

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### ABSTRACT

Local development, understood as a process of significant changes, is conditioned by both endogenous and exogenous resources, including EU subsidies. The main objective of the study is to identify the areas in which EU projects were implemented by the Szczecbrzeszyn commune in Poland in 2014–2020. In addition, the study analyzes the opinions of the commune inhabitants on the legitimacy of investments implemented with EU funds, in the context of the socio-economic development of the commune and improvement of the quality of life. A CAWI survey was conducted among the inhabitants of the municipality, and the changes that have occurred due to the EU funding were analyzed. Most respondents noticed the development within the Szczecbrzeszyn municipality in the last ten years. The use of EU funds allowed to increase the length of the sewage network and bicycle path, as well as to install solar collectors and photovoltaic panels. The respondents claimed that some of the projects positively impacted their quality of life.

**Key words:** EU funds, municipality, investment, local development, quality of life

**JEL codes:** I25, O12, R51

### INTRODUCTION

The municipality (commune, in Polish – *gmina*), as the lowest level of local government in Poland (the EU LAU2 level), is closest to the citizens, therefore it is primarily responsible for creating local development aimed at raising the standard of living. The municipal authorities are active in sectors such as the protection of the environment, culture, energy, health and human capital to contribute to its development. It is obvious that development opportunities are to a large extent determined by the financial resources of a municipality. In a situation where it does not have its own funds necessary to shape development processes, funds

from foreign sources, such as funds from the EU (EU funds), may prove helpful. The mere fact of obtaining subsidies from the EU budget does not guarantee the strengthening of local development; only in combination with entrepreneurship and the activity of the local community can subsidies significantly accelerate this development. However, for this to happen, the potential of the municipality must be properly managed [Kłodziński 2010], and the EU funds must be properly spent [Sawicka and Kurek 2004, Brągaru 2011, Pomianek 2018, Rakowska 2019].

The effects of individual projects are characterized by a different time perspective. Taking into account the time of occurrence, one-off, long-term and

potential effects should be distinguished. One-off effects concern, for example, the organization of cultural events. Long-term effects include the results of projects related to the construction or modernization of technical, social and educational infrastructure. In turn, the effects with a potential impact on development occur in the case of educational activities aimed at creating a low-emission economy or aimed at activating the unemployed. The effects of these measures are difficult to predict over time. In addition, some effects are easier to measure than others and can therefore be classified as measurable and unmeasurable. Measurable changes can be presented in quantitative terms, while non-measurable changes in qualitative terms [Rakowska 2019]. Therefore, it may be possible to determine whether a project has fulfilled its task and contributed to the improvement of certain aspects of society's life only after a certain period of time.

## AIMS AND METHOD

Szczebrzeszyn is an urban-rural municipality located in the south-eastern part of Poland, in the Lubelskie Voivodeship (region). It was established in 1972 and covers an area of 124 km<sup>2</sup>, 71% of which is arable land and 23% forests. There are very good conditions for agricultural production due to the high soil valuation index; however, agriculture is fragmented and thus low-effective [Urząd Miejski w Szczebrzeszynie 2017]. The Wieprz river flows through the territory of the municipality, as well as important road routes of international and national importance. In addition, there is a part of the buffer zone of the Roztoczański National Park and the Szczebrzeszyn Landscape Park within its area.

The aim of the study is to identify the areas in which EU projects were implemented by the Szczebrzeszyn commune in 2014–2020, as well as to find out the opinions of the commune inhabitants on the legitimacy of investments implemented with EU funds, in the context of the socio-economic development of the commune and improvement of the quality of life. The following research hypotheses were adopted in the study:

- Hypothesis 1 – the EU funds allowed to increase the use of renewable energy in the municipality in 2010–2019.

- Hypothesis 2 – due to the EU support, the percentage of the local population using the sewage network has increased.
- Hypothesis 3 – the spending of the EU funds influenced the development of bicycle infrastructure.
- Hypothesis 4 – the professional status of the surveyed inhabitants of Szczebrzeszyn municipality influences evaluation of the municipal authorities' activities.

The study used the following sources of secondary data: the Local Data Bank of the Central Statistical Office and financial reports of the Szczebrzeszyn municipality. A CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interview) questionnaire survey was also conducted, in which 159 random people living in the Szczebrzeszyn municipality took part, including 96 women and 63 men. The chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) test of independence was used to analyse the responses of residents collected during the study [Borkowski et al. 2004, Greenland et al. 2016], which makes it possible to examine whether there is a relationship between individual non-measurable variables. A direct interview was also conducted with a representative of the Szczebrzeszyn City Hall.

## DIRECTIONS OF SPENDING EU FUNDS BY THE SZCZEBRZESZYN MUNICIPALITY IN 2014–2020

In the 2014–2020 financial perspective, Poland was the largest beneficiary of EU funds among all EU countries, and Polish local governments were given the opportunity to obtain huge funds. Due to this, local government authorities had the opportunity not only to overcome barriers resulting from the underdevelopment of the basic technical infrastructure, but also to opening up the possibility of accelerating development processes, thus increasing their competitiveness. The EU funds allow municipalities to develop faster than would be possible if only their own funds were used [Szara and Majka 2017].

Communes could apply for co-financing projects in various fields, including regeneration efforts, social inclusion and a low-carbon economy. However, not all territorial entities have been able to raise funds equally. In the ranking relating to investment expenditure made by local governments in 2014–2019, thanks to the acquisition of the EU funds, Podlaskie voivodship

(the EU NUTS-2 level) was in the lead with expenditure per capita amounting to PLN 1,480.81, while Lubelskie Voivodeship came third with a result of PLN 980.15. In the small town category, Szczebrzeszyn was ranked 230 out of 607 with per capita expenditure at the level of PLN 1,131.95 [Swianiewicz and Łukomska 2020].

In the years 2017–2020, the local authorities and community in Szczebrzeszyn municipality applied for funds from four programs, of which funding was obtained from three, i.e. ROP of the Lubelskie Voivodeship (ROP LV, in Polish: RPO Województwo Lubelskie), OP Digital Poland (OP DP, in Polish – PO Polska Cyfrowa) and OP Eastern Poland (OP EP, in Polish – PO Polska Wschodnia), with the first one being the most popular. As for the municipality as a local government unit, in the discussed period it submitted 15 applications for EU funding, of which 11 contracts were signed (almost all under the ROP LV – only one contract was signed within the Rural Development Programme 2014–2020 – RDP).

The direction of allocation of the EU funds in the Szczebrzeszyn municipality included the spheres of, inter alia, energy, water and sewage management, tourism, education and social integration. Projects that were implemented in the municipality in the past 2014–2020 perspective are listed in Table 1 (under the European Regional Development Fund, within the ROP LV) and Table 2 (under the European Social Fund and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Areas). The projects with the highest EU funding in the municipality were thermal modernization of school and educational facilities in Szczebrzeszyn, construction of a sewage system and installation of solar collectors and photovoltaic panels – Stage II and III (Table 1).

The most aware group of inhabitants of the Szczebrzeszyn municipality in terms of investments financed from EU funds were inhabitants of the age 45–60. On the other hand, taking into account the structure of answers according to the area of residence, the knowledge of respondents from rural areas was at the level of about 57%, and of respondents from the municipality center – about 68%. This means that participants in the urban study were more aware of the activities carried out by municipal authorities regarding the EU projects.

According to the respondents, the most important source of information about investments in the Szczebrzeszyn commune is the Facebook page (33%), followed by information boards (24%) and the commune's website (21%). After analyzing the responses of the respondents, it was found that with age the importance of information provided directly by residents as a source of knowledge about the EU projects increases. On the other hand, the Facebook page shows the opposite tendency. It is more important for younger people.

On Fig. 1 shows the assessment of the importance of individual projects implemented in the commune from the 2014–2020 perspective, made by the respondents on a scale from 0 to 4, where 0 meant that a project was not important for them, and 4 – very important.

The most important for the respondents were projects related to the installation of solar collectors and photovoltaic panels (2.61) and the construction of a pedestrian and bicycle path (2.52). Projects related to the construction of a sewage system and thermomodernization of school buildings turned out to be a bit less important (both 2.47). The establishment of the Museum and Education Center (1.61) had the least value for the respondents in the commune. As can be read from Fig. 1, in the group of respondents, hard investments turned out to be more important than “soft” projects. The  $\chi^2$  test independence tests show the relationship between the professional status (broken down into working and non-working people) and the assessment of the importance of the project to build a pedestrian and bicycle path as well as the project on improving the competences of pupils from the Szczebrzeszyn municipality in the respondents' opinion.

Moreover, the participants of the study assessed the quality of the discussed projects on a scale of 0–4, where 0 meant poor quality of a project, and 4 – very good (Fig. 2). The respondents stated that thermal modernization (1.99) and sewage construction (1.94) were of the highest quality among all the projects. The largest limitations were observed in the “Be active” project (1.6). The evaluation of the quality of all projects was not too high, which may indicate some objections of the respondents as to the quality of these investments. It can be assumed that the projects did not meet their expectations appropriately.

**Table 1.** Projects co-financed by EU funds under the ERDF (ROP LV) implemented by the Szczeczeszyn municipality in the 2014–2020 financial perspective

Project	Aim	Total project value [in PLN]	EU co-financing [in PLN]
Thermo-modernization of the building of the Primary School in Bodaczów	improving the quality of the natural environment through comprehensive thermal modernization of the public building	2,185,049.28	1,235,733.40
Thermo-modernization of school and educational facilities with the use of renewable energy in Szczeczeszyn	improving the quality of the environment through comprehensive thermal modernization of utility buildings at the school in Szczeczeszyn	4,907,933.08	2,332,161.99
Museum and Education Center with an amphitheater	using the internal potential of the area for economic development based on local resources	2,568,853.37	1,442,566.97
Construction of a sanitary sewage system in Szczeczeszyn – Stage IV	increasing the availability and efficiency of the sewage system	6,465 206.49	3,018,969.34
Citizen-friendly digital office	a quick and simple way of dealing with official matters – a partnership project of 8 municipalities from the Lubelskie Voivodeship	7,190,248.99 (1,187,316.92)*	6,111,711.63 (1,009,219.30)*
Construction of a pedestrian and bicycle path along the Wieprz river with the organization of 2 nature observation points	support for economic growth through protection, promotion and development of natural tourist values	1,766,573.23	762,355.95
ECO Szczeczeszyn warm in the rays of the sun – Stage II	increasing the use of renewable energy in the municipality	4,764,140.56	2,743,826.80
ECO Szczeczeszyn warm in the rays of the sun – Stage III	increasing the use of renewable energy in the municipality	3,706,888.00	1,539,382.50

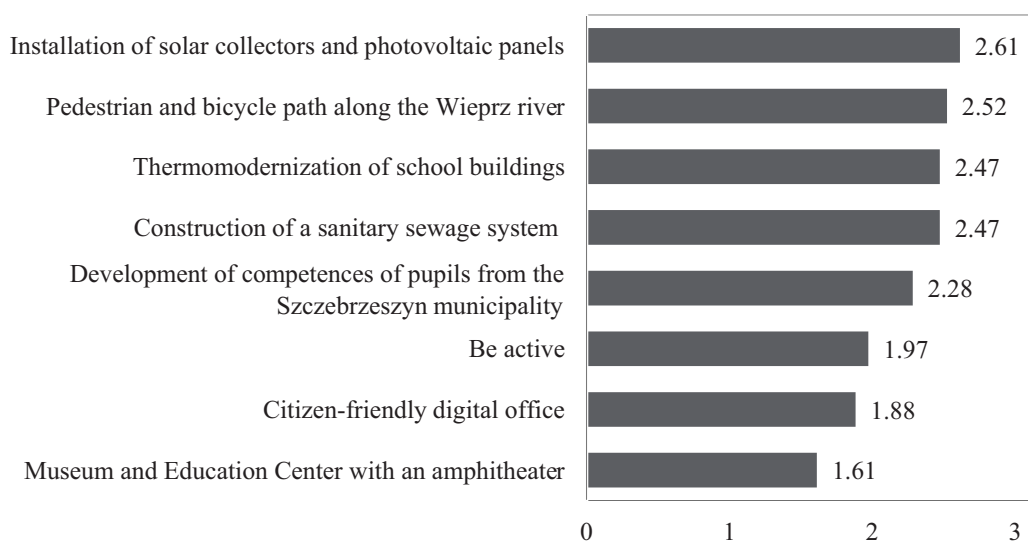
\* – including Szczeczeszyn municipality.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on [Mapa dotacji UE, Realizowane projekty].

**Table 2.** Projects co-financed from EU funds under the ESF and the EAFRD implemented in the Szczeczeszyn municipality in the 2014–2020 financial perspective

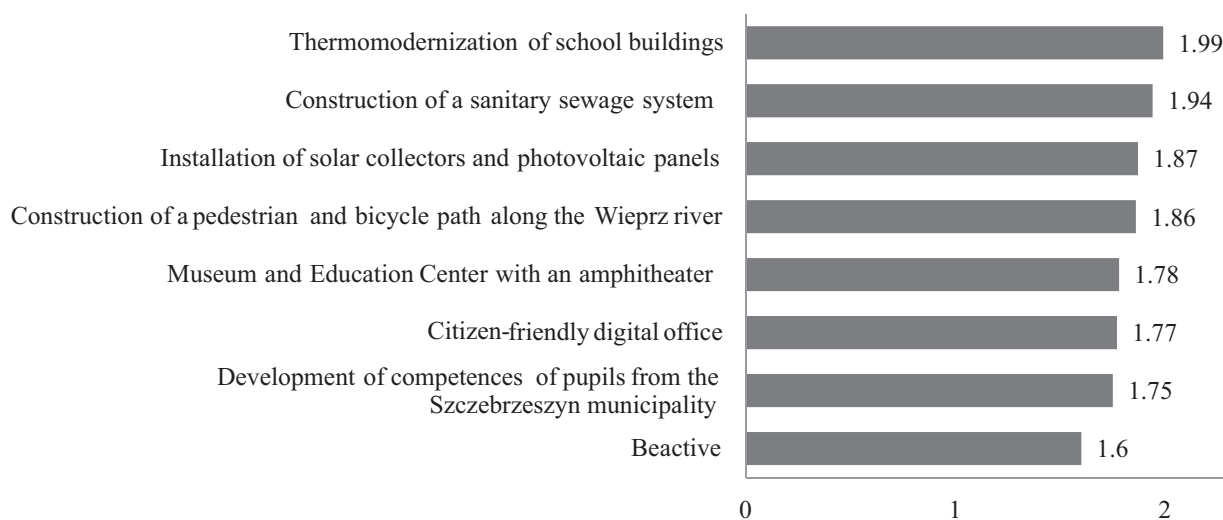
Project	Aim	Total project value [in PLN]	EU co-financing [in PLN]
Development of competences of pupils from the Szczeczeszyn municipality	raising the key competences of students, appropriate attitudes and skills necessary on the labour market, taking into account the needs of disabled people	987,715.91	932,975.91 (ESF – ROP LV)
Be active	increased socio-professional activity and improved access to the labour market for people excluded or at risk of poverty and exclusion	681,484.00	579,261.40 (ESF – ROP LV)
Tourist and recreation centre at Orodowa street	increasing general fitness and active rest by using the playground, outdoor gym or bicycle path	448 866.51	245,058.00 (EAFRD – RDP)

Source: Authors' elaboration based on [Mapa dotacji UE, Realizowane projekty].



**Fig. 1.** Assessment of the importance of projects implemented by the municipality in the 2014–2020 perspective

Source: Authors' research.



**Fig. 2.** Assessment of the quality of projects implemented by the municipality in the 2014–2020 perspective

Source: Authors' research.

The relationship was also examined in the case of project quality assessment. Using the  $\chi^2$  independence test, it was verified that there is a relationship between the professional status and the assessment of the quality of the “Be active” project, as well as the assessment of the quality of the construction project of the Museum and Educational Center. The working

respondents assessed the quality of the projects much worse than the non-working participants. Moreover, the evaluation of the quality of the construction project of the Museum and Educational Center depended on the professional status. In this case also, the non-working respondents were more satisfied with the quality of the project.



Another issue raised in the survey included the areas which require funding according to the surveyed inhabitants of the Szczebrzeszyn municipality. Taking into account the data for all age groups in total, according to the respondents, the local government should put more emphasis on supporting tourism (34.6%), technical infrastructure (28.9%), and health protection (21.4%). Tourism as an area requiring funding was paid attention to mainly by younger people. It is also a local development factor [Boboli and Dashi Muęa 2021] highlighted in the Local Development Strategy of Szczebrzeszyn Municipality [Strategia Rozwoju Gminy...]. However, as the age of the surveyed inhabitants increased, the importance of tourism decreased in favor of technical infrastructure and health protection. People under the age of 21 more often pointed to the need to develop culture and art, while older people looked for work and social integration. Regarding the gender structure, women selected health protection much more often than men.

Another issue raised in the study was whether the actions of the commune authorities are sufficient to improve the local quality of life. An overwhelming number of people participating in the survey (62%) assessed the activity of the municipal authorities as insufficient. The remaining respondents considered it to be sufficient (24%) and good (14%). Nobody rated them as very good. It can be assumed that the surveyed residents are not entirely satisfied with the functioning of the commune authorities and believe that a lot should be improved in this regard.

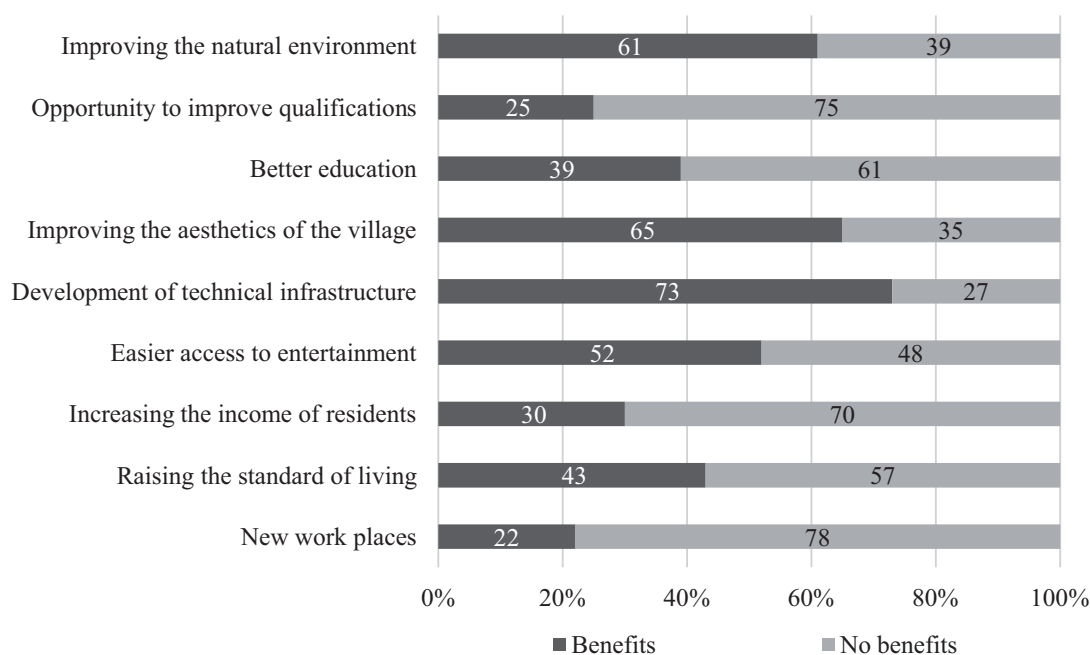
In order to examine the relationship between the evaluation of activities of the authorities of the Szczebrzeszyn municipality and such features as place of residence, professional status and gender,  $\chi^2$  tests were carried out and such relationships were found. The respondents from the town of Szczebrzeszyn assessed the behavior of the municipal authorities worse than the respondents from rural areas. The same question was also examined in terms of professional status. Another conclusion is that the professional status also affects the evaluation of the activities of the municipal authorities. The non-workers assessed the behavior of the authorities more positively than the working respondents. Moreover, there is also a relationship between the assessment of the activities of municipal

authorities and gender. Women participating in the survey had many more objections about the functioning of the organs of the municipality than did men.

There is no doubt that the goal of EU investments is, inter alia, reducing development disproportions, increasing the standard of living of the local community and economic development of the municipality. However, this is not always achieved. The inhabitants of the Szczebrzeszyn commune who participated in the survey were asked to evaluate the individual benefits that may be the result of the EU support (Fig. 3).

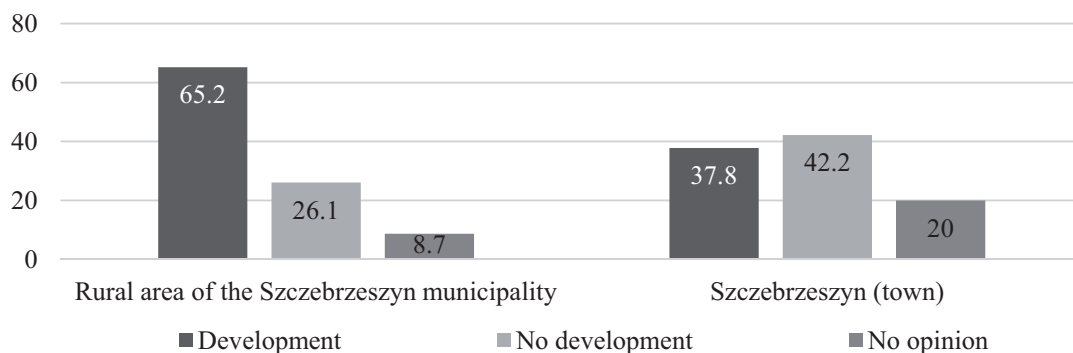
The surveyed community of the Szczebrzeszyn municipality noticed benefits mainly in the improvement of the natural environment (61% of positive opinions), improvement of the aesthetics of the town (65%) and development of technical infrastructure (73%). On the other hand, according to 78% of respondents, no new jobs appeared. Almost the same number of people did not see the possibility of improving their qualifications (75%). The vast majority of respondents also believed that their income has not increased (70%), that there was no better level of education (61%), and that they did not experienced any improvement in their standard of living (57%). As can be seen, negative opinions prevailed. This means that, according to the surveyed residents, the EU funds did not significantly contribute to the development of the municipality. Moreover, using the  $\chi^2$  test, a correlation was found between the professional status and the assessment of the occurrence of benefits thanks to the EU funding in the form of new jobs. The unemployed saw this benefit more often than the employed. This may be due to the fact that non-working study participants, including pupils, students and retirees are not up-to-date with the labor market like working people. In turn, their skepticism may result from difficulties in finding employment in the past. The respondents were also asked about their satisfaction with the current socio-economic situation of the Szczebrzeszyn municipality. Negative responses prevailed – over 60% stated that they are not satisfied with the current socio-economic situation of the municipality. Only 25% of the respondents took the opposite position. The others were undecided.

The respondents' task was also to determine whether there had been any development in the social



**Fig. 3.** Assessment of benefits for the municipality obtained due to EU funds according to respondents

Source: Authors' research.



**Fig. 4.** Assessment of the development of the Szczebrzeszyn municipality over the last decade (2009–2019)

Source: Authors' research.

or economic spheres of the municipality in the last 10 years. Most of the respondents (almost 50%) were in favor that this process took place, while 35% were of the opposite opinion. The Fig. 4 presents opinions on the development of the municipality among the inhabitants participating in the survey, living in rural areas and the municipal center (Szczebrzeszyn town).

As can be seen from the data presented in Fig. 4, the surveyed town residents were much more critical when it comes to the evaluation of the Szczebrzeszyn development process, in contrast to the respondents from rural areas. Almost half of the respondents (42%) living in the Szczebrzeszyn town stated that in recent years there was no development of the

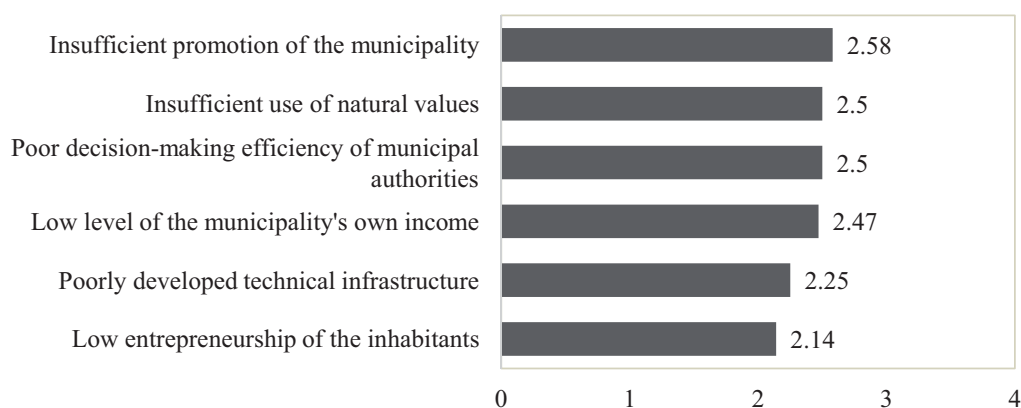
analyzed area. Almost 38% of the respondents had the opposite opinion. In turn, the situation in the rural area was completely different. There, the number of people claiming that development had taken place definitely prevailed (62%). Moreover, the study participants assessed the level of development of the Szczebrzeszyn municipality as similar compared to the neighboring municipalities. In order to find out which obstacles have the greatest impact on limiting and slowing down the development process, the respondents indicated the barriers which, in their opinion, are the most important (Fig. 5). Their task was to assign to each of the constraints a rating from 0 (indicating no impact on development) to 4 (meaning a very large impact on this process).

The most important barriers included in by survey participants were insufficient promotion of the municipality, insufficient use of natural values and poor decision-making efficiency of commune authorities (Fig. 5). The least impact on limiting the development of the Szczebrzeszyn municipality was noticed by the respondents in the low entrepreneurship of the local community.

The inability to obtain support in the form of external funds or difficulties with the implementation of EU projects also constitute a significant barrier to development. According to the person responsible for obtaining funds from the EU at the City Hall in Szczebrzeszyn, the greatest challenge in the past perspective, taking into account the implementation of

the EU projects, was meeting the planned schedules and timely completion of projects. The reasons for this were related to the scale and complexity of project implementation, and in difficulties resulting mainly from conducting tender procedures, i.e. lack of offers or exceeding the funds planned for project implementation.

To sum up, the respondents considered the most important investments to be the installation of solar and photovoltaic panels and the construction of a pedestrian and bicycle path. However, they were not completely satisfied with quality of the projects. Due to the EU funds, the respondents noticed the benefits mainly in the improvement of the natural environment, improvement of the aesthetics of towns and the development of technical infrastructure. As to fields requiring support, they mentioned mainly tourism (34.6%), technical infrastructure (28.9%) and health protection (21.4%). Most of the respondents were not satisfied with the current socio-economic situation, and considered the actions of the commune authorities insufficient to improve their quality of life. It is optimistic that most of the survey participants noticed that the Szczebrzeszyn municipality has developed over the last ten years. They indicated a few barriers with a significant impact on the process of creating development: insufficient promotion of the commune, poor use of natural values and poor decision-making efficiency of commune authorities.



**Fig. 5.** Assessment of barriers influencing the development of the Szczebrzeszyn municipality

Source: Authors' research.



## THE IMPORTANCE OF EU FUNDS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SZCZECBRZESZYN MUNICIPALITY

Obtaining EU funds is only the beginning of a path that should lead to economic and economic development. For this to happen, proper management at the lowest level of local government is important, and should be focused on constant development. However, this is not possible without investment. Government leaders should change the environment, contribute to the improvement or expansion of technical and social infrastructure, activate society and improve the aesthetics of public space, thus improving the comfort and shaping a better living environment for people. Therefore, the changes in individual spheres of life that took place in the Szczecbrzeszyn municipality as a result of using funds under the 2014–2020 financial perspective were analyzed. Those that have taken place in selected items of technical infrastructure over the last six years are illustrated in Table 3.

The sewage system in the Szczecbrzeszyn municipality has been underdeveloped over the years and little has changed in this area. As can be seen from the data presented in Table 3, in the years 2014–2018 the length of the active sewage network oscillated around 17 km. Only the town of Szczecbrzeszyn and the town of Bodaczów were connected to the sewage network at that time. The total number of connections leading to residential and collective residence buildings in 2014 was 412, and in the following years it fluctuated. The situation changed only due to the acquisition of EU funds for the implementation of the project to build a sanitary sewage system. In 2019, the number of con-

nections was 695, and the length of the active sewage network increased to 28.3 km. On the other hand, the percentage of people using the sewage network in cities over the last ten years increased from 56.5% in 2010 to 69.2% in 2019.

The greater number of connections to the sewage network provided better access to services, at the same time leveling the differences in access to the technical infrastructure. The project contributed to the improvement of the quality of the natural environment and economic development [Budowa... 2019].

Another investment that allowed for the development of technical infrastructure was a project aimed at developing the area in the Wieprz river valley. Its implementation resulted in the creation of 0.96 km of a pedestrian and bicycle path. The investment was intended not only for the inhabitants, but also to increase tourist traffic. Its main task was to provide a place to rest and spend free time [Mapa...]. In turn, the slight increase in the length of the bicycle path, which took place in 2019, was the result of the creation of a Tourist and Recreation Center with the help of RDP co-financing. So far, the largest investment aimed at creating bicycle paths in the municipality was the project “Bicycle Routes in Eastern Poland – Lubelskie Voivodeship” under the Operational Programme Development of Eastern Poland. Despite the fact that it was implemented in the previous financial perspective 2007–2013, it was also co-financed from the EU funds. It contributed to the creation of a total of 11.6 km of bicycle paths [Ministerstwo Rozwoju Regionalnego2012].

The development of technical infrastructure increases the attractiveness and competitiveness of the

**Table 3.** Changes in the technical infrastructure in the years 2014–2019 in Szczecbrzeszyn municipality

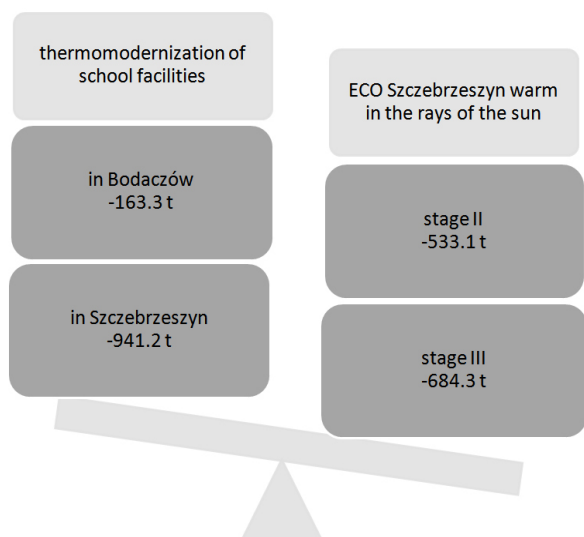
Specification	Years					
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Length of the active sewage network [in km]	16.9	17.3	17.3	17.3	17.3	28.3
Number of connections to the sewage network [in pcs.]	412	450	384	410	399	695
Population using sewage treatment plants [number of people]	2,533	2,542	2,550	2,550	2,580	2,790
Length of the cycle path [in km]	1.2	11.6	11.6	11.6	11.6	11.7

Source: Authors' calculations based on [Local Data Bank, Statistics Poland].

area, which becomes a place encouraging people to settle, rest or locate business there [Sierak 2018].

The local government also conducted pro-ecological activities. Investing in renewable energy sources is an opportunity for better energy management. It involves the reduction of environmental pollution as a result of the reduction of air pollutant emissions in the field of, inter alia, emissions of dust, sulfur dioxide and carbon dioxide. Consequently, this may result in increasing tourist attractiveness of the municipality [Rakowska et. al 2020]. The Lubelskie Voivodeship has a very large potential when it comes to solar energy, which can be used, among others, in agriculture, heating and electricity. The introduction of solar collectors, which have the greatest development opportunities in the short term, would positively affect the reduction of fees for energy services, which will undoubtedly benefit the inhabitants of the municipality. However, not only will they be the beneficiaries of the activities carried out, the environment and the municipality will also benefit from it. In addition, it will be closer to meeting the requirements of energy production from renewable energy sources.

The Fig. 6 shows the number of solar collectors and photovoltaic panels installed under the last two finan-



**Fig. 6.** Estimated annual decrease in greenhouse gas emissions from the projects [t CO<sub>2</sub>/year]

Source: Authors' elaboration based on [Mapa dotacji UE, Realizowane projekty].

cial perspectives. Investments aimed at introducing renewable energy sources into the commune were already initiated in the financial perspective for the years 2007–2013. At that time, 613 solar collectors were installed. In the 2014–2020 perspective, it was continued. The project “ECO Szczecbrzeszyn Heat in the Rays of the Sun – Stage II and III” made it possible to install a total of 492 solar installations and 281 photovoltaic installations in residential buildings in the commune. It can be presumed that they contributed to the improvement of the economic situation of the inhabitants.

One of the main tasks that the Szczecbrzeszyn municipality carried out in recent years was the modernization of educational institutions. The thermo-modernization activities involved reduction of heat loss from buildings. They were aimed at improving the energy efficiency of these buildings, i.e. the use of energy from renewable sources and reducing the costs of lighting and heating. In the 2014–2020 perspective, projects were implemented regarding the thermal modernization of the building of the Primary School in Bodaczów and school and educational facilities in Szczecbrzeszyn [Termomodernizacja...]. In the Primary School in Bodaczów, the coal-fired to gas-fired boiler room was rebuilt. In turn, in the Primary School in Szczecbrzeszyn, for example, walls and roofs were insulated, windows and doors were replaced, and solar collectors were installed. Over time, the effects of thermo-modernization activities have a positive impact not only on the environment, but also human health and finances. The advantages of such activities include energy savings, improvement of the air condition and improved aesthetics. In addition, pupils (and teachers) have a chance to feel the increased comfort of using the buildings. Both thermo-modernization activities and those aimed at the use of renewable energy sources will result in reduction of greenhouse gas emissions [Strategia Rozwoju Gminy...].

## CONCLUSIONS

The changes that took place in the local government in Poland were necessary to awaken the inactive potential at the local level. With the act of 1998, the municipality has become the basic and, at the same time, the smallest local government unit, which is also

characterized by the broadest range of competences and the strongest position. From that time on, the local government began to act as the landlord responsible for the economic development of the municipality [Parysek 2001]. In this process, however, it is not left to itself. It can count on support in the form of EU funds. However, obtaining these funds does not guarantee the rise of local development, as – if improperly spent – they can contribute to generating costs. Thus, it is important to take into account the needs of society and the financial situation of individuals.

For the respondents of the Szczebrzeszyn commune, more important than the “soft” projects were “hard” investments, which included construction of a sewage network and installation of solar and photovoltaic panels. The above-mentioned projects were also characterized by the highest value among all those implemented in the completed perspective. The commune community positively assesses the development changes in the last decade.

It was noticed that due to the EU funds, the municipality and its inhabitants achieved benefits mainly in the improvement of the natural environment, development of technical infrastructure and improvement of the aesthetics of the town. The first benefit may result from the implementation of the project “ECO Szczebrzeszyn Heat in the Rays of the Sun – Stage II and III”, the first stage of which took place in the previous financial perspective. It enabled the installation of a total of 492 solar installations and 281 photovoltaic installations in residential buildings. According to the above, Hypothesis 1 was adopted, which reads as follows: “The EU funds allowed to increase the use of renewable energy in the municipality in 2010–2019”.

The second benefit was the development of technical infrastructure. This is confirmed in practice, because with the aid of funding from the ROP LV, an investment was made to build a sewage network. As a result, its length in 2019 increased by almost 64% (from 17.3 to 28.3 km) compared to the previous year. In turn, the percentage of people using the sewage network in cities over the last ten years increased from 56.5% in 2010 to 69.2% in 2019. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was adopted: “Due to the EU support, the percentage of the local population using the sewage network has increased”.

Another project that influenced the development of the technical infrastructure in the municipality was the construction of a pedestrian and bicycle path along the Wieprz River. It was also co-financed by the ROP WL. At that time, an almost kilometer-long section of the path was built. In total, over 12 km of bicycle paths have been created thanks to EU funds in the last ten years. Thus, Hypothesis 3 was adopted: “The spending of the EU funds influenced the development of bicycle infrastructure”.

On the other hand, the third benefit, i.e. the improvement of the aesthetics of the town, may partially result from the thermal modernization of buildings, the construction of the Museum and Educational Center, the construction of a pedestrian and bicycle path or the creation of a Tourist and Recreation Center for which funds from the ROP WL and RDP have been received. Undoubtedly, this benefit was due to many investments introduced over the years, not only from EU funds.

Most of the surveyed residents were not satisfied with the current socio-economic situation of the Szczebrzeszyn municipality, and they consider the actions of its authorities insufficient to improve their quality of life. Moreover, the assessment of the activities of the authorities of the unit in question depends on the place of residence, gender and professional status of the respondents. As for the first division, the inhabitants of the urban area were more critical in assessing the functioning of the organs of the unit. In the second category, women turned out to be more demanding, and broken down by professional status, the employed had more reservations about the activities of the municipality. In connection with the above, Hypothesis 4 was adopted: “The professional status of the surveyed inhabitants of Szczebrzeszyn municipality influences evaluation of the municipal authorities’ activities”.

Among the barriers limiting the creation of development to the greatest extent, the respondents most often indicated insufficient promotion of the commune and poor use of natural values. Perhaps it is in these areas that further projects should be implemented by the authorities of the Szczebrzeszyn commune. This picturesque town located in Roztocze region has many advantages that can attract tourists, such as: beautiful landscapes, monuments, parks, loess ravines as well

as hiking and biking trails. However, it does not use its full potential, which is noticed by the inhabitants of the municipality.

In the survey, the field that required support was mentioned primarily as tourism (34.6%). The need for its development was also highlighted in the Spatial Development Plan for the Lubelskie Voivodeship [Urząd Marszałkowski Województwa Lubelskiego w Lublinie 2015]. It stated, inter alia, that the commune has a good transportation location and should strive for the development of tourist infrastructure in order to take advantage of local cultural values. A similar opinion was included in the Development Strategy of the Lubelskie Voivodeship for 2014–2020 [Strategia Rozwoju Województwa...]. It defines the commune as an area with high natural, landscape and cultural values that should be used to create appropriate conditions for socio-economic growth. In addition, it was stated that the focus should be on the development of transport infrastructure, the improvement of social services and the support of human resources. The survey participants are of a similar opinion, pointing to the need to support the development of technical infrastructure (28.9% of respondents' votes) and health protection (21.4%).

The local government authorities in the Szczepieszyn municipality see the importance of financial support from the EU, because the municipality's own income is not a sufficient source of financing for investments and without a subsidy from the EU budget, numerous investments, such as the construction of a sewage system, would not be possible. In the 2021–2027 financial perspective, the Szczepieszyn municipality authorities have been planning investments in the areas of road construction and climate, including the construction of storage reservoirs, environmental protection and protection of cultural heritage.

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## **SPÓJNOŚĆ WYDATKOWANIA ŚRODKÓW UNIJNYCH W GMINIE SZCZEPESZYN W LATACH 2014–2020 Z OCZEKIWANIAMI MIESZKAŃCÓW W ZAKRESIE POPRAWY JAKOŚCI ŻYCIA I ROZWOJU LOKALNEGO**

### **STRESZCZENIE**

Rozwój lokalny rozumiany jako proces znaczących przemian uwarunkowany jest zarówno zasobami endogenicznymi, jak i egzogenicznymi, do których należy zaliczyć dotacje z UE. Głównym celem opracowania była identyfikacja obszarów, w których gmina Szczepieszyn realizowała projekty unijne w latach 2014–2020, a także poznanie opinii mieszkańców gminy na temat zasadności inwestycji realizowanych ze środków unijnych w kontekście rozwoju społeczno-gospodarczego gminy i poprawy jakości życia. W związku z tym przeprowadzono wśród mieszkańców gminy badanie CAWI oraz przeanalizowano zmiany, jakie zaszły dzięki dofinansowaniu z UE na jej terenie. Jak się okazało, większość respondentów dostrzegło rozwój gminy Szczepieszyn w ostatnich dziesięciu latach. Wykorzystanie środków unijnych pozwoliło na zwiększenie m.in. długości sieci kanalizacyjnej i ścieżki rowerowej, a także zainstalowanie kolektorów słonecznych oraz paneli fotowoltaicznych. Respondenci uznali, że niektóre projekty wpłynęły pozytywnie na jakość ich życia.

**Słowa kluczowe:** środki UE, gmina, inwestycja, rozwój lokalny, jakość życia

