

FUNCTIONING OF THE POLISH LAG IN THE CONTEXT OF THE LEADER INITIATIVE

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Abstract. Changes in perception of the rural areas from the perspective of agriculture only gave the impulse for emergence of a new direction in the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of the European Union (EU). The Leader initiative established in 1991 aims at activating rural communities and rational local resources management. Local action groups (LAG) that assume the form of agreements of three local sectors (representatives of community, entrepreneurs and representatives of authorities) are the units implementing the Leader approach. The questionnaire based survey covering 44% of the LAGs operating in Poland was conducted. Thanks to that survey knowledge of the specificity and outcomes of their work was obtained.

Key words: rural areas, Axis 4 of the Rural Development Programme for 2007–2013, local action group (LAG)

INTRODUCTION

Rural areas represent over 90% of the entire European Union area and almost 60% of its population live in such areas. Until mid-1990s rural areas were seen in the context of agricultural production only. The common agricultural policy of the EU (CAP) was equivalent to the rural policy because undoubtedly it influenced functioning of rural areas [Spsychalski 2008, Brodziński 2011].

The rural area as a complete whole involves tight correlations between numerous areas. This results from a certain development philosophy that assumes that both agriculture and providing opportunities for development of other areas of activities play immense role in building the potential of rural areas. The strong ties between modernisation of agriculture and simultaneous development of multifunctional rural areas are noticed [Duczowska-Małysz 1998].

As a consequence of the rural area image widening, strong ties between functioning of agriculture and the space: natural, demographic and cultural surrounding it became more visible. The notion of rural areas' multifunctionality encompasses building the environment that is friendly to rural residents (not necessarily dealing with agriculture), the farmers and the tourists. The issue of rural areas' multifunctionality also involves extending its vitality and diversification of economic activity [Wilkin 2007].

As a consequence of the change in the earlier attitudes to the functions fulfilled by rural areas the objectives and directions influencing rural areas have been subject to significant evolution. Particularly well-visible changes took place in the CAP. The Leader initiative established in 1991 became one of the paths.

The name of the Community Initiative LEADER comes from French (*Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale*) and means 'combining activities for rural economy development'. It contributed to emergence of the territorial partnership idea [Moseley, Ed. 2003]. Within its framework, collaboration of three sectors: public, private and non-government takes place [Furmankiewicz and Stefańska 2010]. This partnership is realized within the framework of local action groups (LAG). They are the units dealing with implementation of the Leader initiative into life.

Within the analysed initiative a special role is played by sustainable development, i.e. combination of economic, natural and social issues on the decision-taking process concerning local resources' management. The level of that development influences attractiveness of the region from both economic and living perspective [Bielecka 2011, Wiśniewska 2011].

During the programming period of 2007–2013, the CAP consumes ca. 56 billion EUR a year, of which 13 billion EUR is allocated to rural development. Poland is the largest recipient of funds allocated to the second CAP pillar. Despite that, the EU aid in creating the new image of rural areas should abandon the social character. The focus on innovation, modernisation and civic activity stimulation is necessary [Kisiel, Babuchowska and Marks-Bielska 2012].

The Leader initiative brings us closer to that objective. The EU funds transferred within the Leader initiative framework are allocated freely. This is linked to the innovation and "transferability" potential, i.e. independence in application of that approach [Chevalier 2012]. The solution offers rural areas the possibility of development and creating their own path using the external aid. The initiative aims at socioeconomic stimulation of the population of rural areas [Kłodziński 2006]. The most important change in building the new model of rural areas was that it started to be based on bottom-up initiatives originating from the rural community [McAlinden 2005].

OBJECTIVE, MATERIAL AND METHOD

The main objective of the paper is to present functioning and evaluation of work effectiveness of the LAG in Poland in the context of social outcomes and problems limiting those bodies. An attempt was undertaken to identify the priorities and the most frequent areas and sectors of measures undertaken. The studies also allowed finding the specific mode of operation of the Polish public-private partnerships dealing with the Leader initiative implementation.

The results of own studies formed the base for this paper. The questionnaire addressed to the LAG was the tool used for obtaining them. The primary data was obtained between 4 September and 11 October 2011. The statistical population consisted of 336 LAG operating in Poland.

The questionnaire based on survey requires definition of the surveyed sample. In the surveys the probabilistic selection was applied. This means that every unit of the population has the same chance of being included in the sample. The Internet based survey was applied and the questionnaire was sent by electronic mail to all the LAG that operate in Poland. The survey sample consisted of 147 LAG that responded. The sample represents almost 44% of the entire population. The results reflect the general outline of the situation in the entire country.

The questionnaire consisted of 23 questions that are diversified as concerns the method of providing the answer. The determination of the order of questions resulted from the principle of gradual expanding the subject and going from the general to the detailed questions. The questions were designed in the way that required no additional and complex actions by the respondents.

The secondary data concerning the number of qualified population resident in the area covered by the local development strategy (LDS), amounts of funds available for the individual voivodeships and funds used by them were obtained from all the Marshal Administration Offices across Poland. Moreover, the secondary data originated also from the document presenting the Rural Development Programme (RDP) 2007–2013.

RESULTS OF STUDIES

There are 336 LAG functioning in Poland. Their distribution across the country depends on compliance with the provisions of the Regulation by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development of 23 May 2008¹ on the detailed criteria for selection of LAG for implementation of the LDS within the frameworks of the RDP 2007–2013 (§ 2 section 1 point 3). The vast majority of the territory of Poland is predisposed for that. The willingness of the community, business and public entities to get involved in activities for the benefit of a given area is equally important.

Table 1 presents the data concerning conditions that relate to the LAG in the individual voivodeships. In total, 2,118 communes representing ca. 86% of all the Polish territorial government units of that level are involved in establishing the LAG. The qualified population within the framework of the LDS implementation, i.e. the potential beneficiaries of activities carried out by the groups represents over 46% of the population of Poland. This proves the very wide coverage by the Leader initiative. The LAG borders do not have to be within a single voivodeship. There are 23 inter-voivodeship LAG in Poland.

The last column of Table 1 presents the number of people per 1 LAG in a given voivodeship. This indicator allows evaluating the group impact strength. In some voivodeships the LAG are relatively few, but with their activities they reach a wide group of the potential beneficiaries. Lubuskie Voivodeship with only 10 LAG – the lowest number in Poland – but with 68,547 people per one group is a good example. This is the highest

¹ Journal of Laws from 2008 No 103, Item 659.

Table 1. Conditions of LAG operation in Poland in 2013

Voivodeship	Number of LAG	Number of communes included in the LAG	Qualified population	Population per 1 LAG
Dolnośląskie	19	130	1 193 569	62 819
Kujawsko-Pomorskie	20	125	1 010 049	50 502
Lubelskie	26	193	1 278 675	49 180
Lubuskie	10	88	685 468	68 547
Łódzkie	20	138	930 571	46 529
Małopolskie	39	156	1 863 333	47 778
Mazowieckie	35	253	1 949 335	55 695
Opolskie	12	66	677 983	56 499
Podkarpackie	31	146	1 460 100	47 100
Podlaskie	16	117	664 195	41 512
Pomorskie	16	110	924 440	57 778
Śląskie	15	99	954 158	63 611
Świętokrzyskie	18	109	913 335	50 741
Warmińsko-Mazurskie	13	99	784 748	60 365
Wielkopolskie	31	192	1 797 179	57 974
Zachodniopomorskie	15	97	768 607	51 240
Total	336	2 118	17 855 745	–

Source: Own work based on the data obtained from the Marshal Administration Offices in Poland.

value of that indicator among all the voivodeships. In average, there are ca. 53 thousand people per 1 LAG in Poland.

During the programming period of 2007–2013 the LAG can assume one of the four legal formats. Those formats include the: association, union of associations and “special” association. Among the LAG surveyed around 80% were associations. They are not, however, standard associations operating as legal entities operating only based on the Act of 7 April 1989 – The Law on Associations². They are also subject to four different and very detailed principles stipulated in article 15 of the Act of 7 March 2007³ on support to development of rural areas with participation of the EAFRD.

This trend concerning the most frequently chosen legal form applies to the entire country. Efforts are undertaken at unifying the administrative-organisational principles of functioning of the LAG. The groups that during the previous stages (Leader pattern II, Pilot Programme Leader+) operated as foundations or unions of associations, to make use of funds from Axis 4 of the RDP 2007–2013, had to implement numerous transformations to adjust to the requirements of the above Act on support to development of rural areas with participation of the EAFRD. Hence, establishing new LAG was a more rational solution. Consequently, foundations and unions of associations are infrequent as the legal form of the currently functioning groups. They represented 4 and 3% of the sample respectively.

² Journal of Laws from 2001 No 79, Item 854.

³ Journal of Laws from 2007 No 64, Item 427.

The term “special” association is used in relation to newly established group that did not participate in the previous stages of the intervention. Among the surveyed population they represented 13%. They operate on the same principles and based on the same legal base as the associations. This is the form applicable only and solely to the LAG [Pestuszka 2012].

The principle is that the LAG coverage area is populated by from 10 to 150 thousand residents. Among the surveyed groups, only ca. 6% have a very wide coverage with more than 100 thousand and up to 150 thousand residents covered. LAG are also rarely composed of a large number of communes. In most cases they function as associations of 3–7 communes. This applies to over 57% of the sample. Very rarely a LAG is formed of more than 10 communes. In case of 50% of the groups surveyed, they encompassed with their activities the populations ranging from 10 to 50 thousand people. That characteristic might result from the fact that the larger the area the larger and the number of beneficiaries may cause more difficulties in the internal communication.

The inter-sectoral coalition is the contract between individuals and organisations acting on behalf of individual sectors. Their task is to undertake and carry out collaboration for the purpose of creating social, economic and environmental values with positive influence on a given area. The LAG is a form of such a coalition [Biederman et al. 2004]. The contract involves three sectors: public, civic and economic. The first of them is represented by the local authorities, public utility institutions or government agencies. The civic sector also referred to as non-government sector consists of the residents and associations representing different profiles of activities. The economic (private) sector is understood as manufacturers, agricultural cooperatives, financial and service institutions [Serafin, Kazior and Jastrzębska 2005].

The civic sector is the most numerous represented sector in the structure of all the groups surveyed. Its representatives form 65% of the total number of members in the groups. The economic sector is the second with 19% of all the members in the LAG that formed the test sample. Representatives of the public sector formed 16% of the members in the LAG. The civic sector is the closest to the ordinary people. This distribution of forces indicates that the residents are willing to involve themselves in the fates of their “small motherlands” and to act for their benefits. The participation of the private sector is linked closely to the investment potential and creating new jobs. From that perspective, its share in the structure should be higher.

The sector activity is represented by involvement in and contribution to functioning and life of the LAG. According to the opinions by the groups, the civic sector is the most active – that response was indicated by 48% of the respondents. The public sector is considered the most involved in 30% of the surveyed groups. None of the groups indicated the private sector as the most active one. As many as 30% of the sample declared that the level of involvement of all three sectors was equal and that indicating one outstanding sector was impossible.

Although the civic sector is represented in the highest numbers and its activities are the most intensive, the level of involvement of a given sector does not depend on the number of its members in the given group. This is indicated by the situation where in 42% of cases the sector with the smallest representation is considered the most active. The opposite situation where the most active sector also has the strongest representation occurs in ca. 46% of the LAG surveyed. As the results are similar, there is no such correlation.

The higher number of representatives of one sector in the group does not translate on the origin of the LAG decisive body chairman either. In ca. 40% of the groups surveyed the chairman originated from the sector with the highest number of representatives. However, in 33% of cases, the chairman originated from the least numerously represented sector. This does not allow drawing clear conclusions. The activity of the sector does not translate on the election of the chairman either. Only in 33% of cases, the chairman was a representative of the most active sector. It should be pointed out that in 56% of the LAG surveyed the chairman of the decision-taking body originated from the public sector.

Participation of a given commune in the Leader initiative is absolutely voluntary. Commitment and activity of institutions, associations and people within it represent the necessary components for initiation of the process. A single person or a group of people can act the initiators of the LAG. Table 2 presents who gave the idea for establishment of the groups surveyed.

In the majority of cases the initiative came from the mayors. Such responses were given by 49% of the respondents. None of the other possible answers gained such a big advantage. The public sector was of large importance in establishing the LAG because its representatives were the initiators – not only the mayors, but also employees of the commune administration offices and of the council of the commune.

Residents associated in a non-government organisation proposed the idea in case of 15% of the LAG. Among the responses other than the options presented (24%) the groups of people, very often originating from different communities, e.g. all mayors, together with residents and employees of public units, county mayors and organisations associating communes acted the initiators. The residents in many cases contributed to including their area in the Leader initiative. This indicates their involvement in the issues concerning their nearest environment, and this is promising for the future.

Each LAG must develop the LDS for the area on which it operates. That document defines the directions of development of a given group and tools with which it wants to accomplish the defined objectives. Figure 1 presents the fundamental objectives and tasks formulated in their LDS by the individual LAG surveyed. Three of the responses given are particularly outstanding. The priorities for the activities of the groups include:

Table 2. Initiators of the LAG establishment

Initiator of the LAG establishment	Number of responses	Percentage of the response
Mayors	72	49
Heads of villages / members of village council	0	0
Commune council	1	1
Residents (associated in a non-government organisation)	22	15
Employees of the commune administration office	15	10
Employees of Agricultural Extension Service Centre	1	1
Other	36	24

Source: Own work based on the conducted studies.

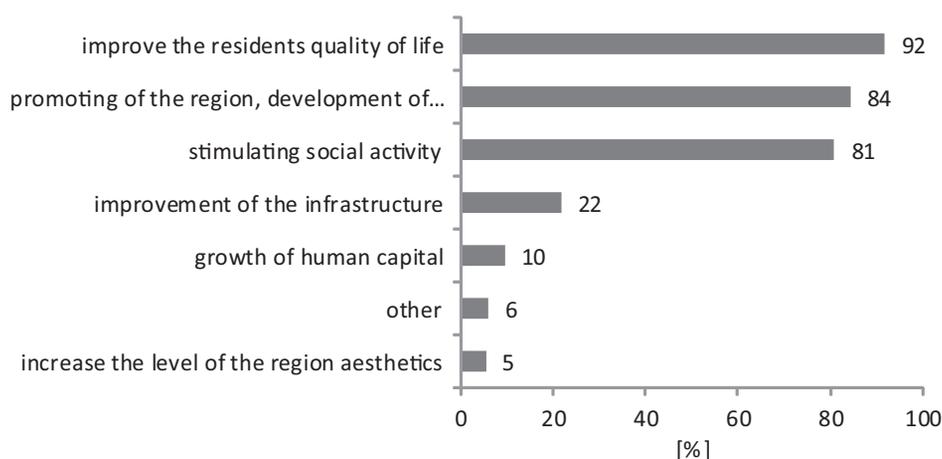
upgrading the living standards of residents (92% of responses), promoting the region and tourism development (84%) and stimulating civic activity (81%). In the response “other” (6%), the respondents indicated: protection and promotion of cultural heritage, promoting entrepreneurship and environment protection.

The areas in which the LAG function the most often support and confirm taking the measures helpful in accomplishment of the determined objectives. As indicated in Figure 2, in case of 67% of the respondents sport and recreation represented the major area of activities. They are followed by history and culture (53%) and civic activities (47%). Civic activities are understood as activities for the local community and supportive to uniting it.

Figure 3 presents the extent to which the groups are successful in implementing the 7-key characteristics of the Leader approach. According to the opinions from 93% of the LAG surveyed the Local Development Strategies are implemented. This is a good signal because the LDS is the document that forms the base for operation of each of those entities.

Almost 2/3 of the respondent LAG (61%) expressed also positive opinions concerning the component of collaboration with other groups. Had that component been more developed in a larger number of the LAG, then probably the result concerning the exchange of experience would probably have been higher (35%). Errors and successes of others may lead to conclusions facilitating creating own reality. And for that reason that component is missing. Nevertheless, the results of studies showed that more than 92% of the groups maintain interregional cooperation. Around 25% declare that they undertake foreign cooperation. Slovakia followed by Lithuania, France and Hungary were the most frequent partners among the LAG surveyed.

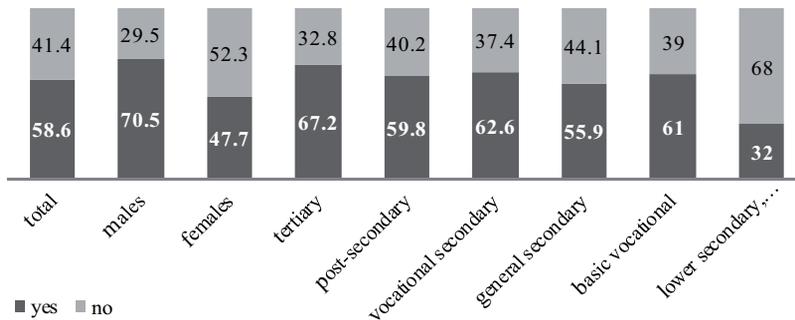
The fact that only 25% of the sample succeed in implementing the principle of public-private partnership is the reason for concern. This is the main principle on which functioning of the LAG is based. This might result from the fact that the cooperation of



*The respondents had the possibility of marking more than one answer.

Fig. 1. Main objectives defined in the LDS*

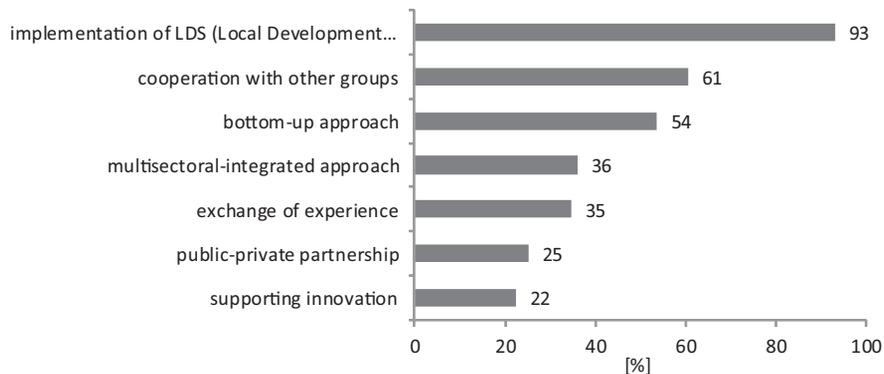
Source: Own work based on the conducted studies.



*The respondents had the possibility of marking more than one answer.

Fig. 2. Most frequent areas of activities undertaken by the LAG*

Source: Own work based on the conducted studies.



*The respondents had the possibility of marking more than one answer.

Fig. 3. Implemented components of the Leader initiative according to the LAG surveyed*

Source: Own work based on the conducted studies.

sectors does not develop correctly in the majority of the groups and hence they consider that element not fulfilled.

In addition to implementation of the Leader initiative characteristics that support efficient operation of the group – their activities should contribute to accomplishment of the objectives formulated in the LDS. Figure 4 presents the number of groups they concern and what are the results of the strategy implementation.

Activation of the local community is mentioned the most frequently among the outcomes. This is the outcome noticed by 88% of the respondent LAG. Promotion of the group activities’ area (understood also as tourism development) is the next outcome indicated. That outcome was reported by almost 71% of the sample.

Implementing the Local Development Strategies involves the natural process of gaining experience in that field. That outcome was noticed in their activities by 69% of the respondents. Only one group noticed negative outcomes of the group functioning. All the other outcomes were positive, but they manifest among the LAG with different strength.



*The respondents had the possibility of marking more than one answer.

Fig. 4. Outcomes of the LDS implementation*

Source: Own work based on the conducted studies.

Figure 5 presents the expectations of local communities concerning the undertakings implemented by the LAG. Beneficiaries participate in cultural events the most willingly because 90% of the respondents gave that answer. Relatively willingly they participate in training programmes and use renovated cultural facilities, which is indicated by the fact that more than a half of the units participating in the survey indicated those options.

As can be noticed, rural community demands access to culture in its different forms. That trend may result from the fact that the rural community is in a way excluded from cultural life. The fact that expectations of the people concerning access to culture are



*The respondents had the possibility of marking more than one answer.

Fig. 5. Forms of activities chosen the most frequently by the local population*

Source: Own work based on the conducted studies.

satisfied by the LAG can be seen as a positive phenomenon. This is indicated by the second position of culture in the ranking of the most frequent areas of activities by the LAG.

Although people willingly express their activity through participation in training programmes, education is the most frequent area of activities for only ca. 10% of the surveyed LAG (Fig. 2). The groups should also focus more frequently on activities leading to increasing qualifications of the rural community. The more so as there are premises for that in the form of expectations from the public.

During fulfilment of the assumed objectives and performance of tasks, the LAG encounter barriers hindering their appropriate operation. The respondents, when asked about the factors limiting their activities, indicated finance (59%). This might result to a large extent from the system of project costs refunding. The funds are transferred to the LAG only after completing a given undertaking. That situation hinders performance of all the ideas by some groups as they do not have sufficient financial resources. The same problem was indicated by the LAG that indicated the EU legislation as the barrier to their operation (3%). Hence, totalling those values, it can be concluded that the financial issues represent a problem for over 61% of the groups.

Excess of duties related to the current functioning of the groups is another limiting issue (20%). This is correlated closely with another problem, which is the provisions of the domestic law. That issue was noticed by 16% of the surveyed groups that pointed in particular at the immense bureaucracy, lack of stability and transparency of the law as well as diversified interpretations of the law by the individual institutions.

CONCLUSIONS

Activities performed within the framework of Axis 4 of the Rural Development Programme 2007–2013 are addressed to more than 46% of the Poles. Hence, the Leader initiative contributes to satisfying the new needs and considering the social character of rural areas.

As concerns the specificity of the Polish LAG, ca. 80% of the groups surveyed assume the legal form of association operating on special terms and conditions, specific for those entities only. Considering the background of all the components of the tripartite agreement the civic sector is outstanding in the numbers as well as the activity. The public sector had immense influence on establishment of the LAG. Its representatives were, in most cases, the initiators of establishing the LAG.

The outcomes of functioning of the LAG in Poland meet to a large extent the objectives assumed in the prepared LDS. This proves consistency of the groups in their intended objectives and actions taken. This is a good signal that confirms that the strategies developed are not just documents but that they really create the reality.

Implementation of the Leader initiative assumptions has good influence on functioning of the rural areas. Rural residents involve themselves and influence the development, which means that they give shape to their “small motherland” in the way suiting them the best. In case of activities, they focus mainly on using local resources and potential embedded in the conditions of the given location.

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FUNKCJONOWANIE POLSKICH LGD W KONTEKŚCIE INICJATYWY LEADER

Streszczenie. Zmiany w postrzeganiu obszarów wiejskich jedynie przez pryzmat rolnictwa stały się impulsem do powstania nowego kierunku we wspólnej polityce rolnej (WPR) Unii Europejskiej (UE). Powstała w 1991 r. inicjatywa Leader ma na celu aktywizowanie społeczności wiejskiej i racjonalne gospodarowanie zasobami lokalnymi. Jednostkami wcielającymi w życie podejście Leader są lokalne grupy działania (LGD), które przyjmują formę lokalnych, trójsektorowych porozumień (sektor społeczny, przedsiębiorcy, przedstawiciele władz). Wśród 44% LGD funkcjonujących w Polsce przeprowadzono badanie ankietowe, dzięki któremu poznano specyfikę i efekty ich pracy.

Słowa kluczowe: obszary wiejskie, oś 4 PROW 2007–2013, lokalna grupa działania

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