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SOCIAL INNOVATIONS UNDER THE LEADER INITIATIVE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENTALLY VALUABLE AREAS OF THE LUBLIN REGION (POLAND)

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to describe the role of the Leader Initiative in developing social innovation and understand how social innovation works in practice in the environmentally valuable areas of the Lublin region. The aim was to be achieved with literature analysis and empirical studies aimed at identifying innovative activities of Local Action Groups (LAGs). The study was conducted on a group of 13 LAGs (50% of the total in the region). The study used the method of document analysis and a case study. Local development strategies (LDSs), the official websites of associations and the implemented cooperation projects were the source of information about the LAGs. In the light of literature analyzes, an important potential role of the LEADER initiative was proven in the development of social innovation. As demonstrated, the LEADER initiative in the environmentally valuable areas of the Lublin Region is an important but under-used instrument for creating local development based on social innovation. It is advisable, therefore, to develop leadership attitudes in local communities. Local leaders could be entities initiating the institutionalization process of the development of social innovation.

Keywords: social innovation, LEADER initiative, Local Action Groups

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Introduction

As rural regions generally have low capacity to create technological innovations, social innovation is the desired direction of creating innovation (Katonáné Kovács et al. 2016, p. 22). Social innovations are variously defined in the literature. According to BEPA, social innovations are “new ideas (products, services, models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives) and create new social relationships or collaborations. They are innovations that are not only good for the society but also enhance the society’s capacity to act” (*Empowering*, 2011). PUE et al. (2015) define social innovation as “... a process encompassing the emergence and adoption of socially creative strategies that reconfigure social relations in order to actualize a given social goal” (p. 10). According to Dargan and Shucksmith (2008), innovation in the LEADER initiative is often understood as a social and cultural innovation by encouraging local linkages and collective learning. LEADER LAGs can be considered social innovation brokers in a given rural territory (Katonáné Kovács et al. 2016, p. 22). Melece (2015) also indicates cooperation in the LAGs created within the LEADER initiative among social innovations that can be developed in rural areas.

According to the European Commission DG AGRI Unit, 2303 LAGs operated in the European Union (EU) member states as of September 2012, of which the largest number (338) operated in Poland, (Brosei, 2012). The Leader initiative is a very popular program for rural areas of the Lublin Region. In the period 2007–2013, all rural and urban-rural communes were affiliated to LAGs – to 26 LAGs (Katalog LGD 2012).

The Lublin Region is a region showing the lowest level of economic development in Poland and one of the lowest in the EU⁴. The level of education of the population living in the rural areas of the region is unfavorable (in 2011, as many as 29% of the population older than 13 had primary education)⁵. In the opinion of Fedyszak-Radziejewska (2010) the social capital in rural

4 The lowest in Poland and 11th in the list of the 20 poorest regions in the EU, according to EUROSTAT, 2014.

5 National Census of Population and Housing 2011

areas in Poland, despite the fact that in some respects non-formalized activity is more developed than in some cities, is not extensively utilized in order to generate economic benefits. Today, Polish literature includes little research showing the mechanisms of capitalizing social resources. Similarly, the issue of the development, capitalization and diffusion of social innovation requires qualitative research. The aim of the study was to describe the role of the Leader Initiative in developing social innovation and understand how social innovation works in practice in the environmentally valuable areas of the Lublin Region. In order to achieve the aim, the following hypothesis was used: the LAGs operating in the environmentally valuable areas of the Lublin Region insufficiently develop social innovations.

Material and method

The study area included 30 municipalities from the group with the highest environmental preciousness in the Lublin Region according to the index developed by D. Guzal-Dec (2013). The study was conducted on a group of 13 LAGs⁶ (50% of the total in the region) in which the above-mentioned 30 municipal governments were affiliated. A diagnostic survey utilized a semi-structured interview. The interview was conducted with the director of the Owocowy Szlak LAG office on 22.08 2016 (for an in-depth case study). The literature analysis enabled the description of the nature of social innovations and the importance of the LEADER initiative to the creation of social innovations in rural areas. The analysis of LAGs' LDSs, and the official websites of associations and cooperation projects enabled the development of general characteristics of associations (their membership structure) and the characteristics of cooperation projects (their range of subjects, description of projects). In the examined case study, the author interprets social innovations in the context of a golden circle of questions by Sinek (2009): WHY (the motivation) – HOW (the process) – WHAT (the product). For this analysis, one more element was added (Katonáné Kovács et al. 2016, p.

6 „Białkopodlaska LAG”, „Roztocze Tomaszowskie”, „Zielony Pierścień”, „Lepsza przyszłość Ziemi Ryckiej”, „Poleska Dolina Bugu”, „Ziemia Biłgorajska”, „Ziemia Zamojska”, „Polesie”, „Leśny Krąg”, „Nasze Roztocze”, „Krasnystaw Plus”, „Jagiellońska Przystań”, „Owocowy Szlak”

23), exploring the effects of social innovation on the main beneficiary social groups. The questions asked concerned: the purpose (motivation), the social goal of innovation, the context of the process, who initiated the innovation, the role of individuals/agent engines, which sectors are likely to contribute, how groups are involved, what are the effects, who benefits from the social innovation, what barriers there are to the development of social innovation in the course of the LAGs and how the LEADER initiative is important to the creation of social innovation.

Results

LAG innovative activity in the Lublin Region – general characteristic

The studied LAGs associated from 3 to 17 local governments. In relation to the proportion of the members of the studied LAGs, the social sector was over-represented (47%) in councils, the public sector accounted for 34% of the total. A high share of the representatives of the social and public sector in the structure of authorities was clearly visible in the profile of the small projects selected for implementation. Mainly the projects connected with the development of social infrastructure were implemented (the modernization or equipment of rural community centers, while it is difficult to discern the innovative nature of small projects). The studied LAGs participated in 15 projects of cooperation: including 2 international. The thematic scope of the projects primarily included the improvement of rural infrastructure and development of agro-tourism and rural tourism (undertaken in all of the 13 studied LAGs). Projects concerning support for new technologies, the use of renewable energy sources were rarely implemented.

Out of the 15 analyzed projects, 5 were technologically innovative. They consisted mainly in developing a multimedia guide for a virtual tour and innovative marking of cycling paths and establishing a business economic vortal. The thematic scope of other cooperation projects included in particular such activities as: determination and marking hiking trails, promoting traditional products, developing a cuisine guide, organizing canoeing events, meetings with folk artists, organizing camps for young people, conducting

workshops for residents in the field of folk art, photography workshops, publishing a tourist brochure, participation in fairs promoting tourism, a series of television programs and press articles.

The activities served the development of social capital, but they were mostly temporary activities and were not continued after the completion of the projects or, if they were continued, they brought limited benefits to the local community (the benefits were participated by a small group of performers). However, one of these projects was characterized by sustainability. Below, there are the characteristics the social innovation created during their implementation.

The Eco-muzeum “Living tradition” – social innovation in practice

WHY? The Eco-museum of the Lublin Region “Living tradition” was created in collaboration of three LGDs: “Kraina wokół Lublina”, “Zielony Pierścień” and “Owocowy Szlak”. In the areas covered by the project cooperation, there are good conditions and traditions for growing orchard and beekeeping, as well as the development of rural tourism. The region is not recognizable to tourists. The income of agriculture is low and, therefore, there was a need for a multifunctional development of this area, particularly through the development of rural tourism.

WHAT? The Eco-museum is composed of 31 objects scattered in the central-western part of the Lublin Region. Most of the attractions are located in valuable natural areas and landscape protection zones. They form a network of tourist attractions created upon the initiative of local communities and presented to tourists by the residents themselves. Each attraction has its own program. Tourists learn the main themes discussed by genuine enthusiasts. While listening to the stories, participants can touch and try out the presented exhibits and equipment. What is more, tourists are invited to participate in artistic activities and making folk ornaments and in workshops, resulting in manufacturing processes being still “in operation”. Local enthusiasts are guides setting themselves the goal of preserving the heritage for future generations.

HOW? The context of the process. The concept of a cooperation project originated during the development of LDSs. It was initially planned to create theme villages in each of the LAGs, but it was difficult to identify locations

with an appropriate number of attractions, the attractions were scattered. Then, there was the idea of linking the tourist attractions to create a network of attractions. Theme villages failed to be created but a network of theme farms was created. In each of the LAGs, there were trained leaders who created a network of cooperating entities. Then, participants of the network were trained.

Who initiated the innovation? The social sector, especially office workers of LAGs. The social representatives of the LAGs, as well as their office workers, were involved in the diagnosis of local conditions to develop the project.

Which sectors were involved? How different sectors were involved? All sectors were involved. Entrepreneurs and civil society actors worked under the project as network partners. Local governments supported the promotion of the project. Employees of the offices supported the network's operation for the duration of the project and after it was completed, providing support as tour operators. The entities belonging to the network were covered by the new project: "LAGs - Places with soul - People with passion".

What are the effects? The project initiated positive social processes (in particular, network development). There has been an increase in the number of theme farms, from the planned 5 to 17. The increase in profits for the industry resulted in increased participation in the network. The village has changed considerably (gardens were cultivated, buildings were taken care of, the amount of waste decreased, etc.). The Eco-museum has become an exemplar project in the Lublin region, and it has already started to have some positive effects on local identity and self-respect as a step towards achieving a long-term socio-economic context. Who benefits from the social innovations? All citizens, in particular, the participants of the network. Many new NGOs were created in the area of cooperation. Providers of tourism services improved their competence in organizing tourism. The project results in the long-term effect of combining two social objectives: employment growth and shaping regional identity. This project is important in the context of the promotion of natural heritage.

Problems for sustainability? It was pointed out that the lack of institutionalization of the project could be a problem for the continuity of social innovation. No indication of a tourism organizer among the project participants was perceived a problem. These matters continue to be dealt with by the office staff of the LAGs.

How is LEADER important in the development of social innovation? The LEADER program was considered an essential factor for the development of the process of social innovation in the studied region. Rural areas in the studied typical agricultural region have a low capacity for the creation of links-type clusters. The development of social capital after the system changes from the 90s was clearly inhibited. The LEADER initiative is a dominant factor enabling social capital activation.

Discussion

The study of M. Labianca et al, (2016, p. 44) considering the example of Italian case studies, reveals various critical issues related to the functions of LAGs. Despite the expectations of the innovation linked to the LAGs, in real processes, there remain mechanisms that are strongly traditional. The causes include opportunistic behaviors, a rather-limited institutional culture approach and no interventions, in particular at the regional level, designed to promote and reinforce the networks of actors within the territories. The reductive interpretation of rural development and local resources as well as the inadequacy of policies for innovation are also reasons for the situation, since, particularly at the operative level, it is believed that “one size fits all”. Similar problems were encountered in the case of the LAGs operating in Poland (Michalska – Zajda, 2011). The results obtained during Hungarian case studies suggest that the greatest threats to social innovation in rural regions include: the lack of involvement of active local actors and the lack of institutionalization (Katonáné Kovács et al. 2016, p. 28). This problem was indicated also in the light of the results of empirical research conducted in the Lublin Region (Poland).

Conclusions

In rural areas, especially in such peripheral regions as the Lublin Region, special attention should be paid to the development of social innovations that stimulate the development of human and social capital.

The LAGs under the LEADER initiative, as platforms for social communication and knowledge transfer, are a particularly preferred basis for the formation of social innovation. Specifically, cooperation projects implemented by the LAGs can have an important role in this process.

The LAGs in the Lublin Region were established by all self-governments of rural and semi-urban areas. However, in the light of the results of empirical research the LAGs operating in the environmentally valuable areas of the Lublin Region, they insufficiently develop social innovations. The barrier was the lack of institutionalization. It is advisable, therefore, to develop leadership attitudes in local communities. Local leaders could be entities initiating the institutionalization process of the development of social innovation.

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