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**AGNIESZKA WOJEWÓDZKA-WIEWIÓRSKA**

Warsaw University of Life Sciences – SGGW, Poland

## **THE ROLE OF LOCAL ACTION GROUPS IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN POLAND BASED ON A SELECTED EXAMPLE**

**Key words:** RDP 2007-2013, Leader approach, social capital, rural areas, local development strategies

**ABSTRACT.** The study shows the importance of projects implemented in the 2007-2013(5) perspective under the existence of a local action group for rural development on the example of the Association for the Development of Plock Land. Based on the analysis of projects implemented by all beneficiaries in 6 communes of the Plock district, the size and directions of funds allocation by the commune were determined. Inhabitant opinions on the effects of the implemented projects were presented. In total, PLN 8,840 thousand was spent on implementing 91 projects. Most funds were spent in the Bielsk commune (PLN 197.18 per capita), and least funds in the Stara Biała commune (PLN 110.91 per capita). Completed projects constituted significant support for rural development and improved the quality of life of residents. The subjects of the projects were very diverse. The largest share in expenditure was spent on the development of a social infrastructure and the organization of local events in line with the objectives of the local development strategy. Directions for spending funds differed between communes; rural community centers were built and modernized in all communes. The importance of projects involving the creation and development of micro enterprises and the diversification of the local economy was insignificant. Residents have noticed the effects of the implemented projects and take advantage of them, but do not associate them with the functioning of the local action group.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, rural areas in Poland have been the subject of support of many instruments financed from public funds in order to solve existing socio-economic problems. One of them is the Leader programme based on cross-sectoral partnership [Furmankiewicz 2006], which, from the 2007-2013(15) perspective, is implemented as part of the Rural Development Programme. The main goal of Leader 2007-2013 was to build social capital by stimulating the activity of rural communities and their involvement in development processes of the area they live in. It was the bottom-up approach to rural development that made this initiative stand out from other rural support instruments [Shucksmith 2000, Lukesch 2007, Kalisiak-Mędelska 2013, Dax et al. 2016, Cañete et al. 2018]. As a result of implementing Leader, new entities emerged in the form of local action groups in the countryside, which brought together representatives from various sectors: public,

private and social [Kalisiak-Mędeńska 2013, Lopolito et al. 2015]. These entities were to develop a local development strategy indicating development goals formulated in relation to the needs and resources held in a given area [Śpiewak 2009, R. Hoffmann, N. Hoffmann 2018]. This approach was to ensure that the pro-development activities undertaken in the countryside correspond to the real needs of rural communities and all entities operating there. In addition, the assumptions of Leader, beyond strengthening social capital [Chmieliński 2011, Czapiewska 2012], could contribute to maintaining decision consistency at a local level and facilitate cooperation between entities representing various spheres of development within the commune and units neighbouring each other and having common development potential.

The scope and possibilities of supporting rural development through the action of local action groups are strictly determined by the construction of the Leader approach, which, in 2007-2013, assumed the implementation of projects related to the following categories: measure 413 – the implementation of local development strategies, including diversification towards non-agricultural activities, the establishment and development of micro-enterprises, village renewal and small projects; measure 421 – the implementation of cooperation projects and measure 431 – running local action groups, the acquisition of skills and activation [MRiRW 2016].

Research conducted so far shows that local action groups are important entities actively working for the socio-economic development of rural areas in Poland [Kołodziejczak 2011, Kalisiak-Mędeńska 2013, Turek 2013, Wojewódzka-Wiewiórska 2019], also in areas most important to the community [Turek 2013], often not yet supported or only supported to a slight extent [Ledzion et al. 2016]. Their activities complement the existing model of local development management [Navarro et al. 2016] mainly based on the actions of local authorities. Work on shaping local development under Leader guarantees cooperation and decision-making regarding development priorities for representatives of various environments – apart from local authorities, representatives of the economic sphere and residents are involved [Czapiewska 2012]. Development strategies developed by local action groups mean that development is not a result of spontaneous decisions, but rather a series of previously planned activities. The involvement of many entities from several communes forming a local action group or cooperating local action groups means that the development of rural areas is programmed from a broad perspective, not only within specific boundaries of one administrative unit (commune), as done thus far. Actions taken by local action groups, i.e. promoting the place, organizing trainings or exchanging knowledge positively affect the level of activity of residents and other entities in the countryside [Surmacz, Magryś 2016]. Moreover, increased trust is of great importance in practice, especially in the case of generally low activity of village residents [Czapiewska 2012]. The literature does indicate some problems in the operation of LAGs in the context of their importance for rural development. These are: low involvement and poor knowledge of group members [Volk, Bojnec 2014], in particular concerning the low involvement of the economic sector, only focusing on the implementation of as many projects as possible, forgetting about residential cooperation [Zajda 2014], lack of consistency between local development strategy and implemented projects [Krievina et al. 2015] and the small importance of LAGs in creating networks of connections between sectors [Guzal-Dec,

Zwolińska-Ligaj 2017]. The research problem undertaken in the article aims at showing the importance of the local action group in rural development on a specific example and presenting, in detail, the purpose of public funds spent under Leader to develop a specific area. It is also important to know the opinions of residents about the effects of the local action group, especially in the context of low recognition of these entities in the local environment as indicated in other studies [Ledzion et al. 2016].

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

The purpose of the study was to determine the significance of the functioning of the local action group, ‘the Association for the Development of Płock Land’ (hereinafter LAG) for the development of rural areas of Płock district between 2007 and 2013. As part of the stated goal, the following research tasks were set: (1) to determine the fund allocation amount and spatial differentiation by communes; (2) to determine the directions of funds spent; (3) to recognize the effects of completed projects in the opinion of residents who use them. The fund allocation amount means total payments made by all beneficiaries according to data from reports. Spending directions were determined on the basis of an analysis of all projects implemented under LAG activity, taking into account the activity and scope of the project. The following sources were used: data of the Agency for the Restructuring and Modernization of Agriculture, as of 31.12.2015 [MRiRW 2017], covering all projects implemented under the surveyed local action group, data of the Central Statistical Office [BDL 2019], LAG’s local development strategy and the results of own research carried out in 2018 in the area of LAG activities using a questionnaire (open and closed questions;  $n = 120$  inhabitants; selection of respondents proportional to the number of communes forming the surveyed LAG).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The local action group ‘the Association for the Development of Płock Land’ in 2007-2013 covered the reach of 6 communes of Płock district: Bielsk, Brudzeń Duży, Słupno, Stara Biała, Staroźreby and Drobin (the only urban-rural commune). The area is considered to be located on the Vistula (although not all communes are located directly on the river) and is characterized by high tourist and landscape attractiveness. In 2006, rural areas of LAG were inhabited by 48.7 thousand [BDL 2019], the area of LGD activity is 751 km<sup>2</sup> [SRZP 2011]. The basis of LAG operation was the Local Development Strategy (LDS) created in 2008, whose goal was to increase the level of social capital and increase the degree of use of local potential to increase revenues from non-agricultural activities [SRZP 2011]. Specific objectives were subordinated to these goals, such as increasing the local leader activity, improving infrastructure supporting social integration, building a competence management system in the field of staff activating the local environment as well as diversifying towards non-agricultural activities. Under the second objective, the need to promote positive examples of social and economic activity, the implementation of the tourism product development strategy was pointed out. The LAG’s mission points to increasing social activity to improve the quality of residential life.

The amount of funds allocated in 2007-2013 by the examined LAG was PLN 8,840 thousand, and the value of projects was PLN 14,568 thousand. Most funds were spent on village renewal (51%), small projects (16%) and LAG functioning (measure 431) (15%). Projects implemented under measure 311 had a small share in the structure of expenditure spent – diversification of economic activity (almost 7%) and those related to support for micro enterprises (less than 10%). The least funds were allocated to regional cooperation with other units – 1.6% of the total. A total of 91 projects were implemented, most in the field of small projects (52 projects) and village renewal (24 projects). In the examined perspective, the LAG implemented 1 project under measure 421 (interregional cooperation) with a total funding of PLN 146 thousand, as well as 3 projects to strengthen the group's operations, with the co-financing amounting to PLN 1,334 thousand. This means an allocation of funds equal to PLN 246.7 thousand per each commune constituting the Association<sup>1</sup>. When it comes to diversifying the allocation of funds between the communes that form the LAGs, the largest number of projects, i.e. 25, were implemented in the Bielsk commune, while absorbing the most resources (PLN 1,796.8 thousand) from among the LGD communes. The fewest projects were implemented in the Słupno commune (9), and the fewest funds (PLN 937.8 thousand, i.e. almost 13% of the total) were spent by beneficiaries from the Drobin commune. Comparing the amount of funds spent with total revenue in the budgets of individual communes (the average annual total revenue in 2007-2015 were taken into account) [BDL 2019], it can be stated that it constituted 8.4% of total revenue in the Bielsk commune, 6.7% in Brudzeń Duży commune, 5.3% in Staroźreby commune, 4.8% in Drobin commune, 4.4% in Stara Biała commune and 4.2% in Słupno commune.

Referring to the allocation of funds to the population living in the villages of individual communes in 2015 [BDL 2019], it can be seen (Figure 1) that most funds were spent in Bielsk commune (PLN 197.18 per capita) and in Drobin commune (PLN 179.94 per capita). The communes constituting the Association differed essentially in terms of spending directions defined by individual actions under Leader. In all communes, except for Bielsk commune, expenditure on village renewal dominated the structure, which stems from the fact that these projects are highly capital intensive. Bielsk commune stood out from other entities with a very high share of expenses for establishing and developing micro enterprises. Projects in this area were still only implemented in the Stara Biała commune, but their share in the structure was small and amounted to 5%. In all communes, projects in the scope of small projects were implemented (their value could range from PLN 4.5 to 100 thousand) and were assumed to include activities contributing to improving the quality of life or diversifying activities in the LAG area. Their share in the structure of resource allocation varied in communes and ranged from 8% (in the Słupno commune) to 26% of the total (Drobin commune). All communes implemented projects under Measure 311 (diversifying the local economy). There were a total of 7 projects, which meant that expenditure for this purpose had a low share in the structure of expenditure. Thus, it may

<sup>1</sup> Funds spent in projects implemented under measures 421 and 431 were equally divided and shared by all communes forming the Association. Projects in this area will not be taken into account in further considerations regarding the analysis of projects by communes and spending directions.

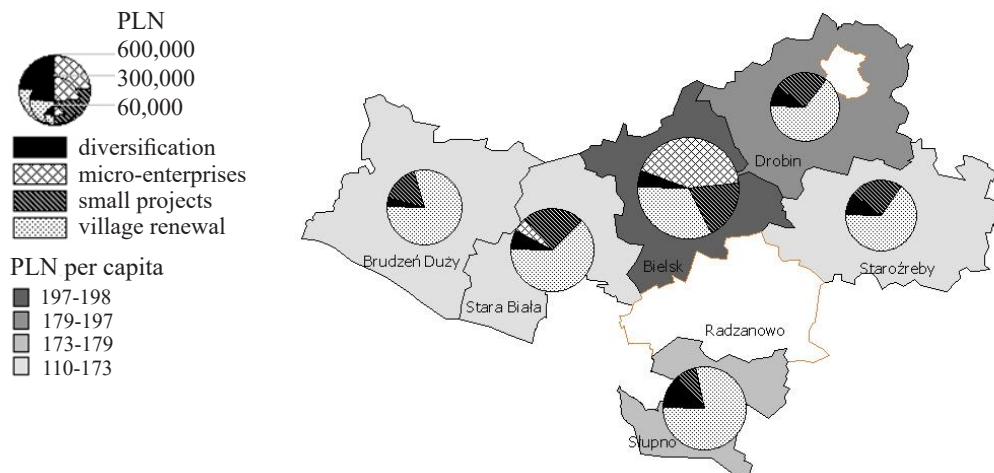


Figure 1. Total expenditure from public funds on the implementation of projects by the Association for the Development of Płock Land in 2007-2013(15) broken down into spending directions

Source: own calculation based on MARD data [MRiRW 2017]

be concluded [Zajda 2014, Ledzion et al. 2016] that projects in this area were not popular in Poland and, as a consequence, their effects are hardly visible in rural areas.

Considering the directions of expenditure spent by communes, it can be stated that all activities, except for the creation and development of micro enterprises, enjoyed the interest of beneficiaries from all communes (Figure 2). Taking into account the structure of allocation of funds in individual measures, it can be seen that, in measure 311, the beneficiaries from Słupno commune spent the most (28%), among small projects from Bielsk (23%) and Stara Biała (22%), and within the renewal of the village beneficiaries from Słupno commune (22%) dominated. Projects aimed at diversifying the economy in the rural areas of Płock district concerned the development of services for farms or forestry (6 projects), services for the population (4 projects), one project focused on the field of wholesale.

Considering, in detail, the directions of spending based on the scope of projects, it can be stated that the projects implemented under small projects and village renewal concerned the same issues related to rural development. The main beneficiaries of the projects were commune offices (beneficiaries of 71% of projects), volunteer fire brigades (8%) that implemented projects in the field of renovation of rural common rooms and other beneficiaries were natural persons, parishes and associations. The largest amount, i.e. 40% of the sum of two measures, was spent on space development by implementing 11 projects in all communes (except for Słupno, in the area of which no projects in this field were implemented). The projects concerned the revitalization of the park, land development around the sports hall, church and renovation of the village center (Figure 3). A large share of funds was also allocated for the construction or modernization of rural common rooms and amounted to 28%, it was the only direction of spending in all communes. In the communes of Bielsk, Drobin and Stara Biała playgrounds were built in all communes,



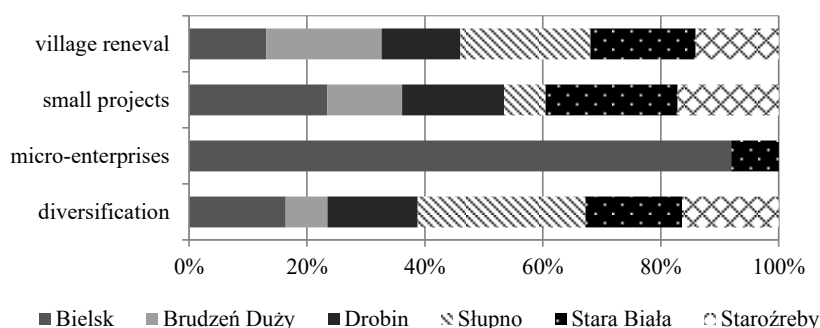


Figure 2. Allocation of public funds in total by the Association for the Development of Płock Land in 2007-2013(5) by measure and seat of beneficiaries

Source: own calculation based on MARD data [MRiRW 2017]

except for Staroźreby commune. The possibility of financing local events was used, i.e. tournaments, commune days, harvest festivals, picnics. In addition, the implemented projects included other activities: support for cultural heritage (renovation of the tombstone, work on the commemorative bell and memory square), school equipment, renovation of the health center, renovation of the museum, renovation of the library, retrofitting the gym in the municipal sports center, purchase of uniforms for the brass band, co-financing a film production or the purchase of multimedia equipment by the commune office. It can be stated that the financial resources were directed to support very different spheres of local development used by various social groups (children, youth, the elderly). It was mainly social infrastructure that was supported. Social bonds were strengthened thanks to the involvement and participation of residents in local events. It should be noted that the projects implemented under measures 421 and 431 also served to build social capital.

Analyzing the directions of spending funds under Leader in relation to LDS assumptions, it can be stated that the implemented projects focus on improving or building rural infrastructure, which is conducive to social activity and is part of the LDS's main objective. Relatively modest funds were spent on an increase in economic activity related to obtaining income from non-agricultural activities (the second objective of LDS).

The surveyed inhabitants of the LAG area of activity have noticed the positive changes that have taken place in recent years in the development of the inhabited area, as indicated by 89% of respondents [Sikorska 2018]. The respondents were asked to determine the sphere in which the changes are most visible. They most frequently pointed to the improvement of the technical condition and functionality of communal public facilities (85% of respondents) and the development of sports and recreation facilities (80% of respondents). Next, they pointed to an increase in the number of local events organized. According to the respondents, the least visible are changes in the possibilities of financial support for new initiatives and the growth of new jobs outside agriculture. Considering the projects implemented under Leader and spending directions, it can be said that the

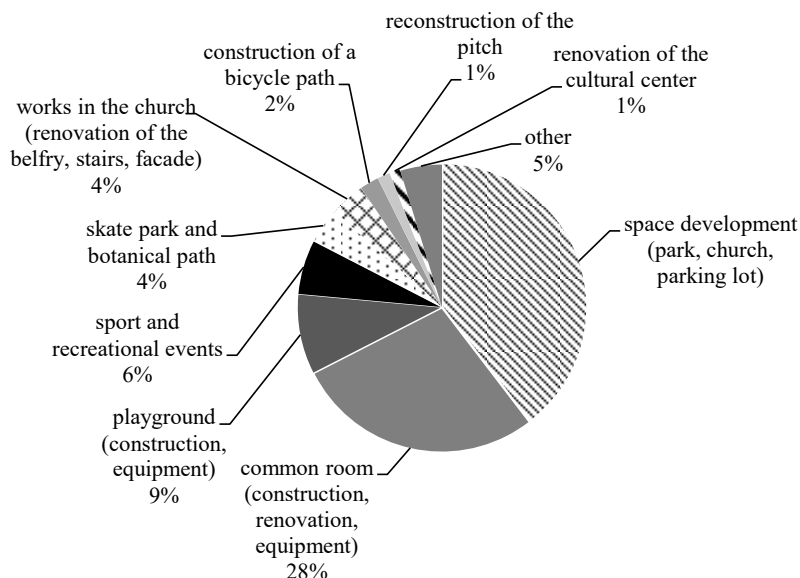


Figure 3. Directions for spending funds under projects implemented by the Association for the Development of Plock Land (small projects and village renewal) in 2007-2013(5)

Source: own calculation based on MARD data [MRiRW 2017]

effects of implemented projects are noticed by residents and contribute to the development of rural areas. Investments, i.e. the construction of a sports field or playgrounds (which were largely supported under Leader) were recognized by the residents as most important. Among the investments lacking in the countryside, inhabitants most often mentioned those related to the development of non-agricultural entrepreneurship, catering services, the accommodation base or summer cinema, which shows that there is still a need to create jobs outside agriculture in the studied area. Despite the declarations of the surveyed residents, they definitely acknowledge investments implemented with the use of EU funds (74% of indications) in their environment. However, residents were not able to correctly indicate investments (from the proposed list) that were implemented in their commune under Leader. This may point to a lack of knowledge of inhabitants concerning investments implemented in their place of residence or the ineffectiveness of information and promotion activities [Ledzion et al. 2016] conducted by LAGs in the area of activity (85% of respondents have not heard of LAG activities). Most indications concerned the construction of a playground, the renovation of a rural common room, gym equipment in a sports/recreation center, the organization of village days, harvest festivals or a football tournament. This may be due to the fact that residents largely use the infrastructure elements listed and participated in local events.



## CONCLUSIONS

The grave importance of local action groups in rural development may be attributed to the construction of Leader and the specific principles of the creation and functioning of LAGs. It is important to combine public, social and economic potential in creating a local development strategy, the implementation of which and the way in which public funds are used depends on the activity of local endogenous potential, as confirmed by the studied example of the Association for the Development of Płock Land. The allocation and directions of spending the funds were different in the communes constituting the LAG. The funds obtained in individual communes accounted for 4 to 8% of the total revenue of their budget. The funds were mainly allocated to the development of social infrastructure and the organization of local events, which may contribute to an increase in the quality of life of residents in accordance with the objectives set out in LDS. Despite large needs in terms of diversifying the local economy indicated in the development strategy and the possibilities of supporting this sphere through Leader, very few funds were spent on this goal, which is also indicated by the residents. Although they notice the socio-economic development of the places that live and benefit from the effects of implemented projects, they do not associate rural development with LAG activity. The identified, very low LAG recognition indicates the need to intensify the promotion of the Leader initiative at a local level.

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## ROLA LOKALNYCH GRUP DZIAŁANIA W ROZWOJU OBSZARÓW WIEJSKICH W POLSCE NA WYBRANYM PRZYKŁADZIE

Słowa kluczowe: PROW 2007-2013, podejście Leader, kapitał społeczny, obszary wiejskie, lokalne strategie rozwoju

### ABSTRAKT

Celem artykułu jest wskazanie znaczenia projektów zrealizowanych w perspektywie 2007-2013(5) w ramach istnienia lokalnej grupy działania dla rozwoju obszarów wiejskich na przykładzie Stowarzyszenia Rozwoju Ziemi Płockiej. Na podstawie analizy projektów zrealizowanych przez wszystkich beneficjentów na obszarze 6 gmin powiatu płockiego określono wielkość i kierunki alokacji środków w podziale na gminy. Przedstawiono opinię mieszkańców na temat efektów zrealizowanych projektów. Łącznie wydatkowano 8840 tys. zł, realizując 91 projektów. Najwięcej środków wydatkowano w gminie Bielsk (197,18 zł *per capita*), a najmniej w gminie Stara Biała (110,91 zł *per capita*). Zrealizowane projekty stanowiły znaczące wsparcie rozwoju obszarów wiejskich i poprawiły jakość życia mieszkańców. Tematyka projektów była bardzo zróżnicowana. Największy udział w wydatkach stanowiły środki skierowane na rozwój infrastruktury społecznej i organizację eventów lokalnych, co jest zgodne z celami lokalnej strategii rozwoju. Kierunki wydatkowania środków różniły się między gminami. Na terenie wszystkich gmin budowano i modernizowano świetlice wiejskie. Znikome było znaczenie projektów obejmujących tworzenie i rozwój mikroprzedsiębiorstw oraz różnicowanie gospodarki lokalnej. Mieszkańcy zauważają efekty zrealizowanych projektów i korzystają z nich, ale nie łączą ich z funkcjonowaniem lokalnej grupy działania.

AUTHOR

AGNIESZKA WOJEWÓDZKA-WIEWIÓRSKA, PHD

ORCID: 0000-0003-2393-0430

Warsaw University of Life Sciences

Institute of Economics and Finance

166 Nowoursynowska Str., 02-787 Warsaw, Poland