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LOCAL ACTION GROUPS (LAGS) IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF PERIPHERAL REGIONS OF EASTERN POLAND¹

Key words: LEADER Programme, Local Action Groups, rural areas,
community-led local development (CLLD)

ABSTRACT. The purpose of the work is to characterize the impact of LAGs on the socio-economic development processes of peripheral regions of Eastern Poland. The subject of the study were LAGs established and operating in 5 voivodships from the Eastern Poland Macroregion. The method of literature analysis, diagnostic survey and statistical analysis were used in the work. Based on random selection, the survey was conducted in 2019 with the use of direct interviews directed to 390 members from 26 LAGs (27.7% of 94 operating in voivodships of the Eastern Poland Macroregion). The results of the research on the impact of LAGs operating in peripheral regions on development processes for the period 2014-2020 coincide with results regarding the impact of LAGs on development in an earlier period of their operation. The positive effects of these organizations are generally recognized by the LAGs community. In the context of the evaluation of LAGs functioning in the period 2014-2020, it is important to state the extension of the range of perceived effects, including economic development. Local communities gathered in LAGs recognize the need for these organizations to function and their complementary nature with other institutions operating in rural areas.

INTRODUCTION

The development of peripheral regions is a challenge of EU regional policy. That is why, it is important to search for the factors accelerating the processes of development and ways of enhancing the positive impacts of these factors. Such opportunities under the common agricultural policy in relation to rural development are provided by the LEADER initiative. LEADER is based on an economic development model of rural areas called: the “Community-led rural development theory” [Guzal-Dec 2016]. This model, presented by Ida Terluin in the paper “Rural Regions in the EU: Exploring Differences in Economic

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Development”, identifies “the main precondition for generating and sustaining economic development in rural regions: the existence of a community’s capacity to function on a self-help basis. The community-led rural development theory focuses on the strengthening of the self-help capacity of local actors, which is considered a major precondition for establishing and sustaining local economic development. Partnerships and adjustments of institutional structures are seen as the main tools in the process of capacity building [Terluin 2001].

The LEADER initiative implementation tool are Local Action Groups (LAGs). LAGs are organized as tripartite (civil, governmental and business) rural development partnerships. LAGs in their functioning implement the main principles set out by the LEADER programme such as: area based, bottom-up, public-private partnership, innovation, integration, networking and co-operation [EC 2006].

Besides the contribution of the LEADER initiative to the creation of social capital, commonly emphasized in the literature, it also allows to generate effects in the area of improving the situation in rural labor markets thanks to opportunities for job creation. The LEADER Programme also supports other activities aimed at the broad support of entrepreneurship in rural areas. Beneficiaries receive support for organizing training courses, the research of local markets of goods and services, the promotion of local entrepreneurship, starting up production as well as the marketing of goods and services based on local resources, traditions and heritage [Guzal-Dec, Zwolińska 2017].

Research to date have pointed out the positive as well as negative outcomes to the LEADER Programme [Guzal-Dec, Zwolińska-Ligaj 2017]. As stressed by e.g. Gary Bosworth et al. [2016] measuring and understanding how “added value” is generated is problematic with purely economic measures showing relatively low job creation² and high costs per job created [Krievina et al. 2015]. By contrast, evaluations that have focused on the wider benefits of LEADER have been more positive because of the value of the creation of social capital [e.g. Anderson et al. 2014] and a range of non-economic outcomes for rural communities [Bosworth et al. 2016]. Furthermore, in light of national evaluation reports and other research, it has been argued that although the measurable economic effects of LEADER interventions may be small, their impact can make a real difference to local communities [e.g. Krievina et al. 2015, Bosworth et al. 2016].

From the start, LAGs have carried out activities closely linked to the communities in which they operate, providing economic support for various initiatives in rural territories;

² In the Latvian example, as examined in practice, the implementation of the Local Development Strategy (LDS) in the 2007-2013 period was not balanced: at a planning level, priorities and activities of the LDS widely cover entrepreneurship development, though among the implemented projects, economy related projects account for only about 18% of the total approved financing. Most LEADER projects have been implemented to facilitate the development of infrastructure related to active recreation and quality leisure time as well as culture and sports [Krievina et al. 2015]. In the example of Poland [Guzal-Dec, Zwolińska-Ligaj 2017], in the study of operations of LAGs in the Lubelskie Voivodship in the period between 2007-2013 and their impact on the development of entrepreneurship and job creation in rural areas revealed that the contribution of LAGs to the creation of new entities should be assessed as small. Most of the studied LAGs demonstrated a lower than average activity in applying for funds aimed at the creation of new jobs.

and fostering a cohesive and understanding dynamic amongst the population [Arroyo et al. 2015]. From this perspective, LAGs can be considered representative entities for rural society, capable of promoting resilience and enabling these communities to overcome challenges being faced. This contributes to resilience in the rural environment and allows them to adapt, both in terms of structure and operationally. Nowadays, LAGs are increasingly perceived as potential catalysts of rural resilience [Labianca et. al. 2016, Sánchez-Zamora, Gallardo-Cobos 2019].

LAGs operating in rural peripheral areas are particularly challenged because of their low human, capital and innovation capacity. In social and economic sciences there are several types of definitions relating to peripheral areas (regions). The concept of peripherality is ambiguous due to the complexity of this phenomenon. According to the spatial criterion, peripheries are defined as areas remote from economic centers and difficult to access in terms of communication [Goodall 1987]. Peripherality in the socio-demographic aspect is manifested by low population density and a decrease in population [Miszczuk 2013].

In the economic as well as political dimension, peripheries are not only defined as areas remote from economic centers and difficult to access, but also as areas economically dependent on economic centers. The gross domestic product (GDP) per capita is most often used to assess the economic dimension of peripherality. In the assumptions of the European Union's cohesion policy at a unit level, it was assumed that peripheral areas are those with a GDP per capita calculated according to purchasing power parity (PPS) lower than 75% of the corresponding EU average [Miszczuk 2013].

Peripherality, despite socio-economic development, does not disappear, and what is more, among the units (regions) classified as peripheral, there are certain groups of lagging regions with extremely high indicators in various dimensions of peripherality and with low dynamics of improvement of these indicators. In Poland, the features of spatial and economic peripherality are demonstrated by the following voivodships: Lubelskie, Podlaskie, Podkarpackie, Świętokrzyskie and Warmińsko-Mazurskie located directly or in close proximity to the eastern border of Poland, which is also the eastern border of the EU. Due to the specificity indicated (peripherality not only in the spatial dimension, but also in economic terms) these regions are covered by support under EU regional/cohesion policy. In the economic peripheral dimension, these regions remain in the lagging regions group [World Bank 2019].

In this work, the question is asked: to what extent and areas LAGs influence the development processes of peripheral regions of Eastern Poland. The purpose of the work is to characterize the impact of LAGs on the socio-economic development processes of peripheral regions of Eastern Poland.

RESEARCH METHODS

The methods of literature analysis, diagnostic survey and statistical analysis were used in the work. Measures of descriptive statistics (arithmetic mean and coefficient of variation) and a nonparametric test of significance of mean differences of Kruskal-Wallis were used to examine the diversity of impact assessment of LAGs on development processes in individual voivodships of the Eastern Poland Macroregion.

The survey was conducted in March-September 2019 among 26 LAG communities (constituting 27.7% of all functioning voivodships of the Eastern Poland Macro region. From each voivodship, the sample was selected in proportion to the number of functioning LAGs (25-30%) in total (in the Lubelskie Voivodship 7 LAGs out of a total of 23 LAGs, in Podkarpackie – 7 LAGs out of 28, in Podlaskie – 4 LAGs out of a total of 13, in Świętokrzyskie – 5 LAGs out of 18, in Warmińsko-Mazurskie – 3 LAGs out of a total of 12). In 26 LAGs surveyed, based on random selection, 390 direct interviews³ were conducted among 1112 active members⁴ from 3052 formally registered LAG members. The minimum sample size - 390 units was determined with an estimated fraction size (of 0.5), assuming a confidence level of 0.95 and an error estimation level of 0.04.

RESULTS

In Poland, the LEADER initiative was launched together with EU accession in 2004, contributing to the emergence and expansion of LAGs – 324 organizations as of 31.12.2019, including 94 in five voivodships of the Eastern Poland Macroregion. It should also be noted that due to the widespread belonging of rural and urban-rural communes to LAGs in the analysed macro-region, virtually all of its rural area has been covered by the LEADER initiative⁵.

When it comes to 26 surveyed Local Action Groups, they covered a territory of 209 communes (commune, NUTS 5 level) and over 1.6 million rural inhabitants. The smallest LAG surveyed covered an area of 4 communes, whereas the largest one covered 16 communes. The smallest LAG surveyed inhabited 34.4 thousand residents, whereas the largest one inhabited 143.5 thousand people, respectively.

Measuring the effects of the impact of LAGs on territorial development is extremely complicated. Some of them are material and non-material. This was also emphasized in the evaluation report on the functioning of LAGs in Poland in the period 2007-2013, indicating that the LEADER programme will be difficult to assess due to the fact that its most important effects are “soft” and long-term, which is difficult and sometimes even impossible to capture in the language of indicators. Meanwhile, the greatest added value of the LEADER programme lies precisely in social, mental and psychological effects that will bring positive effects in the future” [MRiRW 2012, p. 85].

The distribution of these effects over time as well as their social perception are also varied. In the case of less developed units, sometimes even a small, quantifiable effect can

³ According to voivodships: 7 LAGs from Lubelskie – 105 respondents, 7 LAGs from Podkarpackie – 105 respondents, 5 LAGs from Świętokrzyskie – 75 respondents, 4 LAGs from Podlaskie – 60 respondents, 3 LAGs – from Warmińsko-Mazurskie – 45 respondents.

⁴ Actively operating for the benefit of organizations and actually participating in making collective decisions (participation in general meetings) indicated by the Directorate of LAG offices/LAG presidents (named lists constituted a sampling frame).

⁵ In the perspective of 2007-2013, all rural and urban-rural communes were associated in LAGs and implemented, with Rural Development Programme (RDP) financing, local development strategies, in the period 2014-2020 only 6 communes were associated in LAGs. The G6 Association Grzędy Sokalska ceased activity due to a lack of LDS funding for this organization.

Figure 1.
Assessment of the
impact of LAGs
on the process of
socio-economic
development of
operation area

Source: own study
based on empirical
research

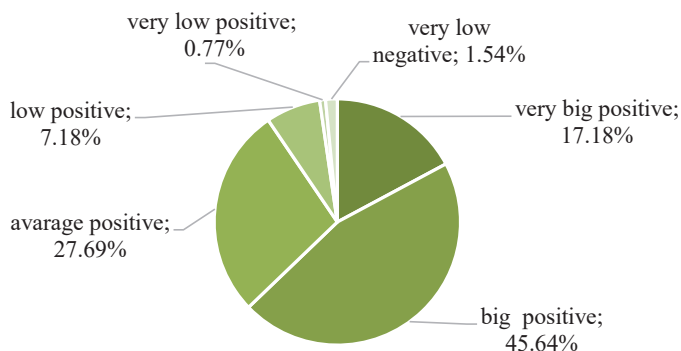
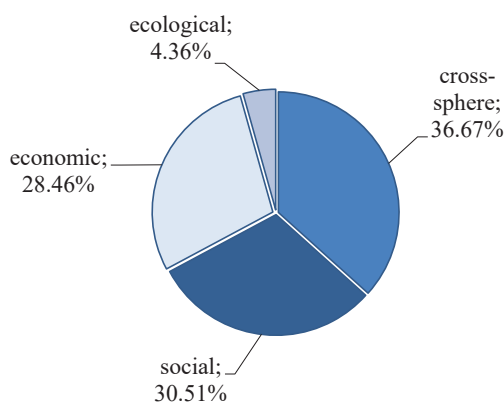


Figure 2. Spheres of LAG
impact on development

Source: own study based on
empirical research



be seen as a strong impact on development processes. This work examines the subjective assessment of the effects of LAGs on the development processes of areas within their functioning.

The generally positive social perception of the pro-development impact of LAGs is evidenced by the fact that only 1.54% of the surveyed members noticed a slight negative impact of LAGs, indicating a smaller than expected scale of LAGs impact on improving the quality of residential life. These results are consistent with generally positive assessments of LAGs functioning in the period 2007-2013 indicated in the research [MRiRW 2012, Kisiel, Gierwiatowska 2013, p. 47, Koryluk-Dryjska i in. 2016]⁶.

In the surveyed sample, over 60% of respondents pointed to an above-average positive impact, and nearly 30% to an average positive impact of LAGs on development processes.

Based on the examples of LAGs impact on development given by respondents, there are four categories indicating the impact on the economic, social and ecological sphere, or, where respondents indicated the multidirectional impact and cross-sphere impact.

Subjectively analysing the impact assessments of LAGs as positive, it should be pointed out that LAGs communities perceive their comprehensive impact on the area (the

⁶ In light of the results of the evaluation report on the functioning of LAGs in the period 2007-2013, 97% of representatives of management boards, 95% of representatives of decision-making bodies and 92% of representatives of LAGs members/partners did not notice any negative effects of LAGs activities.

largest proportion of indications – cross-sphere impact – 36.67%). The impact on social development was indicated by 30.51% of respondents, and economic development – by 28.46%. This may indicate a change in the perception of these organizations the effects of which are not only increasingly seen in building social and human capital.

The analysis of examples of LAGs impact on „local homelands” has also revealed some symptoms of the „immeasurable” effects of these organizations, related to their specificity and perception as an indispensable element of the institutional support system in rural areas. The following statements of respondents can be quoted here: „We see positive effects, mainly when it comes to the promotion of our products (...). We have very good honey products, many regional dishes, we have something to boast about and the LAG is really helpful in this. There is no other organization to support this, because communes do something completely different, and no one in the city is interested in us, so this impact on the area is very large and much needed”. (...) “LAG’s activity is very much needed, it mainly counteracts social exclusion, unemployment, and although this may not be so apparent at first glance, there are many activities that just help residents and these positive effects will be visible in the long run”.

In the next stage of the research, a comparative analysis of LAGs impact in individual areas in the regional system was made. Respondents assessed the impact of LAGs on development on a scale of 0-5 where 0 – no impact, 1 – very low impact, 2 – low impact, 3 – moderate impact, 4 – high impact, 5 – very high impact. The analysis in individual voivodships, regardless of region, generally indicates an above-average positive LAG impact on development (individual average rates ranged from 3.13 to 4.11) and a high convergence of opinions of respondents on the above issue – coefficients of variation did not exceed 40% – the average level of differentiation and were in the range of 16.27-37.02%.

The activity of LAGs in influencing the social sphere in the area of building trust, integrating the local environment, strengthening social ties and the development of human capital, including organizational competences by organizing initiatives under LAGs, was rated the highest. Equally highly rated was the activity in creating jobs and developing entrepreneurship, including non-agricultural entrepreneurship (average rates ranged from 3.5 to 4.1). Activity in the area of creating and spreading innovation, including social innovation, was relatively rated the lowest. The area of this type of activity is generally difficult to stimulate in rural areas. The problem of innovation of rural non-governmental organizations is also reported by Katarzyna Zajda [2017], indicating that only 3% of organizations operating in rural areas implement social innovation, usually of a short-term nature.

Against a background of surveyed voivodships, the lowest activity in all analysed areas was indicated among LAGs from the Warmiańsko-Mazurskie Voivodship. This region should generally be considered particularly problematic in the context of structural changes and the development of social capital. As emphasized by Elżbieta Psyk-Piotrowska [2013], the weakest link in the socio-economic structure of rural areas in this voivodship is social passivity, a learned claim attitude, with the reproduction of a ‘culture of poverty’, quite common in the post-state-farm environment.

It should also be emphasized that the analysis of the significance test of average differences in the area of LAGs impact from 5 voivodships showed a statistically significant separation of the Warmiańsko-Mazurskie Voivodship from all others regarding activity in

Table 1. The activity of LAGs in the following areas of development in the opinion of LAG members

Areas of LAG impact on development	Voivodship							
	Lublin		Podkarpackie		Podlaskie		Świętokrzyskie	
	average scores	coefficient of variation [%]	average scores	coefficient of variation [%]	average scores	coefficient of variation [%]	average scores	coefficient of variation [%]
Building trust, integrating the local environment, strengthening social ties	4.11	16.27	3.93	18.41	4.01	18.04	4.04	21.32
Developing human capital, including organizational competences, by organizing initiatives under the LAG	4.10	17.77	3.81	19.97	3.98	18.19	3.99	22.01
Social inclusion (support for disadvantaged groups)	3.90	22.49	3.79	22.46	3.93	21.38	3.97	23.03
Creating jobs and developing entrepreneurship	4.10	20.53	3.93	22.65	3.8	27.32	3.64	28.80
Impact on multifunctional processes (job creation outside agriculture)	3.99	19.81	3.77	24.18	3.7	25.03	3.77	23.69
Initiating economic cooperation between entrepreneurs	3.98	21.75	3.66	25.67	3.78	20.70	3.64	23.31
Creating and spreading innovation, including social innovation	3.79	24.73	3.72	23.99	3.75	20.02	3.52	23.05
Shaping (among others through educational initiatives) ecological awareness	3.88	25.47	3.89	20.91	4.0	20.07	3.96	22.14
							3.62	25.17

Source: own study based on empirical research

such areas as: creating and spreading innovation, including social innovation, creating jobs and developing entrepreneurship, initiating economic cooperation among entrepreneurs and developing human capital, including organizational competences by organizing initiatives under the LAGs. However, due to the subjective nature of the assessment, it is difficult to clearly recognize the “weaker condition” of LAGs from the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodship. Perhaps the expectations of LAG members in this region, due to a lower level of development, are higher, which requires further in-depth research.

Table 2. Results of the Kruskal-Wallis rank ANOVA test on the impact of LAGs on the development of the surveyed voivodships

Voivodship	Area			
	N	Average rank	H Test statistics	p-value
Creating and spreading innovation, including social innovation				
Lubelskie	105	212.485714	9.538757	0.0490
Podkarpackie	105	203.080952		
Podlaskie	60	199.891667		
Świętokrzyskie	75	172.553333		
Warmińsko-Mazurskie	45	170.566667		
Creating jobs and entrepreneurship development				
Lubelskie	105	220.966667	12.65670	0.0131
Podkarpackie	105	201.476190		
Podlaskie	60	189.100000		
Świętokrzyskie	75	171.513333		
Warmińsko-Mazurskie	45	170.644444		
Initiating economic cooperation between entrepreneurs				
Lubelskie	105	228.819048	23.88968	0.0001
Podkarpackie	105	192.519048		
Podlaskie	60	199.400000		
Podkarpackie	75	182.880000		
Warmińsko-Mazurskie	45	140.544444		
Developing human capital (including organizational competences) by organizing initiatives under LAG				
Lubelskie	105	215.652381	12.03207	0.0171
Podkarpackie	105	178.261905		
Podlaskie	60	200.275000		
Świętokrzyskie	75	206.640000		
Warmińsko-Mazurskie	45	163.766667		

Source: own study based on empirical research

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the research on the impact of LAGs operating in peripheral regions on development processes for the period 2014-2020 coincide with the results regarding the impact of LAGs on development in an earlier period of their operation. The positive effects of LAGs are generally recognized by the community of these organizations. In the context of evaluating the functioning of LAGs in the 2014-2020 period, it is also important to state the extension of the range of perceived effects. The perception of the positive impact on economic development and a more comprehensive perception of effects achieved is becoming increasingly visible.

The area of innovation was rated the lowest among the analysed areas of activity of LAGs. Due to the fact that innovation is a key principle of LAGs functioning, this situation necessitates an increase in the efforts of programme managers as well as LAG authorities aimed at improving the effectiveness of implementing this principle.

A comparative analysis by region of LAGs functioning showed a lower subjective assessment of the impact on the development processes of LAGs from the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Voivodship. This indicates the need for in-depth research for this region in the scope of evaluation of the LEADER programme in order to improve/individualize implemented actions/initiatives and their greater adaptation to the needs of local communities. Local communities gathered in LAGs recognize the need for these organizations to function and their complementary nature with other institutions operating in rural areas.

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LOKALNE GRUPY DZIAŁANIA W ROZWOJU REGIONÓW PERYFERYJNYCH POLSKI WSCHODNIEJ

Słowa kluczowe: LEADER Programme, lokalne grupy działania, obszary wiejskie,
rozwój lokalny kierowany przez społeczność (RLKS)

ABSTRAKT

Celem pracy jest charakterystyka oddziaływania LGD na procesy rozwoju społeczno-gospodarczego regionów peryferyjnych Polski Wschodniej. Przedmiot badań stanowiły LGD, mające siedzibę i prowadzące działalność w 5 województwach z makroregionu Polski Wschodniej. W pracy zastosowano metodę analizy literatury, sondażu diagnostycznego oraz analizy statystycznej. Na podstawie doboru losowego przeprowadzono badania sondażowe w 2019 roku, z zastosowaniem wywiadów bezpośrednich skierowanych do 390 członków z 26 LGD (27,7% z 94 funkcjonujących na terenie województw, makroregionu Polski Wschodniej). Wyniki badań oddziaływania LGD funkcjonujących w regionach peryferyjnych na procesy rozwoju dla okresu 2014-2020 były zbieżne z wynikami dotyczącymi efektów oddziaływania LGD na rozwój we wcześniejszym okresie ich funkcjonowania. Generalnie, dostrzegano przez społeczność LGD pozytywne skutki oddziaływania tych organizacji. W kontekście ewaluacji funkcjonowania LGD w okresie 2014-2020 ważne jest stwierdzenie poszerzenia zakresu dostrzeganych efektów, w tym na rozwój gospodarczy. Społeczności lokalne skupione w LGD dostrzegają potrzebę funkcjonowania tych organizacji i ich komplementarny charakter wobec innych instytucji funkcjonujących na obszarach wiejskich.

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