

## LOCAL ACTION GROUPS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL AREAS IN LUBELSKIE VOIVODESHIP (POLAND)

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**Abstract.** The aim of the study was to identify, basing on a literature review, the importance of Local Action Groups (LAGs) in the creation of rural development and to determine (basing on an empirical study) the role of LAGs in stimulating the neo-endogenous development mechanism of Lublin voivodeship. The area of the study included 40 municipalities of Lublin voivodeship (30 municipalities from the group with the highest environmental preciousness and 10 comparative municipalities from the group with the lowest environmental value in Lublin voivodeship, according to the index developed by D. Guzal-Dec). The study was conducted on a group of 16 LAGs (61.5% of total in the voivodeship), associating the above-mentioned 40 local governments.

The study used the method of document analysis and diagnostic survey with an interview questionnaire addressed to the heads of municipalities. LAGs' local development strategies as well as the official websites of associations and projects of cooperation were the source of information about the LAGs. As shown, the investigated LAGs constitute an important but under-used instrument for creating local development, basing on the innovative use of local resources in supra-local projects. It is then appropriate to provide educational support for LAGs and to promote good practices in the area of the innovative use of resources in the LAGs.

**Keywords:** LEADER initiative, Local Action Groups, neo-endogenous development, Lublin voivodeship.

**JEL Code:** O 17

### Introduction

The development of peripheral regions is a challenge of the EU regional policy. That is why it is important to search for the factors accelerating the processes of development and ways to enhance positive impacts of these factors. Lublin voivodeship was the study area because it is not only a national (Polish) example of such an peripheral region but also a supranational (the EU) one. Lublin voivodeship is located in the border zone, in the macro-region of the Eastern Poland, showing the lowest level of economic development in Poland and one of the lowest in the European Union\*. Lublin voivodeship is one of the least populated and urbanized regions of the country. Its demographic situation is unfavourable and continues to deteriorate as a result of its number of births and migration outflow. Lublin voivodeship is characterized by low transport accessibility and the low availability and consistency of communication within the region. The share of the agricultural sector is relatively large in the production structure of the gross added value in Lublin voivodeship. Poland's accession to the EU enabled development of external financial support, implemented mainly under the Rural Development Programme (RDP) and the Regional Operational Programme of Lublin voivodeship (ROP) in the period 2007–2013. Additionally, the Operational Programme Development of Eastern Poland (OP DEP) was

specifically dedicated to the problematic areas of the Eastern Poland. The LEADER initiative, as implemented under the Rural Development Programme (RDP), was of major importance to the enhancement of bottom-up development initiatives. The initiative served and supported the creation and functioning of Local Action Groups. The aim of the study was then to determine the role of Local Action Groups (LAGs) in stimulating the neo-endogenous development mechanism of Lublin voivodeship. Implementation of the aim was to provide verification of the following hypothesis: LAGs in Lublin voivodeship contribute to the development of innovative supra-local projects. It was assumed, following S. Michalska and K. Zajda, that projects using local resources in accordance with the specific trajectory and the general trajectory with specific features will be recognized as innovative (Michalska S., Zajda K., 2011).

The area of the study included 40 municipalities of Lublin voivodeship – 30 municipalities from the group with the highest environmental preciousness and 10 comparative municipalities from the group with the lowest environmental value in Lublin voivodeship, according to the index developed by D. Guzal-Dec – the procedure is detailed in Guzal-Dec 2013. The study was conducted on a group of 16 LAGs† (61.5% of total in

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† "Bialskopodlaska LGD", "Roztocze Tomaszowskie", "Zielony Pierscien", "Lepsza przyszłość Ziemi Ryckiej", "Poleska Dolina Bugu", "Ziemia Bilgorajska", "Ziemia Zamojska", "Polesie", "Lesny Krag", "Nasze Roztocze", "Krasnystaw Plus", "Jagiellonska Przystan", "Owocowy Szlak", "Zapiecek", "Dolina Wieprza i Lesnym Szlakiem", "Grzeda Sokalska".

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

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the voivodeship) associating the above-mentioned 40 local governments. The study used document analysis and diagnostic survey with an interview questionnaire addressed to the heads of municipalities and analyses of documents. Analysis of local development strategies of LAGs and the official websites of associations and projects of cooperation enabled preliminary general characteristics of associations (their financial potential, membership structure) and the characteristics of the projects of cooperation (their range of subjects, description of projects). The questionnaire interview included questions about the most important benefits achieved through cooperation and evaluation of cooperation by local authorities. The report was prepared as part of the research project No. 2011/01/D/HS4/03927, entitled "Environmental Conditions and Factors of development of the economic functions of the valuable natural areas of Lublin voivodeship" funded by the National Science Centre.

## **Research results and discussion**

### **1. Problematic issues of the development of Lublin voivodeship – in the light of national studies**

The research conducted in Poland by P. Swianiewicz, concerning the absorption of the EU funds by local governments in the financial perspectives 2004–2006 and 2007–2013, indicates a problem in adjusting the directions of applications to the availability of funds and applying for funding for projects previously unplanned, not urgently needed. Poor strategic management with the use of the EU funds is an example of an inefficient approach of local governments to the implementation of their own development strategies (Swianiewicz P., 2013)\*.

Research conducted by a team of B. Plawgo, in the analysis of the impact of the local government sector on the processes of socio-economic development in 120 municipalities of the Eastern Poland, confirms the serious problem of the dysfunctional absorption of the EU funds. Development activities implemented with the absorption of external funds focused on creating and developing infrastructure aimed at meeting the basic needs of the local community. To a limited extent, efforts are being aimed at creating conditions for endogenous development based on cooperation in production networks implementing new projects, clusters and the formation of social capital conducive to entrepreneurship and innovation (Plawgo B., 2010).

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\* research carried out in 50 municipalities of the regions of Lublin, Malopolska, Podlasie and Slask.

The analysis of the potential impact of the activities of municipalities in applying for the EU funds on the development of the surveyed local governments does not enable reliable inferring any positive impact of the support obtained on the dynamics of development (there is no statistically significant importance to the rate of socio-economic development indicators' changes) (Plawgo B., 2010). Absence of any statistically significant correlations is largely due to the short period from the end of individual investments but also to the character of the implemented investments. The selected projects were aimed at meeting the most immediate needs of the local community. However, the extent of the impact of this type of investments is mainly local. This conclusion can be confirmed by the results of the implementation of the project entitled: "Evaluation of the Impact of the Implementation of the Cohesion Policy 2004–2006 on Strengthening the Capacity of the Socio-economic Development of the Eastern Polish Regions". In the surveyed municipalities of Eastern Poland, the projects implemented were primarily those with a range not exceeding the regional, dominated by local ones (the Ministry of Regional Development, 2010). Local investments, due to their small value, do not always receive the appropriate "critical mass" for starting self-acting endogenous development. They do not solve the problem of remoteness which has been for years faced by local governments of Eastern Poland (Grosse T.G., 2007).

In 2013, under the order of the Department of Economy and Innovation of the Marshall's Office of Lublin voivodeship, a study was conducted on the level of competence and capabilities of the public administration to manage growth and create innovation. The study was carried out in 167 municipalities (98% of all rural municipalities in the voivodeship) (P. Czyz et al., 2013). The study showed a low level of activity of local governments of rural municipalities of Lublin voivodeship in the sphere of development and application of innovative solutions. Indirect actions were by far the most common form of activity in supporting innovation of enterprises, e.g. shaping relevant local laws, tax facilitations/exemptions or stimulating cooperation between enterprises.

### **2. Cross-sectoral partnership – LAGs as determinants of rural development**

Local authorities are the not-contested main entities stimulating development processes (Blakely E.J., 1989) but, as representatives of local communities, they

should consider and determine the place of the communities in setting the vision and goals of development. The concept of sustainable development, in contrast to the paradigm of globalization, highlights the subjectivity of the local community. The greater the involvement of the various social partners in the system of local governance, the greater the chances of sustained growth – the co-governing concept enables better identification of problems in the area and enables faster overcoming them (Adamski T., 2008).

According to Böcher M. (2008), the LEADER type initiatives are instances of regional (territorial) governance which can be characterized by such important features as: increasing self-governing responsibilities of regions; replacing the principle of "administrative" territory by a functional principle; inter-sectoral co-operation through regional networks and partnerships; hierarchical steering of incentives through various instruments and forms (i.e. support programs and their eligibility rules). LEADER is based on an economic development model of rural areas called: "Community-led rural development theory". This model, presented by I. Terluin in the paper "Rural Regions in the UE: Exploring Differences in Economic Development" identifies "the main precondition for generating and sustaining economic development in rural regions: the existence of community 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 to be a major precondition for establishing and sustaining local economic development. Partnerships and adjustments of the institutional structures are seen as the main tools in the process of capacity building (Terluin I., 2001).

Due to the ever-increasing role the LEADER approach has played in realising the Rural Development Policy, Local Action Groups (LAGs) have become crucial to the institutional system of rural development (Kis K., Gal J., Veba A., 2012). LAGs are made up of public and private partners from a rural territory and must include different socio-economic sectors. They receive financial assistance to implement local development strategies by awarding grants to local projects. The LEADER 2007–2013 financing perspective included three actions carried out in Poland: implementation of local development strategies, implementation of cooperation projects and the functioning of LAGs, acquiring skills and mobilization.

The main aim of LAGs is to develop, update and implement the objectives identified in local development strategies (LDSs). They are the basis of each LAG operation and include directions for developing areas belonging to the group. The action of "implementing cooperation projects" enables the realisation of joint projects within the framework of interregional and international cooperation. Under the measure, support is granted for projects included, or not, in the relevant LDS but consistent with the objectives of the LDS. These projects must establish joint ventures and may involve, in addition to LAGs, other partnerships with other EU Member States or third countries that deal with the issue of rural development. Cooperation projects provide an opportunity for networking on an international scale; the networks' participants exchange experience and know-how. They also open up the possibility of creating social capital resources (Zajda K., 2013b).

The functioning of LAGs is then for the use of external and internal factors in the creation of local development. The European Union support is to spur development impulses through the use of local resources in the process of development. LAGs, through cooperation projects, should also become an important entity in the creation and diffusion of innovation. It can be assumed that participation in cooperation projects of foreign partners will promote the diffusion of innovation, the use of local resources by LAGs in a unique manner, linked to the specificity of the area covered by support (Zajda K., 2013a).

LAGs can use the definition of innovation contained in the "Rural Review", according to which "innovation can simply be the introduction of technologies and good practices used elsewhere and adapting them to specific conditions and circumstances prevailing at the new location or the introduction of proven concepts, in a new, more effective manner. Innovations understood in this way often result from intensive contacts and cooperation with entities that operate elsewhere, from teamwork and the created networks as well as inter-regional and transnational cooperation" (Creativity and Innovation, 2009). The Guide to the RDP Axis 4 Cooperation Projects 2007–2013 reads, however, that innovation is understood as: the use of ideas and solutions elsewhere common but with innovative nature, on a given area; innovative use of local resources; development of new types of production or services; new ways of involving the local community in the development process. It is also noted that partners

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can extend the definition given above, indicating other, innovative solutions. It is necessary, however, for cooperation project to describe how the partners perceive the concept of innovation (Guide to RDP..., 2012). It should be noted that the concept of innovation and the innovation of LAG activities are defined very broadly. This provides a great freedom of interpretation and LAGs often recognize any action absent earlier on the supported area as innovative. As noted by Zajda K. and Michalska S. (2011) such a belief becomes a real barrier to the implementation of innovations. According to the authors, innovative use of local resources in the processes of development may be granted only where:

- unique resources are used in a custom way, in conjunction with local tradition, specificity – the "specific trajectory" of using local resources or
- common resources, typical of many areas, are used in a custom, unique manner, linked to local specificity – the "general trajectory with specific features".

Summing up, it is clear that the functioning of LAGs can be identified as a model example of cooperation, the essence of which is to mobilize the local potential of human resources (human, social, relational capital) to identify and mobilize utilization (by assumption, in an innovative manner) of resources (especially natural and cultural) in the process of local development.

### **3. LAGs in Lublin voivodeship – activities in cooperation projects**

As of 31 December 2013, 26 LAGs operated in Lublin voivodeship, they included all (193) rural and urban-rural municipalities of the voivodeship. In-depth studies were conducted among 40 municipalities of the voivodeship, they belonged to 16 LAGs (61.5% of total), bringing together 133 municipalities of the region. The studied 16 LAGs associated from 3 to 17 local governments. The structure of the studied LAGs complied with the rule of at least fifty-percent representation of economic and non-governmental sectors – other than public partners of the members of the groups accounted for, on average – 82% and 64% in the case of councils. In relation to the proportion of the members of LAGs, the social sector was over-represented (45%) in councils, the public sector accounted for 36% of total. The LAGs associating the studied municipalities dealt mainly with protecting and promoting the local natural and cultural heritage and

the promotion of tourism. The studied LAGs joined 17 projects of cooperation, including 2 international. The number of cooperation partners ranged from 2 to 12.

The determinant of the financial capacity of LAGs in the context of supporting the development of municipalities belonging to these associations is not so much the value of the LDS budget but the value of budget funds per 1 municipality. In the case of the studied LAGs, the LDS total budget value ranged from PLN 6.2 to PLN 22 million, and the rate – the amount of budget per 1 municipality is in the interval of PLN 0.7 to PLN 3.1 million. It could seem that cooperation projects should be an important item in the LDS budget – as the partnership idea. Unfortunately, as demonstrated by the analysis of the LDS budgets of the studied LAGs, the value of cooperation projects ranged from PLN 0.1 to PLN 1.9 million and did not exceed more than 9% of the budget\*.

Table 2 presents the thematic scope and activities of the undertaken cooperation projects.

The cooperation projects primarily invested in tourism infrastructure and promotion of tourist attractions. All of the analysed cooperation projects have signs of innovation within the meaning of the definitions and guidelines of the "Guide to RDP..." and "Rural Review ...". However, only eight projects (including 2 international) used local resources in an innovative way in accordance with the specific trajectory\* or the general trajectory with specific features\*\*† (as interpreted by the innovative use of resources by Michalska S. and Zajda K.). Following, there are the assumptions of the most interesting projects.

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\* It should be noted, however, that the actual budget for the cooperation project, as a whole, is the sum of contributions made by all of the project partners (Guide to RDP, 2012)

† "Eco-museum of Lublin Living Tradition"\*, "In the footsteps of the past historical and cultural heritage of the central and eastern part of Lublin region"\*, "Treasures of nature and culture"\*, "Learning by doing – International Youth Project"\*\*, "Local Investor Service Centres, Eastern European Gateway"\*\*, "Virtual Tourist Zone"\*\*, "Tourism – Ecology – Activity – Management (TEAM)"\*\*, "Virtual walks as a bridge between the Lublin and Podkarpackie LAGs"\*\*,

**Thematic scope and activities of the cooperation projects implemented by the LAGs associating the studied municipalities**

<b>Project title</b>	<b>Thematic scope of the project</b>	<b>Activities of the project</b>
<b>Tourism – Ecology – Activity – Management (TEAM)</b>	improvement of rural infrastructure, rural tourism, ecology and environment, support for new technologies	delineation and marking a new and innovative system of bicycle routes, the creation of innovative forms of three-sector cooperation "Region Home" and promotion at home and abroad
<b>Welcome to Roztocze</b>	promotion of local natural and cultural heritage	preparation and publication of a tourist brochure, installation of information boards, participation in tourism fairs, a conference summarizing the results of the project
<b>Eco-museum of Lublin Living Tradition</b>	promotion of local products, promotion of local natural and cultural heritage, ecology and environment, rural tourism	marking objects constituting the Eco-museum, development of tourist passports and promotional leaflets, a website, training for facility managers
<b>Creation of a canoe route - The Wieprz Valley</b>	protection of culinary heritage, river tourism, rural tourism	creating a network tourist product in the form of a marked canoe route and organizing joint promotion by creating a Polish-English Internet portal, printing a tourist guide with a map and organizing canoeing events
<b>KRAM (The MASTER Forge of Regional Artists)</b>	promotion of local natural and cultural heritage	conducting workshops for residents in the field of folk art, organization of a summarizing conference, publishing a brochure on folk art, creating centers of artistic creativity in each cooperating LAG, setting up and running a website of the cooperation project
<b>The extraordinary charm of rivers – NURT Tourism</b>	river tourism, rural tourism	organization of canoeing trips, photography workshops and a photo competition, publishing a local folder aimed at promoting local rivers and local action groups
<b>In the footsteps of the past historical and cultural heritage of the central and eastern part of the Lublin region</b>	promotion of local natural and cultural heritage, support for new technologies, rural tourism	establishment of an inventory, renovation and marking historical – cultural heritage resources, publishing a Regional Atlas of the project area, creating a multimedia guide as an extensive application that contains proposals for routes, description of interesting places, a multimedia guide as a stand-alone web portal associated with the parties to the partner LAGs
<b>Get a Taste of Tradition</b>	protection of culinary heritage, promotion of local products, agritourism	organizing cooking workshops, carrying out a cycle of television programs, developing a gourmet guide, organizing a Festival of Traditional Products
<b>Treasures of nature and culture</b>	protection of cultural heritage, support for new technologies	development and publication of an album, developing an interactive promotional and informational website, preparation of large information boards, purchase and distribution of promotional materials, organization of conferences, preparing a promotional video, publishing articles in the local press
<b>Cooking as the Region's Attraction</b>	protection of culinary heritage	developing and printing a gourmet guide, organizing cooking workshops
<b>Between the Bug and the Wieprz</b>	river tourism, rural tourism	Internet portal execution, development and distribution of a folder, production of promotional spots
<b>The Wieprz Valley</b>	river tourism, rural tourism	marking a canoe route, setting up a website, publishing a guide
<b>Learning by doing – International Youth Project</b>	development of entrepreneurship, support for new technologies, improvement of rural infrastructure	providing group services on the basis of a diagnosis of the needs and professional aptitude of individual beneficiaries, group meetings, establishing international cooperation with a group of young people from Finland and Russia in the use of web-based platform, study visits, on the basis of the developed programs, the project's closing conference
<b>Local Investor Service Centres, Eastern European Gateway</b>	development of entrepreneurship, support for new technologies, improvement of rural infrastructure	creating a modern system of business communication and communication of business information on the basis of the latest IT technology
<b>Virtual Tourist Zone</b>	promotion of local natural and cultural heritage, support for new technologies, rural tourism	promotion of LAG areas through an innovative tool, a "virtual walk" – including panoramas using modules
<b>Our heritage as an attraction - DNA</b>	promotion of local natural and cultural heritage, rural tourism	participation in fairs, organization of conferences aimed at promoting the tourist offer of the region, involving local communities in restoring and preserve their cultural heritage (the Youth Academy of Cultural Heritage), publishing a tourism folder,
<b>Virtual walks as a bridge between the Lublin and Podkarpace LAGs</b>	promotion of local natural and cultural heritage, support for new technologies, rural tourism	promotion of LAG areas through an innovative tool, the "virtual walk" – including panoramas using modules

**Source: author's construction based on information from the websites of the LAGs' projects of cooperation. Retrieved: <http://ekomuzeumlubelszczyzny.pl>, <http://lgdkram.pl>, <http://dna.lgd-region-wloszczowa.pl>. Access: 14.10.2015**

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According to the representatives of municipal authorities, the studied associations made it possible to achieve very good results of cooperation (score of 4.7 at a five-point rating scale, where 1 means unsatisfactory and 5 means very good). The most important benefits of cooperation in the framework of the LAGs, as pointed out by mayors, included mainly: increase in social activities of the inhabitants – 20 indications and the possibility of financing through the development of LAG projects that have a large impact on improving inhabitants' quality of life and which exceeded the financial capabilities of the budgets of individual municipalities – 15 indications.

The following benefits were also pointed out: promotion of municipalities – 7 indication, tourist base development – 6 indications and sustaining tradition – 5 indications. Local authorities perceived benefits from membership in LAGs mainly in the context of the possibility of obtaining additional funds for the development of municipalities and the development of social ties and the creation of conditions for the development of tourism. The benefits mentioned did not directly include the effects that supported innovation development and diffusion (for example, exchange of experience and good practices between the members and partners of LAGs).

## **Conclusions**

- 1) In the light of the literature, a significant potential influence of LAGs was shown on rural development. LAGs serve the development of social capital. The pro-development impact can also result from the possibility of creating innovation (thanks to the cooperation of many entities representing various sectors) and diffusion of innovation – especially through cooperation projects.
- 2) However, as shown in the study on LAGs from Lublin voivodeship, at their present stage of functioning, they are an important but under-used instrument for creating local development based on innovative use of local resources in supra-local projects. As a result of the study carried out, the hypothesis set up in the paper has been negatively verified.
- 3) The studied LAGs mainly influenced the development of tourism and social integration through numerous cultural events organized within cooperation projects.
- 4) For LAGs to become a more efficient tool to support the development of rural areas they should contribute more to the formation of stable, long-term effects of development and not primarily to the initiatives characterized by a local and short-term impact range.
- 5) It is then advised to provide educational support and promotion of good practices within the area of the innovative use of LAGs' resources.

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