

THE LEADER PROGRAMME AS AN IMPULSE FOR NEW PROJECTS IN RURAL AREAS

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ABSTRACT: The article aims to present the stages of the LEADER programme and its influence on greater activity and integration of inhabitants by, e.g. extending the knowledge of tradition and national heritage and the actions intended for the integration of local communities. It is noticeable particularly in the implementation of the activities within Axis 4 of the 2007–2013 Rural Development Programme. Positive changes in rural areas are a result of building strong social and human capitals, which are important factors of local development. The skills and the ability for cooperation of a local community allows it to implement many projects. The investments made by beneficiaries of the LEADER programme improve the level of living and the quality of life in the countryside. The effect is an improvement in physical infrastructure and tourist attractiveness as a result of care for the rural landscape and cultural heritage. The implementation of the LEADER programme is presented on the example of Wielkopolskie Voivodeship where the participation in actions for local communities is deeply ingrained. In order to show spatial differences in the activity of local entities under Local Action Groups in Wielkopolskie Voivodeship, classes were selected on the basis of funds received by local entities in the LAG areas. There are 36 Local Action Groups operating in Wielkopolska (of which 31 have seats in this region).

KEY WORDS: Local Action Group (LAG), LEADER, Poland, Rural Development Programme (RDP)

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Introduction

The disproportion in the level of living between the inhabitants of towns and the countryside was a result of the domination of industry over other branches of the national economy; this period was called “an industrial era”. The domination of the agricultural function was then often treated as an indicator of the economic backwardness of a community and area, which was an impulse for modernising and development-oriented measures (Bukraba-Rylska 2011). At the end

of the 1970s rural areas developed mostly by external factors perceived as impulses coming from urban centres. The main role of rural areas was basically limited to food production for growing agglomerations. As the result of low productivity and attractiveness of rural areas, the necessity of its modernisation appeared (Ward et al. 2005). Ray (2001) states that according to a new model of development of rural areas, external resources should be used to meet local needs and support their potential.

A significant step in agricultural development was the introduction of the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). At first CAP helped to enhance the effectiveness of production, while social questions and those of the natural environment were poorly managed (Furmankiewicz, Królikowska 2010).

On analysis of the Irish agriculture and countryside of the early 1990s, Seamus O'Reilly (1998) came to the conclusion that it was impossible for the Common Agricultural Policy to stimulate a rural community for steady endogenous socio-economic development, which was its drawback.

To improve the social situation in the rural areas of the EU member states, the LEADER programme has been worked out. The LEADER initiative, its name being an abbreviation of its French name: *Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Economie Rurale*, means relations among measures taken for the economic development of the countryside, or cooperation among various entities operating there for the development of the countryside and its inhabitants. The LEADER programme implements the bottom-up and territorial approach to stimulate the development of countryside. Cross-sectoral cooperation is essential for the program efficacy. That is why a part of local communities and other local stakeholders, also public authorities participate in the implementation of the LEADER programme (Sykała et al. 2015). An important element of the programme is the possibility of setting up local action groups (LAGs), which are partnerships representing the three sectors: public, social and economic. Partnerships are created in order to connect and coordinate actions taken by entities so as to improve their results, but also in order to improve social relationships. LAGs are the main and basic level of the LEADER programme (*The LEADER Approach...2006*). The empirical studies conducted by Lopolito et al. (2015) showed that LAGs increased the competence of the network as well as reduced the distance between particular actors. Local entities able to cooperate make the attainment of current and future goals more probable (Smykowski 2011). Aside from three-sectoral collaboration, the LEADER programme is innovative in its participation approach. This phenomenon can be considered an important means of achieving goals of the programme or awakening the community's consciousness (Burkey 1993).

Moreover, participation seems to be one of the most important factors for promoting, fostering and enhancing the development of rural areas (Cohen, Uphoff 1980).

The goal of this article is to present stages of the LEADER programme and how it stimulates the activity and integration of inhabitants, e.g. by popularising their traditions and cultural heritage as well as by actions leading to the integration of local communities. This is especially visible in the case of measures taken under Axis 4 of the 2007–2013 Rural Development Programme (RDP).

Stages of the LEADER programme

The LEADER programme was introduced in a few stages. The first (LEADER I), treated as a pilot one, was implemented in the years 1991–1994 and allowed checking a new model of the development of rural areas, testing inter-sectoral cooperation, and stimulating the activity of local communities. After the success of the programme, the European Commission decided to launch the second stage (LEADER II), implemented in the years 1994–1999. LEADER II already embraced 50% of rural areas of the EU members of that time. Its big advantage was greater involvement of local authorities.

The next stage was LEADER+, the programming period being the years 2000–2006, and the end, 2008. An important element of this edition was its popularisation in all EU rural areas and the encouragement of local leaders to work out their own development strategies. The goal was to activate the development potential of rural areas that would encourage people, e.g. to start an economic activity and settle in the countryside. In this perspective of the programme, the European Commission did not allow the new members to enter it. However, the new states that joined it in May 2004 were allowed to implement LEADER instruments in the years 2004–2006. Of the ten new members, six decided on the pilot LEADER programme (the Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, and Hungary). Support consisted in training, consultancy and the financing of the emerging local action groups and integrated strategies of the development of rural areas (Iwańska et al. 2010). In Poland those tasks were performed as part of two

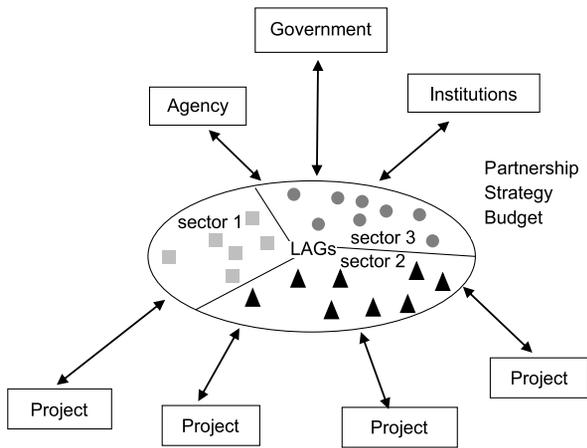


Fig. 1. Model of the LEADER type of approach.
Source: based on Kamiński, Kwatara (2005) and Iwańska (2010).

LEADER+ schemes. The goal of Scheme I was to create LAGs (167 Local Action Groups were created) and to work out an Integrated Strategy for Rural Development; it cost 19.5 million zlotys. Scheme II involved the implementation of the Integrated Strategy for Rural Development by Local Action Groups, which cost 98.5 million zlotys and embraced 885 communes with an area of 125,000 km², inhabited by some 7 million people.

All the EU countries participate in the next editions of the LEADER programme, 2007–2013 and 2014–2020. Starting with 2007, LEADER stopped being a separate programme, it is now part of programmes financed from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. In Poland it was fully introduced in 2007 under Axis 4 of the 2007–2013 Rural Development

Programme. At first there were 338 LAGs participating in the programme, including 120 LAGs from the previous stage of the LEADER programme. The chief goal of this type of initiatives is financial support for innovative measures for rural development by decentralisation of the management of local resources, a fight with unemployment, and the activation of inhabitants, which results in the cooperation of the three sectors: public, private and social.

Fig. 1 presents a model of the LEADER type of approach. Its great advantage is two-way communication: beneficiary-local action group, and local action group-government institutions and agencies.

This information flow allows bottom-up actions that are more efficient and justified than in the traditional model where decisions are taken at the central level and the flow of information is unidirectional (Iwańska 2010).

The EU states earmark various sums for the LEADER programme. The state with the largest outlays is Spain, which devotes for it 10% of the financial means granted to programmes concerning rural areas. Spain has participated enthusiastically in all LEADER editions, introduced in 45% of the Spanish territory and involving 13% of the population (Perez 2000). The European Commission has set the minimum threshold of inputs for the LEADER initiative in rural areas at 5% for the old members and 2.5% for the new ones.

Fig. 2 presents the first three stages in the development of the LEADER programme as well as

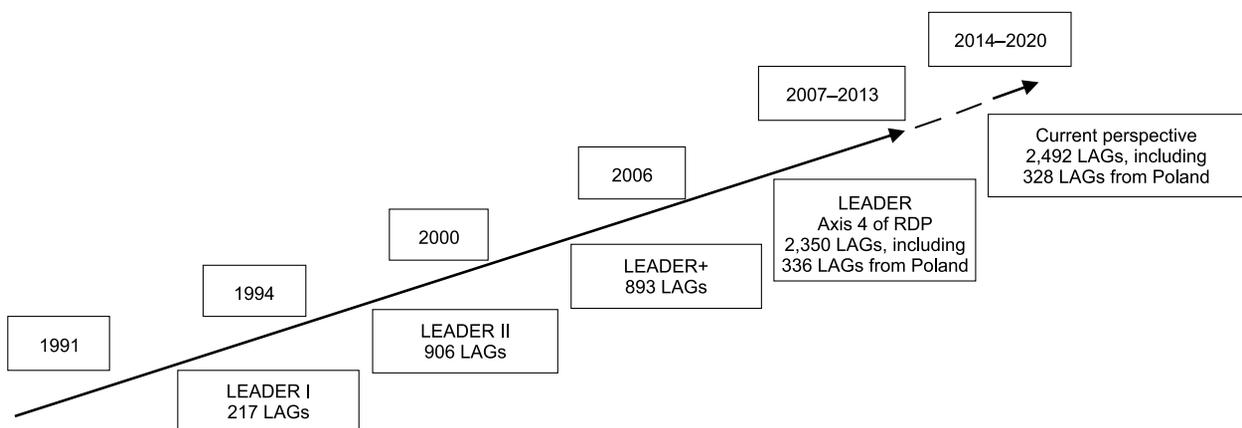


Fig. 2. Five stages of the LEADER programme and the number of LAGs implementing the programme in individual years.

Source: own compilation on the basis of Kieft, Manintveld (2004).

stages four and five. Stage four is currently at an end, while stage five starts the next period of the programme. The interest in the programme keeps growing, as evidenced by the establishment of ever new LAGs. This translates into the range of impact of the programme and the amount of financial means granted. The territorial extent of the LEADER I programme embraced 367,000 km² and the amount granted was 442 million euro; in stage two (LEADER II), the territorial extent was 1,375,144 km², and the amount granted, 1,755 million euro; in stage three (LEADER+), the territorial extent was 1,577,386 km², and the amount granted, 2,105.1 million euro.

Poland has got the greatest number of LAGs among the EU states. At the start of the programme (2007–2013) there were 338 of them, now there are 336. The next states are Spain (264), Germany (244), and France (221). The number of Local Action Groups is primarily connected with the number of the rural population and the area of the country. In Croatia (an EU member since July 2013), 42 LAGs have been set up, even though there was no support programme for rural areas for the years 2007–2013. This creation of LAGs in advance allowed Croatia to participate immediately in the next editions of the LEADER programme. At the close of 2013 the LEADER programme showed the highest amount of granted but unused EU means intended for rural areas. The use of means from this programme is high in Ireland, the Netherlands, Estonia and the Czech Republic. What affect this level are the criteria that the beneficiary has to meet in order to obtain subsidies for investments.

The LEADER programme in Poland

One of the ways of solving problems of rural areas in Poland is the participation of local communities in their development. This was made possible under the multi-stage LEADER programme, introduced as a pilot one in the years 2004–2006 and continued in full since 2007 under Axis 4 of the 2007–2013 RDP. Its chief goal is financial support for innovative measures intended for rural development by the decentralisation of the management of local resources, a fight with unemployment, and the activation of inhabitants, which results in the cooperation of the three

sectors: public, private and social. Programme beneficiaries are local action groups, usually set up by a few or more neighbouring communes.

Territorial partnerships are often treated in the literature as a tool designed for the social development and greater involvement of a local community in the management of local resources, which is supposed to increase its efficiency (Wasielewski 2009; Furmankiewicz, Królikowska 2010).

Wierzbicki (1973) calls the treatment of local development focused especially on social issues “activation of the local community”.

In the years 2007–2013 Local Action Groups were present in 96% of rural communes in Poland (Ściański, Żak 2009), which, according to Furmankiewicz and Janc (2012), makes it impossible to compare indicators of communes participating and not participating in the LEADER programme in that period.

It is generally believed that the social activity of the Polish countryside is low, which is a result of the difficult material situation of its inhabitants (Kłodziński 2006). All initiatives stimulating the activity of the rural population lead to common actions, trust and solidarity, which allows building social capital, one of the factors of local development.

In Poland, under Axis 4 of the 2007–2013 RDP the LEADER programme had three goals: (1) the implementation of a local development strategy (LDS), (2) the implementation of cooperation projects, and (3) the operation of LAGs, acquisition of skills and their activation. Under the LDS, a local action group chooses operations to implement within the means assigned for this strategy. This concerns the following measures: “Diversification of non-agricultural activity”, “Setting up and development of micro-enterprises”, “Rural renewal and development”, and “Small projects”. The most popular measure was the LDS. Under it, 27,000 projects were implemented in 336 LAGs to the amount of 3 billion zlotys. The sum granted is not too high, considering its country-wide range and the number of projects. 66% of the means were granted for “Rural renewal” projects, and the largest number of projects were implemented under the “Small projects” measure.

Out of all the EU countries, Poland has the greatest number of LAGs – 336; they occupy ca. 95% of the country’s area inhabited by almost

a half of its population. The greatest number of Local Action Groups is in Małopolska – 39, while their greatest density can be found in the south, the centre and Lublin Voivodeship, which is connected with a high population density in those regions.

The operation of local action groups is not limited only to the LEADER programme. Thanks to the means obtained from the RDP under Axis 4, the created associations are also subsidised from outside. As follows from the research conducted by the Urban Development Institute in Cracow, LAGs obtained 609 grants outside the LEADER programme. More than half of the LAGs in Poland – 175 implemented at least one project financed from external means, e.g. the EU Cohesion Policy, or obtained from such states as Norway, Switzerland or the USA. The LAGs that got most external money were those in Lower Silesia, Kujavia-Pomerania, Małopolska and Świętokrzyska Land.

Projects implemented under Axis 4 of the 2007–2013 Rural Development Programme in Wielkopolskie Voivodeship

There are 36 LAGs in Wielkopolska, including 31 with seats in this voivodeship and 5 LAGs with seats outside it. Most LAGs in Wielkopolska have taken the form of associations (34), the other two partnerships are foundations; both forms have a legal personality. The LAGs are directly controlled by the voivodeship's marshal, which is a result of the co-funding of projects from the EU means.

Local Action Groups embrace 28,300 km², or 95.1% of the region's area, while their names are closely connected with the area where they appear and may come, e.g. from the name of the river flowing through a LAG's territory ("Wielna Valley Association") or the names of communes included in it (KOLD – the initial letters of the founding communes).

As it may be observed in Fig. 3 most LAGs (29 entities) have their headquarters in Wielkopolskie Voivodeship and operate only within its borders. Due to that fact they obtained subventions only from one coordinator, in this case Wielkopolska Marshal's Office, which seems to be an easier and more pragmatic way of running LEADER projects. However, there are also LAGs of an

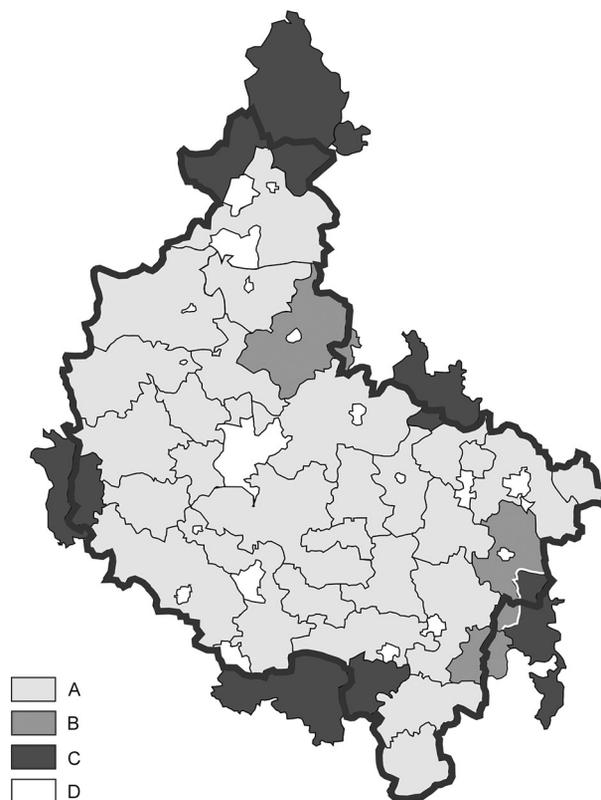


Fig. 3. Distribution of LAGs in Wielkopolskie Voivodeship.

Legend: I – LAGs operating in voivodeship; B – LAGs of inter-voivodeship range headquartered in Wielkopolska; C – LAGs of inter-voivodeship range headquartered outside Wielkopolska; D – areas with no LAGs.

Source: own compilation on the basis of the website <http://www.minrol.gov.pl/pol/Media/Files/mapa-LAGs-PL>; numbering on the basis of data from the Marshal's Office of Wielkopolskie Voivodeship.

inter-voivodeship range, two with their headquarters in Wielkopolska and five with headquarters outside. This proves there to be strong ties among the local community, which decides to cooperate in the implementation of the most important projects despite living in different voivodeships.

Carried out under the LEADER programme was the measure "Implementation of cooperation projects" (ICP), offering the possibility of an exchange of experiences and good practices among communities of various regions in a state and among EU countries. Especially valuable was international cooperation with regions of states where various forms of the programme have been present since 1991. The construction of a network of links also makes it possible to introduce novel solutions in other LAGs. The results of this type of cooperation have been numerous

common initiatives and travels, e.g. to fairs of regional products.

Wielkopolska occupied fourth place in Poland in terms of the number of applications for cooperation projects submitted by LAGs. By the end of 2012, 31 applications had been submitted for a total of 1.93 million zlotys, and 25 agreements had been contracted to the amount of 1.71 million zlotys. This gave the region second place in Poland in terms of the number of agreements contracted, and third in terms of the means obtained for the implementation of cooperation projects. In the next years the sum invested in ICPs grew to 4.3 million, with contracts signed for 64 projects (data as of December 2015).

Most LAGs tended to choose ICP partners in a 'neighbourly' fashion. What decided it were often their location and common goals, e.g. the creation of a canoe route. "Implementation of cooperation projects" in Wielkopolska is carried out in a network of two or three local action groups. Decidedly more numerous were teams of LAGs that carried out cooperation projects with partners from other voivodeships or states.

Especially active in the Wielkopolska ICP are Światowid and KOLD LAGs, which run cooperation projects of varying range with many partners.

An example of a large project of inter-regional and international significance was one implemented by the Światowid LAG called "European Routes of St. Jacob", accessed by six groups from Poland as well as LAGs from Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary. The chief goal of this project is bringing up to date of St. Jacob's routes in the countries where it runs (i.e. routes starting in Eastern Europe and leading to France) and the preparation of various linguistic versions of the documentation promoting it, activation of people living along the route, and the development of infrastructure for pilgrims irrespective of their nationality and language.

The next examples of projects of international significance were two initiatives implemented by the KOLD LAG: (1) "Use of the potential in rural tourism in the Fläming-Havel area (Germany)", intended to present local products (Germany - pottery, Poland - wickerwork) and publish a map of tourist farm routes, and (2) "Development of rural tourism using local customs in Estonia-North Harju, Lithuania-Suduva, Poland-KOLD,

and Slovakia-Spis". This cooperation project was designed to promote local products, create routes with fairytale elements, and publish route maps by all the partners.

The next measure was "Implementation of Local Development Strategies" with competitions for operations in "Diversification of non-agricultural activity", "Setting up and development of micro-enterprises", "Rural renewal and development", and "Small projects". By December 2015, 3,915 investments had been implemented in the area of operation of LAGs in Wielkopolska under the LEADER programme to the amount of 205.3 million zlotys (Fig. 4).

Under "Diversification of non-agricultural activity", 693 applications were submitted in Wielkopolska, of which 212 were accepted, a mere 31% of applications for the funding of projects. The amount applied for was 51.8 million zlotys, but only 15 million, or 29%, were granted. The financial means acquired by beneficiaries were much below the average amount applied

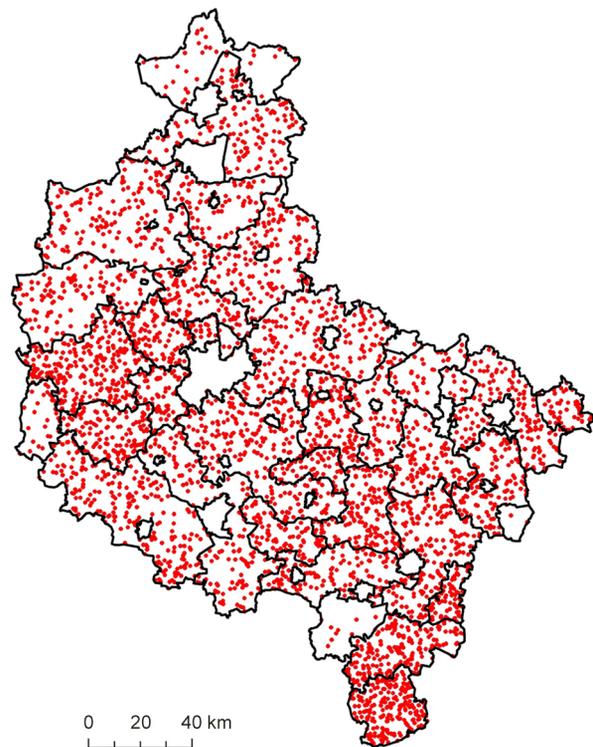


Fig. 4. Number of projects implemented by Wielkopolska LAGs under the measure "Implementation of Local Development Strategies". Source: own compilation on the basis of data from the Wielkopolska Marshal's Office and the Agency for the Development and Modernisation of Agriculture (as of December 2015).

for. The greatest number of applications (54) and the highest sum obtained for this operation (4.8 million) were recorded in the largest LAG, Światowid.

Examples of projects under this measure are the establishment of a firm performing services in the field of renting rooms together with the organisation of active forms of leisure in a tourist area (a beneficiary from the Between People and Lakes LAG); improving the competitiveness of an enterprise and the diversification of services offered to include innovative ones (a beneficiary from the Green Wielkopolska Leaders LAG); or a project ensuring an increase in the number of customers and income of a service shop by enhancing its competitiveness (a beneficiary from the Węlna Valley LAG).

The above examples demonstrate that beneficiaries looked for additional sources of funding in tourism and agritourism. Their projects confirm that rural tourism, including agritourism, is a significant element of the multi-functional and sustainable development of rural areas (Bański 2003; Kłodziński 1998, 1999; Kołodziejczyk 2004; Pałka 2004; Rudnicki, Biczkowski 2015)

For the next operation, "Setting up and development of micro-enterprises", a total of 841 applications were submitted in all Wielkopolska LAGs, of which a mere 182 were accepted (21.6%). The sum applied for was 91.1 million zlotys, of which 16.5 million zlotys, or 18.1%, were granted. Here the success of entities applying for assistance was the poorest in the LEADER programme. The greatest number of applications came from the Green Wielkopolska Leaders LAG, 71, but only eight were approved for implementation.

Examples of projects launched under this measure include: opening a biological renewal institute and creating new jobs in the Source LAG; enhancing the competitiveness of an enterprise and increasing its employment by expanding its offer; bringing new services to the local market in the Southern Wielkopolska Window LAG; or launching economic activity and creating jobs in the Eastern Wielkopolska LAG.

The next operation, "Rural renewal and development", allows identifying and solving problems in rural areas. Where it is implemented it acts as a 'flywheel' for their development and makes possible projects intended to improve living conditions in the countryside. The most

popular initiatives involve the construction and restoration of common rooms, community centres and historical objects important for the local community. In Wielkopolska, 994 projects were submitted under this operation, financial assistance being received for 830 projects, or 84%. The applications were for 171.5 million zlotys, and the funds obtained were 127.1 million, or 74%. In addition, eight projects received 1.3 million zlotys. Most applications came from the KOLD LAG - 71, of which 68 projects were granted financial help.

The fundamental task of a LAG is to enhance social capital and animate a local community for greater involvement in the development of an area. Here the most successful was the "Small projects" measure, one most popular in the 2007-2013 DRP Perspective. Already at the stage of working out local development strategies, local action groups took care to include the protection of the cultural and culinary heritage, the promotion of local products, agritourism and rural tourism, environmental protection and ecology, the development of entrepreneurship, and an improvement of rural infrastructure. Those issues are present in a large proportion of projects submitted under this measure.

The "Small projects" measure was analysed for 31 LAGs with seats in Wielkopolska. The number of applications submitted here was 4,696, with 2,691 or 57.3%, accepted for funding. The sum applied for by entities from Wielkopolska LAGs was 90.6 million zlotys, of which they obtained 46.8 million, or 51.7%. In addition, nine projects were granted financial means. Most accepted projects were in the Green Wielkopolska Leaders LAG (165), to the amount of 3 million zlotys.

An assessment was made of spatial differences in the activity of local entities under the LEADER programme in LAG areas. LAGs were divided into classes regarding the amounts of subsidies received by local entities of particular LAGs situated in Wielkopolskie Voivodeship (Fig. 5).

The spatial distribution of particular activity levels of local entities in receiving funds for projects was affected by the earlier cooperation between communes in social, public and economic sectors, which allowed appointing optimal LAG partnerships. The local community which cooperated well and was able to employ successfully local resources received the highest funds for the

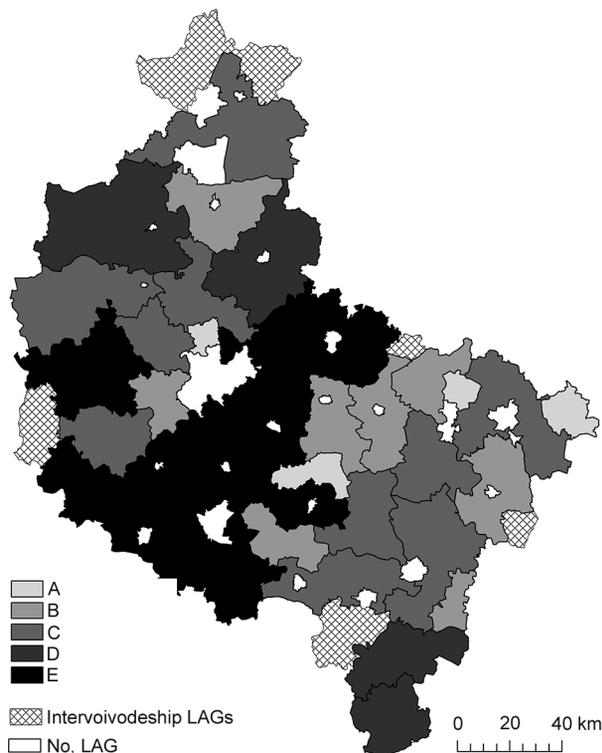


Fig. 5. Division of LAGs in terms of the amount of subsidies received by local entities under the LEADER programme in LAG areas in Wielkopolskie Voivodeship.

Legend: A - very low, B - low, C - medium, D - high, E - very high.

Source: own compilation on the basis of data from the Wielkopolska Marshal's Office and GUS (Central Statistical Office).

projects planned under the Local Development Strategies.

Based on the amounts of financial means received for the projects implemented under the LEADER programme, five classes were selected. Class A included LAGs where local entities received funds up to 2.5 million zlotys, class B included LAGs where local entities received funds up to 5 million zlotys, class C included LAGs where local entities received funds up to 7.5 million zlotys, class D included LAGs where local entities received funds up to 10 million zlotys, and class E included LAGs where local entities received funds up to 15 million zlotys.

Class A included four LAGs: Dwa Mosty (Two Bridges), Solna Dolina (Saline Valley), Suchy Las, Zaścianek, with a small number of membership communes and a small operating area which resulted in the smallest subsidies. Class E received the greatest amount of funds and it consisted of the following LAGs: Gościnną

Wielkopolska (Hospitable Wielkopolska), Lider Zielonej Wielkopolski (Green Wielkopolska Leader), KOLD, Kraina Lasów i Jezior (Forest and Lake Land), and Światowid with a large amount of membership communes, large areas in which they operated and with considerable experience in the LEADER+ Pilot Programme, which made it possible to use effectively local resources. Additionally, these LAGs were touristically attractive which was manifested by numerous projects related to the development of the tourist infrastructure.

Summing up

The LEADER programme made it possible to activate local communities by giving them financial help for selected investments. Projects implemented by its beneficiaries changed rural space and its development, and took care of the cultural heritage, e.g. by the organisation of open-air events.

Under the measure "Implementation of cooperation projects", LAGs carried out common ventures at the three levels: (1) within a single voivodeship, (2) within a single country (inter-regional), and (3) inter-state ones. This type of projects helped a local community to open to the outside with its achievements or problems. The cooperation of LAGs under this measure allowed them to present their tourist attractiveness, cultural heritage, and regional products, and to exchange experiences from the area of their operation. The implementation of a local development strategy under "Diversification of non-agricultural activity", "Setting up and development of micro-enterprises", "Rural renewal" and "Small projects" improved the living conditions of rural inhabitants through projects resulting, e.g. in new jobs outside agriculture, new micro-enterprises, the construction and modernisation of schools, sports fields, a tourist base, and many 'soft' projects: all kinds of festivities, harvest festivals, fairs, and training courses.

In the subsequent period of financing the 2014-2020 Programme for Development of Rural Areas, Wielkopolskie rural areas received larger funds under the LEADER programme - over 320 million zlotys. Received funds are going to contribute to further development of the region

through the implementation of tasks within the Strategy of Community-Led Local Development (SCLLD). Local entities of Wielkopolskie Voivodeship similarly to the previous 2007–2013 PDRA period, are one of the most active in obtaining financial aid from the LEADER programme in the 2014–2020 PDRA period, which results from the strong cultural identity and long-term tradition in the activity for their “small homelands” by the local community represented by local leaders and nongovernmental organisations.

The projects put into practice concerned all fields of life in rural areas. The success of the tasks completed should be sought in bottom-up actions of people who used the obtained subsidies in an effective and purposeful way. However, the assessment of the LEADER programme should not only be focused on the effectiveness of fund spending, but also on something less tangible but truly essential, that is, creating the identity of a local community, the quality of participation processes and the improvement to social capital. New methods to measure these features should be prepared and applied in future research.

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