

# LEADER as a mechanism of neo-endogenous development of rural areas: the case of Poland

## Abstract

The main aim of this paper is a quantitative and structural comprehensive evaluation of LEADER projects presented in the context of local resources, which determine development opportunities. The issue has been discussed mainly from a geographical and spatial perspective. The impact of the LEADER approach on increasing the mobilisation of local communities and their use of rural resources was evaluated; as a result, this has enabled a bottom-up simulation of the development of local government units. The LEADER approach has substantially contributed to the mobilisation of local resources in rural areas (e.g. growth in the number Local Action Groups (LAGs) from 149 to 338). It was found that the involvement of LAGs had a positive impact on the activity of inhabitants (i.e. an increase in the number of initiatives undertaken, the absorption of European Union (EU) funds). The nature of the implemented projects demonstrates that LEADER combines investment actions with social projects. In general, it has been implemented more successfully in areas where investments are related to genuine needs and local resources.

## Keywords

LEADER programme • neo-endogenous development • rural areas • Local Action Group (LAG) • EU funds

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## Introduction

The LEADER mechanism is an important element of development policy, and it is commonly accepted as an innovative method of stimulation (Berriet-Sollicet et al. 2018) and development of rural areas in the European Union (EU) (Falkowski 2013). It emphasises the neo-endogenous approach, where local development is based on the potentially high level of bottom-up activities, whereby the implementation of ventures that aim to increase the standard of life in villages is determined by local communities (Ray 1997; Kovach 2000; Shucksmith 2000, 2010; High & Nemes 2007; Dargan & Shucksmith 2008; Juska et al. 2008; Convery et al. 2010; Gkartzios & Scott 2014). On the one hand, it is a method that activates and boosts the growth potential of rural areas. On the other hand, it is an accelerating factor for the mobilisation of the rural population and their involvement in the process of integrated management of local development. Policies implemented by local self-governments should stem from development opportunities and the existing endogenous potential of a particular territorial unit (Dax et al. 2013). Thus, the optimal use of resources and successive strengthening of endogenous developmental factors should lead to permanent (sustainable) development. That process can be supported by applying for European funds and, subsequently, using them in a rational way – this is a practical application of the LEADER approach. Communes intending to benefit from structural funds have certain features that affect their fund acquisition efficiency. These include the endogenous potential of individual communes, their surroundings and the conditions for the acquisition of EU funds, as well as soft factors, namely human and social capital.

The research was carried out to provide an answer to the following questions: what does the spatial distribution of the absorption of LEADER funds (measured by the amount) and the activities of local communities (measured by the number of implemented applications) look like? What are the most popular preferences in the activities undertaken and what are the main types of initiatives concerned (structure of implemented projects)? Is LEADER, and to what extent, the actual mechanism of local community activation (encouraging association in groups such as LAGs)?

There are many different interpretative views regarding the LEADER approach. In recent years, many papers have been written that take the sociological (social) or political perspective into account. However, the geographical and spatial context has been poorly accentuated. The lack of a holistic (nationwide) view, covering all of the LEADER projects carried out that preserve local spatial arrangements, indicates the existence of a research gap. The main aim of this paper was, therefore, a quantitative and structural comprehensive evaluation of LEADER projects presented in the context of preferred development directions. These result from local resources (potential) that determine the development opportunities (preferred directions) of individual local government units. The identification of the research gap created the opportunity to design and conduct empirical research and to map the spatial distribution of all completed projects. Thus, this paper is not intended to re-evaluate LEADER as a political or sociological approach, but to evaluate its impact on the increase in the mobilisation of the local community in terms of

the use of rural resources, which in effect enables the bottom-up stimulation of the development of local government units. The empirical operationalisation and analysis of the spatial diversity of LEADER funds was carried out from a geographical and spatial perspective using a solid set of indicators and a coherent method for mapping the current state of absorption of LEADER funds in Poland.

The structure of the paper includes theoretical issues related to the LEADER approach, and special attention was paid to key aspects of the implementation and success of enterprises, as well as the improvement of local development management in contributing to more efficient use of resources and in reducing local and regional disparities. In the next stage, both the research methods adopted and the materials used are discussed. Then, the results of the research are presented along with a discussion and the most important conclusions.

### **LEADER as an instrument of rural areas development policy – theoretical approach**

Rural development theory has oscillated from top-down, exogenous models to endogenous approaches and now, increasingly, to locally led approaches characterised by mixed endogenous–exogenous dynamics (van der Ploeg & van Dijk 1995; Terluin 2003; Shucksmith 2010; Bosworth et al. 2015). Also, researchers' attention in Poland is mainly focused on the role of endogenous factors in determining development opportunities (Gorzela 2004; Churski 2008; Hadyński & Borucka 2015). Straying from the perception of external factors as essential in rural development has changed the perception of the village itself. Ward et al. (2005) consider the inclusion of local resources in the development processes of units on a local scale (development driven by bottom-up projects) as a key principle, which clearly postulates (neo) endogenous development. This approach is a modified version of the endogenous approach, assuming that local development should be based on internal factors specific to a given area, as well as on the potential and resources available within the local rural community (Chigbu 2012), which shape the immediate environment (Michalewska-Pawlak 2013). This potential should be used in accordance with local needs, including through external instruments (Biczkowski 2016). One of the most important of these are EU funds, and a strong impulse to activate and more fully utilise the resources held (Klekotko 2005; Biczkowski 2013).

In general, each territorial unit has specific development factors (conditions). Hence, durable and sustainable development of a village should be based primarily on its local resources (Parysek 2001; Stanny 2013). Kuciński (1994) writes about a resource base that includes natural, cultural and human resources. Parysek (2001) extends this list to fixed assets, financial resources and spatial development. In turn, Klasik (ed. 2003) defines resources as physical capital, human capital, social capital and knowledge capital. The variety of classifications cited in publications means that a more useful division should be used for research (Bowden 2002). Thus, local rural resources can be considered to be natural resources (elements of the geographical environment), resource/material capital (e.g. architectural tissue, settlement system) and immaterial (e.g. cultivating traditional customs, folklore), cultural resources (e.g. anthropogenic elements of the geographical environment, fixed assets), human resources (e.g. population living in the area, inclusion of local communities in rural development) and social capital.

Due to dynamic changes in rural space, as well as the result of investing and recapitalising investments with European Union funds, it is difficult to talk about a type of development other than neo-endogenous, which was proposed by Ray (2001), as a result of the belief that rural areas can – using their potential – shape their future themselves. The concept of neo-endogenous development

juxtaposes the potential of rural areas themselves (using all possible resources) with a range of external support instruments to effectively use resources and multiply their potential (Biczkowski 2016). A similar approach is shown by Bosworth and Atterton (2012), who add that the essence is the relationship between various forms of potential, namely cultural, social, educational and economic. Development based on local resources can be animated from three potential directions: by local actors; by national governments and/or European programmes (top-down); and through an intermediate level, in particular by NGOs (Ray 2001).

One of key elements of endogenous rural development is the orientation towards the capacities, skills, cooperation and perspectives of local people, which is expressed through their engagement in proposing and implementing development activities (Ray 2000, 2006). Through such involvement, people acquire cultural, environmental and community values. That is why the endogenous model of rural development is characterised as being built on these capitals (especially social capital) and helps significantly in including various groups of the population in development activities. This is also the nature of the LEADER approach.

The LEADER programme was created in response to the growing demand for sustainable rural development based on endogenous resources and the activation of local communities. It favours better utilisation of the potential of rural areas, the improvement of their competitiveness and the development of economic activity, as well as the cooperation of residents (Filipek 2016). It is, therefore, a good example of combining both (exo- and endogenous) approaches in rural development in EU countries. This approach means that decisions on what should be co-financed, and how this can be implemented, are made at the local level on the condition that the local community is organised into a local partnership, or Local Action Group (Furmankiewicz & Janc 2011). Thus, social capital is strengthened by inspiring residents to cooperate and participate in society using endogenous resources (Dargan & Shucksmith 2008; Czudec et al. 2018) in the development of local territorial units. As institutions of the third sector, LAGs play an important role in managing rural development (e.g. Knieć 2012; Brodziński & Brodzińska 2014). Thanks to them, local communities are involved in the creation of Local Development Strategies (LDS) and in the implementation of projects necessary for meeting assumed objectives (Zajda & Kretek-Kamińska 2014), bringing together human, natural, cultural, historical, and any other resources (Ray 2000; Kovach 2000; Moseley 2003; Farrell & Thiron 2005). Key aspects of the implementation and success of ventures within the LEADER approach apply the role of social resources (Keamey et al. 1994; Ray 1996; Shucksmith 2000; Nardone et al. 2010), while other pivots are related to the institutional environment (Jessop 2000, 2008; Gualini 2004; Pemberton & Goodwin 2010). What is, therefore, crucial for the creation of the development policy for rural areas is the balance between self-governments and other partners (Woods 2003, 2008; Reed 2008; Gorlach et al. 2008).

Neo-endogenous development is highly dependent on the potential of local knowledge (Bicker et al. 2004). The optimal use of local resources and external opportunities (Rural Development Programme (RDP) funds) in the process of local development is facilitated by the synergy of all types of knowledge (Adamski 2008), including expert/academic knowledge, managerial knowledge and local/informal knowledge (Klekotko 2008). Social capital is one of the resources of rural areas (Bukraba-Rylska 2011; Goszczyński 2008; ed. Thlon 2015; Zajda 2011); however, it is less significant than in cities (Kłodziński 2003; Antoci et al. 2009; Wojewódzka-Wiewiórska 2011). Therefore, the primary goal of the LEADER approach relies on undertaking activities that contribute to the building of social capital in rural areas through the mobilisation of village inhabitants (creation of LAGs), as well as the creation and

strengthening of bonds between members of local communities. This capital is also important for building partnerships, which is confirmed by research conducted in Western Europe (McArdle 2012; McLachlan & Arden 2009; Osborne et al. 2004, 2006). In addition, the role of participation in rural development (Oakley 1991; Mayer 1997; Huttner 2013) and development in general is emphasised (White 2011). Decision-making in the hands of the people provides a better coordination mechanism in the harmonisation of interests and the implementation of joint projects (Ray 2000; Shucksmith 2000). For this reason, it is expected that the LEADER approach brings about the improved management of local development, which contributes to the more effective use of local resources and reduced regional and social inequalities (Nemes & Fazekas 2007; Polleermann et al. 2008).

In the LEADER initiative, emphasis was put on the creation of development policy for rural areas based on endogenous resources (Barke & Newton 1997). This enables the rational use of the local potential, which is at the disposal of a particular spatial (self-government) unit.

This contributes to the stronger mobilisation of human resources at the local level, which, as a result, leads to the increased involvement of the rural population (Thompson & Ward 2005). It is the influx of additional funds that stimulates local development, which was made possible as a result of Poland's accession to the European Union. These funds help activate the endogenous potential and the use of local resources (neo-endogenous development), which is to be understood as the use of all resources available, including natural resources, cultural resources, inhabitants' entrepreneurship, and social and organisational capital (Ocena... 2012a). Obtaining funds from the LEADER programme, therefore, was an important element in assessing the operation of LAGs and a determinant of growth dynamics.

**Materials and research methods**

The assumptions chosen for this paper make the research comprehensive. This is due to the fact that: (a) the analysis involves all the implemented projects within the measure 'Implementing Local Development Strategies'; (b) the study was conducted at the local level – the data were aggregated (as at 30 December 2018) for both the administrative units (communes) and the areas covered by LAGs; (c) for all LAGs a set of indicators was prepared, which was the basis of the assessment of inhabitants' activity and the absorption level of funds from the LEADER programme. For these purposes, the author took advantage of data (as at 30 December 2018) from the Agency for Restructuring and Modernization of Agriculture (ARMA) in Warsaw both on the number of implemented ventures and on the number and structure (by implemented measures) of funds delivered from axis 4 RDP 2007–2013 (LEADER). In addition, data from the Local Data Bank (LDB), published by the Central Statistical Office (GUS) in Warsaw, were used to calculate the indicators (e.g. number of foundations, associations and organisations, number of natural persons conducting economic activity, area unit and number of villages). The research procedure included the following stages: (1) collecting and aggregating materials on the LEADER projects (assigning projects to a specific territorial unit – a total of 41,545 projects); (2) collecting data from the BDL database; (3) preparing a set of indicators (discussed below) based on BDL and ARMA data, which formed the basis for assessing the activity of residents and the level of absorption of funds from the LEADER approach (a synthetic indicator has been developed); (4) developing cartograms; (5) analysing and interpreting the material.

In order to present the dependencies between the level of funds absorbed and the local community activity, relative indicator

values were used. For this purpose, the following indicators were created:

- (1) number of implemented projects (activity) converted to: 1,000 – foundations, associations and non-governmental organisations (NGO; social activity; X1); 1,000 – number of natural persons conducting economic activity (economic activity; X2); 1 km<sup>2</sup> (for area unit; X3); 1 – villages (place of investment; X4);
- (2) amount of funds obtained (efficiency) converted to: number of foundations, associations and non-governmental organisations (PLN/1 NGO; X5), number of natural persons conducting economic activity (PLN/1 business entity; X6), area unit (PLN/1 km<sup>2</sup>; X7), number of villages (PLN/1 village; X7).

Then, for the purpose of a comprehensive analysis, all of the above indicators were presented in the form of a standardised synthetic indicator (Racine & Raymond 1977), according to the pattern:

$$W_i = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{j=1}^n t_{ij}$$

where:

$$t_{ij} = \frac{x_{ij} - \bar{x}_j}{\delta_j} \qquad \delta_j = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{i=1}^N (x_{ij} - \bar{x}_j)^2}{N}}$$

- t<sub>ij</sub>* – normalised value of the diagnostic feature *j* in the unit *i*,
- x<sub>ij</sub>*, *t<sub>ij</sub>* – the original and standardised value of observation *j* in unit *i*,
- x̄<sub>j</sub>* – arithmetic mean of the characteristic *j*,
- δ<sub>j</sub>* – standard deviation determined from observation *j*,
- W<sub>i</sub>* – mean normalised value,
- N* – number of diagnostic features.

On the basis of the distribution of the index values, all communes were categorised into one of the five groups in terms of the level of absorption of EU funds in the implementation of projects from the LEADER programme: (1) very low (below -0.75δ); (2) low (-0.75δ to -0.25δ); (3) average (-0.25δ to +0.25δ); (4) high (+0.25δ to +0.75δ); and (5) very high (above +0.75δ) (results are shown in the attached cartograms). The conducted study proves the spatial diversification and provides an evaluation of inhabitants' activity (measured by the number of implemented applications) and the absorption level of funds from the LEADER programme (measured by the amount and structure of funding obtained).

**Research results and discussion**

In Poland, where the building of civil society is progressing with great resistance (Podemski 2014; Korolczuk 2017), all initiatives that support activation are very important. One of them is the LEADER programme and the creation of LAGs, through which it is implemented. One of the questions raised at the beginning of this paper refers to the attempt to assess how LEADER is an initiative that encourages people to act and associate in groups such as LAGs. It is the local community of inhabitants that is/ should be the causal factor; not only the subject of changes and development but also their activator (Biczkowski & Rudnicki 2017). The number of LAGs increased from 149 (at the launch of the LEADER + pilot programme implemented in 2004–2006) to 338 at present (337 are currently in operation; one has ceased to exist – the municipalities have joined other groups). This made it

possible to significantly increase the effectiveness of preparations for the use of LEADER funds in subsequent programming periods (i.e. 2007–2013 and 2014–2020; Furmankiewicz & Królikowska 2010). This indicates very high interest in creating LAG partnerships in Poland, which has the highest number of LAGs in the EU. For example, there are 56 LAGs in Finland, 64 in England and 96 in Hungary, while the highest numbers of LAGs – apart from Poland – are in Spain (264), Germany (244) and France (221). In total, they cover 278,235.7 km<sup>2</sup> (in Poland), which is 93.2% of the area that qualified for support from the RDP 2007–2013 (Hadyński & Borucka 2015), and they include all rural and urban-rural communes in Poland. The confirmation of the success of the LEADER initiative and the creation of LAGs is the fact that, in the current 2014–2020 perspective, they play a key role in the process of constructing assumptions for the Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) tool (Czudec et al. 2018), in the creation of which previous experience from implementing LEADER was used (Veveřis & Puzulis 2019). The rich Polish cultural and culinary heritage should be used in the construction of local tourist products. National LAGs, by establishing cooperation with LAGs from other EU countries – Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Romania, Slovakia and Latvia, among others – have taken important actions to protect the natural environment, biodiversity, development of non-agricultural entrepreneurship, agrotourism, investments in new and green technologies, and the promotion of a village's cultural heritage (Miś 2013). In addition, by implementing training, consulting, conferences and seminars, rural residents and local leaders were mobilised to maximise the use of EU funds. This is confirmed by the research of Kotala and Puchala (2009), which shows that territorial units effectively use local resources, acquire residents as partners for economic development, or develop mechanisms to reconcile the interests of different groups. The role of LAGs is particularly important because of the poorly developed institutional structure and social capital of the Polish countryside. Most LAGs were set up in the Małopolskie, Mazowieckie, Podkarpackie and Wielkopolskie voivodeships, which together made up 40% of all LAGs. High activity in LAG creation is one of the success indicators of the idea of rural development based on the bottom-up initiative. LAGs play an important role and contribute significantly to stimulating local activity and use of rural resources (Gendźwiłł et al. 2019; Guzal-Dec et al. 2019). This is also indicated by the fact that as many as 2,877 third sector organisations participate in partnerships with LAGs (Furmankiewicz et al. 2016). The change in the size of the third sector in rural Poland is particularly pronounced considering the noted 'weakness of civil society' that has characterised the post-socialist environment (Bernhard 1996; Campbell & Coulson 2006). The involvement of third sector organisations in LAGs had a positive impact in terms of residents' engagement in local development strategy building.

A total of 41,545 projects were implemented under the LEADER approach for a total amount of PLN 3.37 billion (Fig. 1). This represented 4.6% of the total RDP funds. However, it should be remembered that projects implemented through LEADER are not expensive compared to typical pro-investment activities and environmental subsidies, for which most funds were allocated.

The share of the LEADER approach in the total number of RDP contracts is even lower and amounts to 0.6%. This situation was affected by pro-environmental measures implemented through axis 2, which constitute almost 96% of all applications implemented under the RDP.

Nevertheless, the role of the LEADER approach is important, especially in activating local rural communities and exploiting the potential of the countryside. Considering the number of villages in Poland (43,000), it follows that, on average, there is almost one project (0.96) per village. In turn, calculated for Local Action

Groups, this indicator is 123 projects/LAG. It is hard to find better proof of LEADER's popularity and importance in the context of influencing the mobilisation of the rural population to take actions and implement projects. Such a high level of activity of beneficiaries proves that LEADER is an important mechanism for the bottom-up development of rural areas. Nevertheless, in terms of spatial diversification, the study showed large differences in the activity level. The most active attitudes from beneficiaries were exhibited by two groups: Wstęga Kociewia LAG (412 projects) and Partnerstwo Dorzecze Słupi LAG (376 projects). There were also areas where beneficiaries implemented fewer than 20 projects: Dwa Mosty LAG, Gminy Nadpiliczne LAG and Brody nad Kamienną LAG.

Due to the construction of the LEADER programme, over 96% of ventures were implemented within the measure 'Implementing Local Development Strategies' (which had approx. 80% of the entire programme budget). The most common and the most available (though less costly), 'small projects' proved particularly attractive. Here, nearly 28,700 ventures (68% of all) were implemented (PLN 721.5 million; 19%; see Fig. 2A, 2B).

The projects concentrated on two areas: infrastructure development (especially communes in eastern Poland and mainly municipalities in southern Poland). Projects were mostly devoted to building small tourist and leisure infrastructure (6,417 projects), renovating and equipping rural clubhouses (4,370) and renovating historical objects (842). The most significant aspect of the LEADER programme refers to the 'soft', unmeasurable issues, and it is here that the highest value is added. This is reflected, in the activation of the rural population and the increase in the self-esteem of the local community, who, owing to their implementation of projects, improve the quality of their lives and boost their confidence in their own strengths, competencies, and self-sufficiency. The bulk of the implemented soft projects was related to the organisation of cultural, sports and leisure time events (5,935), promotion of local cultural creativity (2,195), as well as preservation of local customs, traditions and rites (1,864). Most of the projects were implemented by local self-government units and non-governmental organisations (almost 60%). For this reason, it is the self-government and its subordinate organs that are mostly responsible for creation and controlling initiatives (Furmankiewicz 2013). What presents a problem is the development of methods for stronger networking, which would allow for deeper involvement in the work by all partnership members. As Psyk-Piotrowska (2013) notes, changes in organisational structures would yield more possibilities to participate in decision-making processes and, thus, they would strengthen the 'bottom-up approach'.

A strong public sector in LAGs is not only the domain of Poland. Comparing experiences of territorial governance in post-communist countries like Poland to findings from the 'old' EU countries, it should be kept in mind that the history of partnership activity in new member states is at least two decades shorter (Furmankiewicz 2012). Similar observations exist in other countries, where researchers indicate the dominant role of local political elite and the presidents of semi-public agencies – France (Buller 2000), of municipalities – Denmark (Teilmann & Thuesen 2014) and of municipalities and various types of industry organisations – the Netherlands (Oostindie & van Broekhuizen 2010). However, this is particularly noticeable in most Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs) (e.g. in Hungary; Fekete 2014), and also in some regions in southern European countries, where a weak history of collective action is reported because of their lack of trust in collective action (e.g. Italy, Spain; Dargan & Shucksmith 2008), and, therefore, the collaborative approach encouraged by LEADER does not engage well (Pollermann et al. 2013). It is important to highlight the growing role of the institutional sector here because

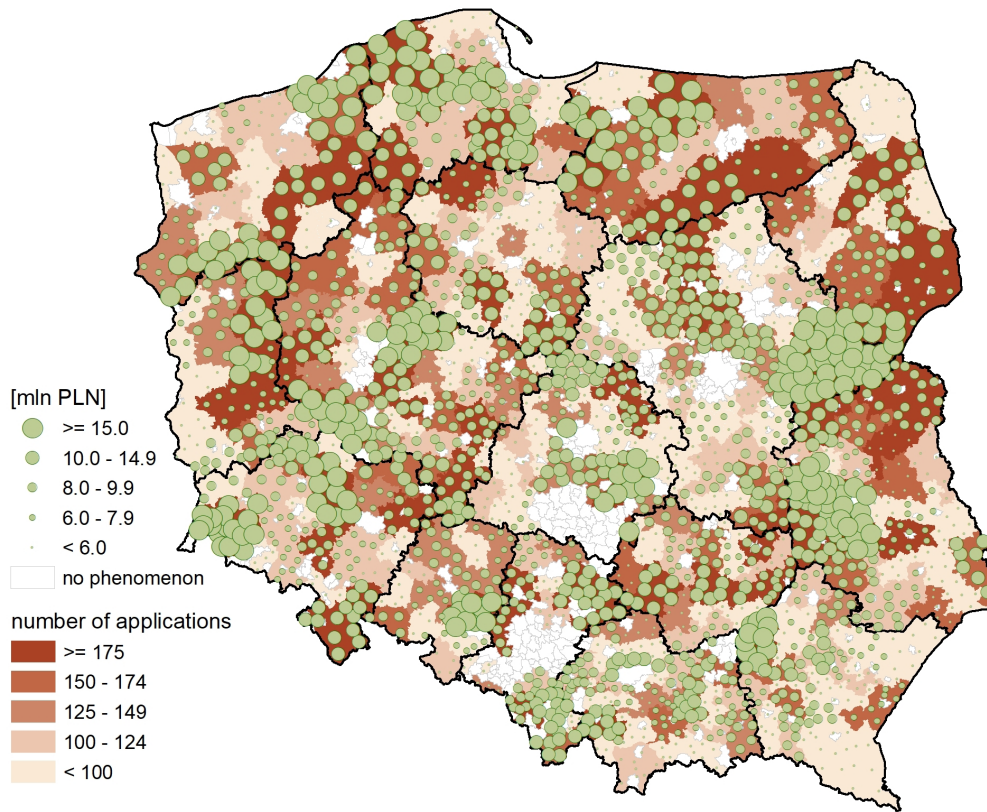


Figure 1. Number of completed projects and amount of payments under the Leader axis  
Source: own study based on the ARMA data

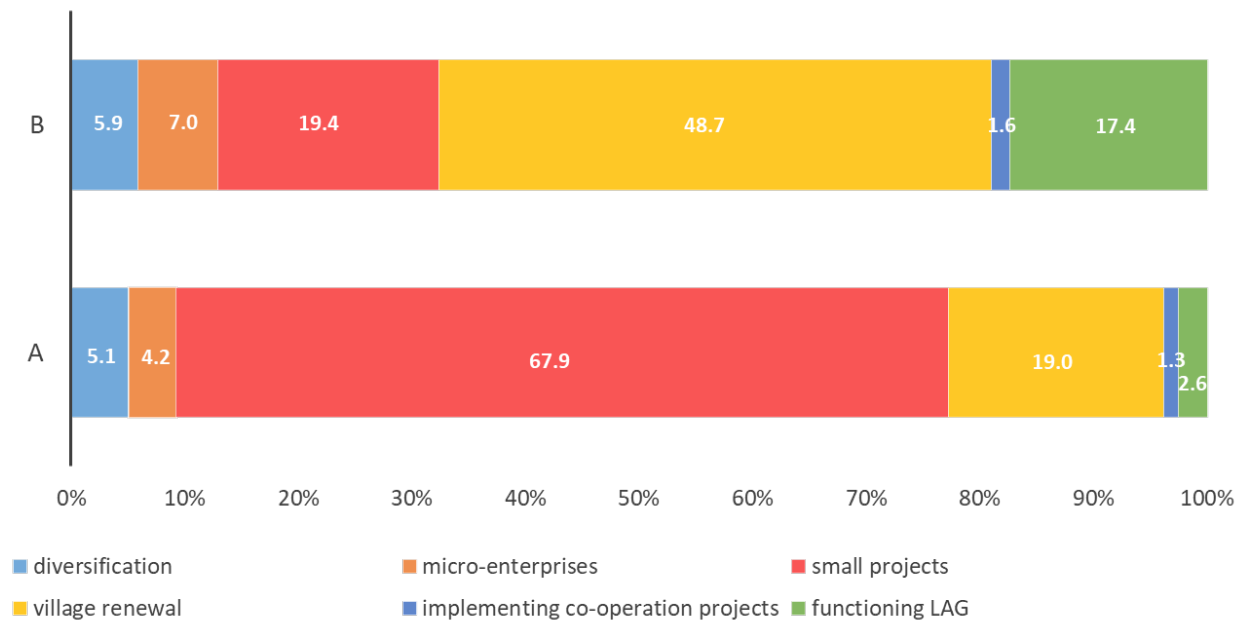


Figure 2. Structure of implemented activities by number of applications (A), payment size (B)  
Source: own study based on the ARMA data

this phenomenon is also observed in Germany, where there is a good tradition of participation, but, currently, in most federal states, there is the additional influence of public actors, due to co-financing rules (Böcher 2008; Pollermann et al. 2013).

Another instrument that enjoyed widespread popularity was related to village renewal (over 8,000 ventures, totalling PLN 1.2 billion). Also, this measure was dominated by infrastructural projects (e.g. the modernisation and renovation of sports and leisure centres, tourist objects, social and cultural venues, and cultural heritage objects). Local self-governments and cultural institutions were the biggest beneficiaries of the financing. Some of the projects were also implemented by non-governmental organisations and ecclesiastical institutions. Although usually not innovative, village renovation projects affect the local environment and, in consequence, they change the rural cultural landscape by making it more orderly and highlighting the natural, cultural and historical assets of the locality. The new infrastructure is used by inhabitants for the implementation of 'soft' projects, as it enables the organisation of a variety of events and festivals, which leads to the integration of local communities and the preservation of local identity.

The other two instruments were directed at multi-functional development of rural areas: diversification into non-agricultural activities (2,000 projects); and creation and development of micro-enterprises (1,700 projects). The majority of projects were carried out in the Wielkopolskie and Mazowieckie voivodeships – these are large regions with a highly diversified economic structure and, hence, the beneficiaries willingly use these aid instruments. Overall, the spatial structure of the implemented projects was substantially connected to the endogenous resources of particular self-government units. For example, development of the tourism industry was most appealing in the areas characterised by high-class natural and cultural assets: forests, lakes, mountains and numerous historical monuments (Pomorskie, Warmińsko-Mazurskie, Małopolskie, and Dolnośląskie). On the other hand, in highly agrarian and forested areas, applicants were keener to develop services for agriculture (Wielkopolskie and Kujawsko-Pomorskie) and forestry (Lubuskie). In consequence, they were creating the environment for agricultural production by supporting it with their services. The above structure (see Fig. 3) proves the existence of a rational approach by both applicants' and LAGs' decision-making bodies to the development of the local environment, as each region has its own specificities. Attempts to solve problems based on the specific nature of regions are also observed in other countries, for example in France (Brittany, Rhone-Alpes, Champagne-Ardenne, Aquitaine), Italy (Veneto, Emilia Romagna) and Germany (Hesse, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, North Rhine-Westphalia) (Berriet-Sollicet et al. 2018). The relationship is visible and shows that a wide spectrum of local resources was used in the implementation of projects – mainly cultural, historical, tourist, natural and human (Barke & Newton 1997; Ray 2000; Moseley 2003; Farrell & Thiron 2005), making rural areas with endogenous potential even stronger. This reflects the essence of the mechanism of neo-endogenous development (activation of local resources through the impact of an external factor).

The juxtaposition of the level of activity undertaken in LAGs with the number of individuals inhabiting a particular LAG area points to an important correlation, namely the larger a LAG (and, thus, the larger budget at its disposal, which is dependent on the size of the population), the more effective it is in the implementation of projects. Also, not to be forgotten is the number of partners. In fact, the more partners in a LAG structure, the more effective the group's activities and the more mobilised the local community (Ocena... 2012a, 2012b).

The synthetic indicator of the level of absorption of funds from the LEADER (research methods) approach showed that

the highest activity (Fig. 4A) and efficiency (Fig. 4B) among beneficiaries was to be found in eastern (Podlaskie and Lubelskie voivodeships) and southern Poland (Małopolskie and Podkarpackie voivodeships). The LEADER, as a mechanism of the bottom-up development of rural areas, left a weaker imprint in western and central Poland (Fig. 5). The dividing line of beneficiaries' activity alludes to the old historical divisions into partitions.

The structure of the implemented projects clearly indicates that investments are conducted in activities that allow the use of the economic potential of individual local government units. For example, in the vicinity of larger urban centres, applicants are willing to implement projects in the field of trade, services (e.g. consultancy, finance and insurance, culture, entertainment), transport, construction or industrial processing. In areas with strongly developed agriculture, there are services for agriculture and forestry, the sale of agricultural raw materials, agri-food processing, or the rental of agricultural machinery. Meanwhile, in areas with high natural values, tourism prevails (e.g. accommodation, gastronomy, agrotourism). This indicates both similarities and differences compared with other EU countries. There are common preferences for the sale of agricultural raw materials and the promotion of food products in Belgium, Bulgaria, Estonia, France, Italy, Sweden, Slovakia and Slovenia; for environment in Austria, Belgium, Germany, Estonia, Italy, Luxembourg and the UK; for education in Finland, Lithuania, Sweden, Slovenia and the UK (ENRD report 'The State-of-play... '2014) and, in Latvia, for entrepreneurship and business activities (Veveris & Puzulis 2019). What is specific to Poland is the large share of projects in the field of broadly understood infrastructural investments and the above-mentioned trade, secondary services, transport and construction.

Despite the shortcomings of the LEADER programme in some respects, it should not be disregarded or explicitly assessed negatively. Overall, in the literature, there are positive assessments regarding features such as better cooperation, participation, networking, innovation, linkage between different types of knowledge, mobilisation of actors and projects that are suitable for local areas (Esparcia Perez 2000; High & Nemes 2007; Böcher 2008; Dargan & Shucksmith 2008; Metis 2010; Bosworth et al. 2013; Pollermann et al. 2014) and, in some cases, the creation of social capital also (Nardone et al. 2010). Thanks to the projects implemented through the programme, the mobilisation of rural resources has been made possible. This mostly concerned decision-making for the integration of rural communities, indexation of the rural space with regard to technical and social infrastructure, landscape, architecture and services. An increase in interest was observed in local matters and commitment to the development of the 'small homeland', taking care of public space, and strengthening the cultural, environmental and tourist potential, which is clearly demonstrated in numerous projects (e.g. Kraina Szlaków Turystycznych LAG, Zielony Pierścień LAG, Zielone Bieszczady LAG, Towarzystwo Rozwoju Wsi Świętokrzyska LAG, Jurajska Kraina LAG, etc.). The outcome is visible in the improved quality of life and higher economic self-sufficiency of the villages, providing better conditions for investment, developed services, new workplaces and sources of income beyond agriculture. An analysis of primary data found the dependence of LAGs on acquiring EU funds to be a constraint in relation to how they identified and achieved their own objectives. Nonetheless, it was found that active involvement in LAGs had a positive impact on the growth level activity of local inhabitants (i.e. an increase in the number of initiatives undertaken and in the absorption of EU funds).

In turn, LEADER opportunities for building social capital in the countryside were not fully taken advantage of. As mentioned

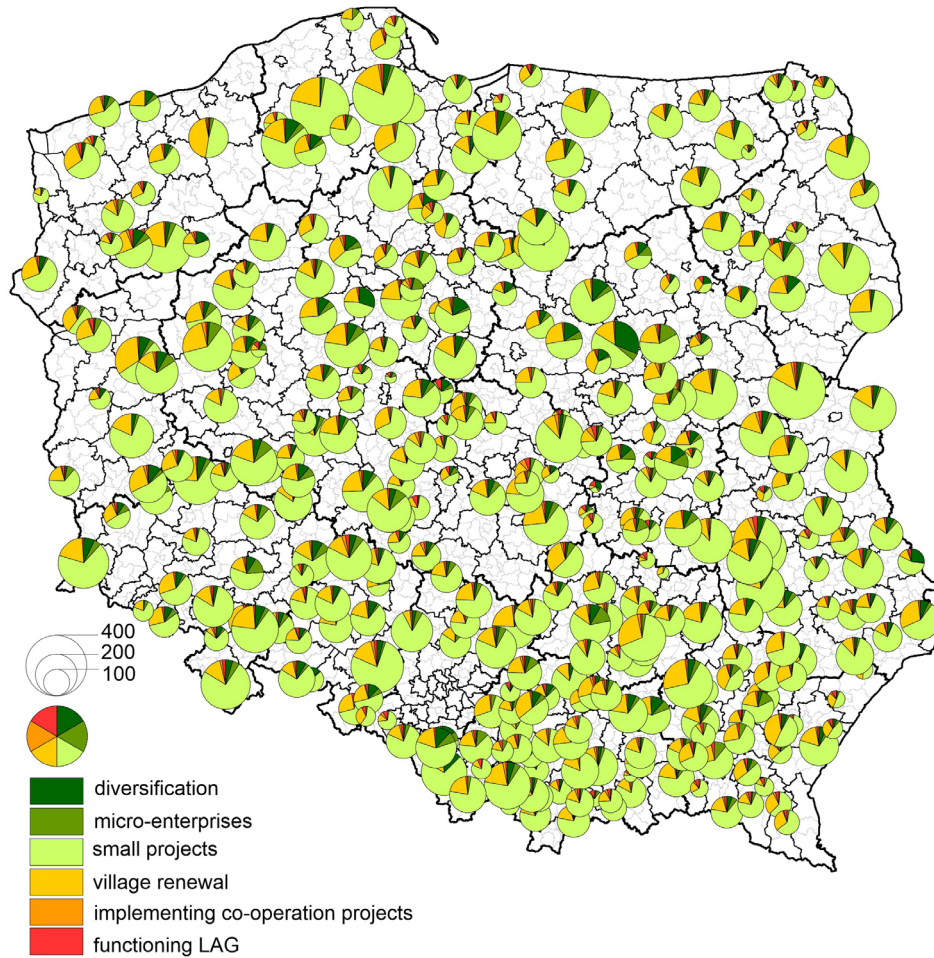


Figure 3. Directions of implemented activities from the Leader axis [Number and directions of implemented activities from the Leader axis]  
 Source: own study based on the ARMA data

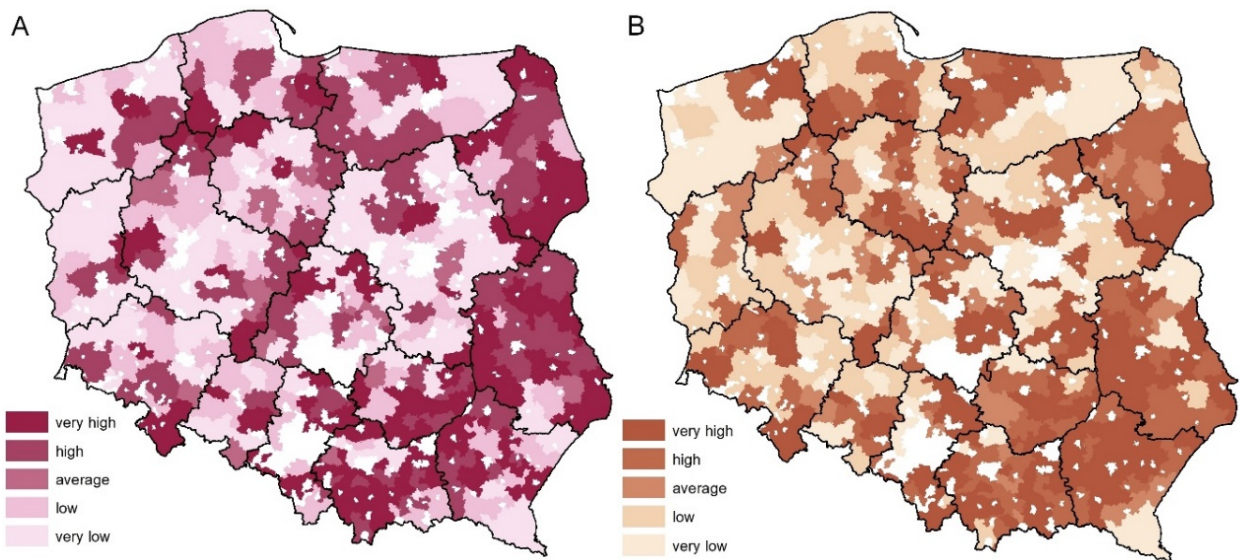


Figure 4. Activity level (A) and efficiency (B) from the Leader axis – synthetic indicator  
 Source: own study based on the ARMA data

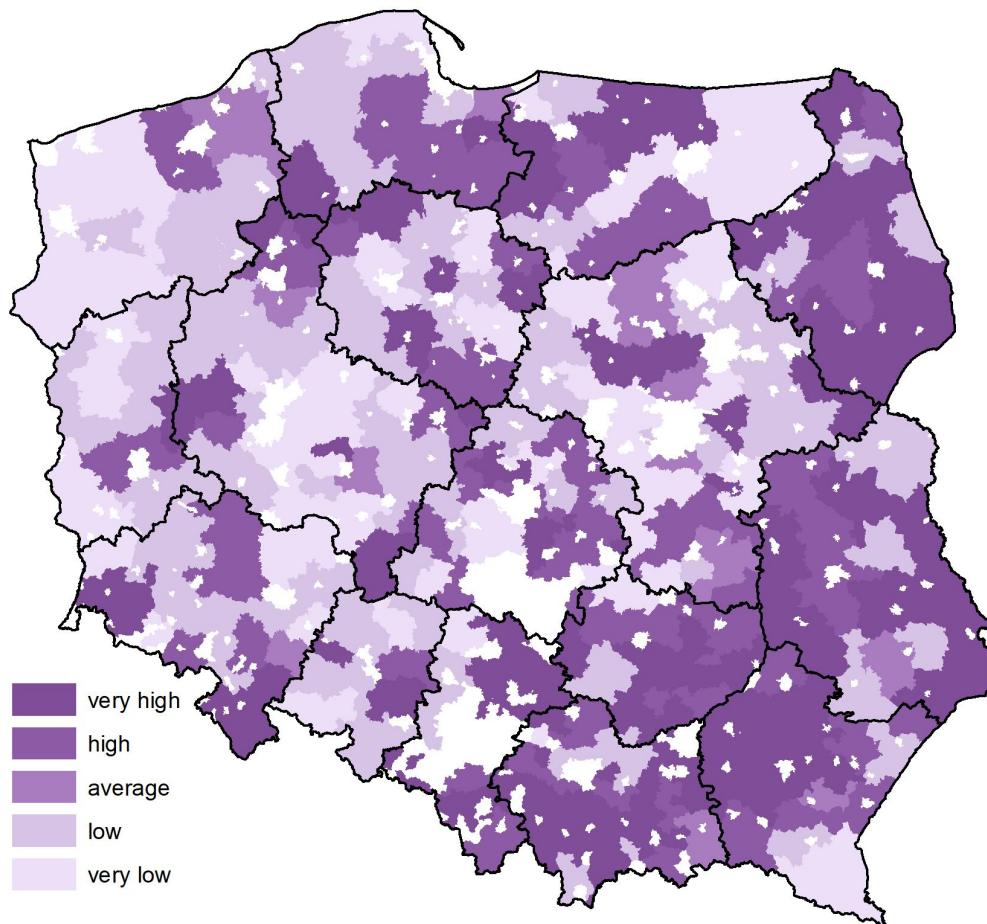


Figure 5. Total synthetic index of the absorption level of funds from the LEADER approach  
Source: own study based on the ARMA data

earlier, however, this is a problem that arises in most countries implementing this approach. When seeking recommendations for strengthening the social sector, attention should be paid to Hungary, where Katona-Kovács et al. (2011) highlight the importance of taking social animation more seriously, and improving decision-making through a clear, strategic approach. In addition, there are educational activities (workshops, training sessions) that build awareness, and increase citizens' involvement in building the local community (awareness of building a 'small homeland'). An interesting observation can be seen in the example of Estonia, where one of the success factors in implementing the LEADER approach was the conditions rooted in tradition that affect high social capital (Wielofunduszowość... 2012).

This paper highlights only a few problems. However, it is crucial to emphasise the need for further research and seek answers to a number of questions. How can citizens be encouraged to get more involved in community activities? How can local resources be better used to develop territorial units and how would a common platform for the activities undertaken look? How can the LEADER approach be better used in local community building? These are problems worth tackling and exploring more deeply in further research.

### Conclusions

Previous experience in Poland shows better results from the LEADER approach in the strengthening of local potential

(mainly public infrastructure, touristic–recreational possibilities, etc.) when the actions refer to endogenous conditions. As a holistic approach, LEADER in Poland has demonstrated that neo-endogenous development is effective when building on local assets and promoting local cooperation. It is evident in the number of LAGs created, which has increased in number from 149 to 337 and currently covers over 90% of rural areas in Poland. The funds' absorption indicators also prove the unquestionable importance of the LEADER approach. Beneficiaries implemented 41,545 projects for a total amount exceeding PLN 3.37 billion. This translated into the implementation of many ventures and to improvements in infrastructure, village appearance, service development, increased involvement of inhabitants in local affairs and an increase in social capital. This contributed to the improvement of the standard of living in the countryside and, thus, influenced the achievement of the objectives of the LEADER approach. The numerous training courses, which were attended by about 210,000 people, facilitated the building of the social potential in villages, thanks to the wider knowledge and higher skills that the rural population received. They also contributed to the increase in awareness and the positive attitude of the inhabitants.

Moreover, structural funds are better implemented in communes where investments are related to genuine needs than in communes where ideas for projects are generated on the basis of contests being announced (according to the principle of 'if they



give, we take'). This translates into a convergence of absorption trends and development objectives of the commune based on endogenous resources. Rational (aligned with the potential) application for EU funds should be the core of developments, determined by properly defined objectives set forth in Local Development Strategies (LDS).

It is much more difficult to measure the quality of implemented projects and LAG activities. The nature of the implemented projects demonstrates that the LEADER approach combines investment projects with 'soft' factors (activating local inhabitants). For example, the construction (renovation, modernisation) of a rural community centre creates space for social initiatives (events, meetings, training sessions, workshops, etc.). The qualitative effect – resulting from the activities of the LAG and the implementation of LDS – certainly increases ties with the local culture and preserves a sense of identity (which is reflected in the types of ventures completed). This is the lasting effect of implementing the LEADER approach. However, despite the evident benefits, it should be underlined that the undertakings completed were mostly stereotypical, not requiring any particular intervention or innovative solutions. On the plus side, however, there was the utilisation of local resources for the development of the area within the impact range of the LDS.

Quite another view is necessary to analyse the programme with regard to the delivery of social objectives. The fundamental idea behind the LEADER approach rests on the organisation of inhabitants in the local community who are able to undertake collective ventures. Yet, in the majority of LAGs, it is quite the other way round. In fact, it is the public sector that dominates

in the LAG structure and handles the creation of initiatives and the implementation of the majority of ventures. Such directions of activity demonstrate the biggest weakness of the LEADER programme in Poland. In the beginning, the endogenous capital was activated through the creation of LAGs. However, when developing a functional framework for LAGs, it was local governments that had the leading role. Their leading position stems from the fact that public administration is best prepared substantively for the implementation of procedures in the creation and operation of partnerships. Changing inhabitants' awareness and including them in collective actions for the benefit of small homelands remain the most important areas for improvement.

The Polish experience of implementing the LEADER approach indicates that the structure of implemented projects is related to the resources of individual regions. The strengthening of local economies (capitals) occurs when the internal (local) potential is utilised and implementing external solutions that do not relate to local conditions has less of an impact. This should be an essential recommendation for other countries, especially CEECs, in successfully implementing the LEADER approach.

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