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Urban Local Action Groups in Poland: Monofunctional Social Activities Within Community Led Local Development

Abstract

The article presents the basic characteristics of Urban Local Action Groups (ULAGs) in Poland. ULAGs are associations of citizens and legal entities representing different interest groups: the social sector (organisations and residents), the economic sector (local entrepreneurs) and the public sector (state and local government institutions), each operating in accordance with the assumptions of the Community-Led Local Development approach financed by the European Union (EU) and covering the entire area of a single city or several urban units. The ULAGs establish a bottom-up development strategy for a given area and obtain the funds required for its implementation by organising local grant competitions, in which the decision-making council (project selection committee) composed of local stakeholder representatives selects projects offered by local entities for funding. Only 7 ULAGs have been established in Poland at the beginning of the 2014-2020 EU Programming Period. The research described herein made use of the method of content analysis for the purpose of studying Local Development Strategies (LDS) prepared by ULAGs for the years 2015-2022. All investigated ULAGs were financed from the European Social Fund. Their activities were typically focused on social issues, including such aimed at social and professional activation and social inclusion of the inhabitants. The examined ULAG activities did not display the typical features of neo-endogenous integrated development, as they were prevented from utilizing EU funds for investment activities or infrastructure development. The article discusses the basic goals and tasks planned in the strategies of these organisations.

Key Words

Community Led Local Development, Urban Local Action Groups, cross-sectoral partnership, community mobilisation, neo-endogenous development, Poland

JEL Classification: L31; O15

Introduction

The development of participatory management of urban areas and community mobilisation related to the concept of grassroots or endogenous development has for many decades been an important policy carried out in most democratic countries of the world (Campbell, 2014; Willis, 2011). This involved the introduction of various forms of participatory spatial planning (Castro et al., 2020; Sanoff, 2000), participatory (civic) budgets (Bednarska-Olejniczak et al., 2020) and other methods of engaging local stakeholders in planning, social and economic activities on the local scale (Macken-Walsh, 2010; OECD, 2001). One of the relatively new forms of cross-sectoral cooperation for local development are Urban Local Action Groups (ULAGs), created around the year

2014 in towns and cities of the European Union (EU) as part of the Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) approach (Panciszko, 2020). This approach is a continuation of the LEADER-type programmes that have been implemented by the European Economic Community (currently the EU) since 1991 in rural areas (Moseley, 2003; Servillo & De Bruijn, 2018; Šaradín, 2019), and subsequently in fishing regions (Bartłomiejski, 2011). Literature on the subject commonly considers the formation of the organisational model of LAG-type partnerships – established throughout the EU on the basis of a very similar, shared set of principles – as one of the processes of ‘Europeanisation’, i.e. the creation of unifying development policies among EU member states (Furmankiewicz et al., 2021a; Konečný, 2019). There is abundant literature available on the various social and political aspects of LAGs in rural areas (Boukalova et al., 2016; Cejudo & Navarro, 2020; Moseley, 2003), with a significant lack of academic analyses of the type of goals chosen by local stakeholders in LAGs strategies (Furmankiewicz & Campbell, 2019; Kisiel & Gierwiatowska, 2013). Among the fewest of these rank analyses of Urban LAGs (ULAGs), which are not as common in the EU as rural and fishing LAGs (European Leader Association for Rural Development, 2016). So far, they have been analysed, inter alia, in Poland (Kola-Bezka, 2020a, 2020b; Panciszko, 2020; Zajda et al., 2017) and in Romania (Puşcaş & Beleiu, 2020). However, the organisational structures, cooperation processes, goals and effects of ULAGs activities remain poorly recognized in literature on the subject.

The main purpose of this paper is to present the basic characteristics and analysis of the main objectives of ULAGs operating in Poland in the 2014-2020 EU Programming Period. The subject of the analysis includes 7 existing ULAGs. The main research method is content analysis performed on Local Development Strategies (LDS) formulated by the examined ULAGs for the years 2016-2023. The article focuses on goals from the ULAG strategies that are still in the implementation phase, as the projects have not yet been completed and accounted for at the time of the preparation of this article.

1. Area-based partnership and neo-endogenous development

The development policy of urban areas today supports various types of grassroots initiatives – both in terms of their economic activity (entrepreneurial and professional activity), as well as social activity (participation in local social activity). One of the forms of management of local resources is the creation of various types of multi-sectoral local partnerships covering entire cities, districts or focusing on the implementation of specific projects (OECD, 2001). Policies of this type were frequent in democratic Anglo-Saxon countries like Canada (Rounds, 1993) and the UK (Bailey, 2003; Perrons & Skyers, 2003). The launch of URBAN, EQUAL, INTERREG and LEADER Community Initiatives in 1991 saw the large-scale establishment of territorial partnerships as formal organisations in the European Economic Community. This continued after the establishment of the EU in 1993 (Furmankiewicz et al., 2015; Moseley, 2003) and was followed by the carrying out of the URBACT Urban Development Network Programme in cities (Zajda et al., 2017). It is the LEADER Initiative, however, which has become particularly renowned for supporting the creation of area-based partnerships in rural areas, known as Local Action Groups (LAGs). Within these organisations decisions regarding strategic goals and implemented activities are made by members of the association and decision-making council (project-selection council) composed of

representatives of local authorities, entrepreneurs, non-governmental organisations and local inhabitants (Furmankiewicz et al., 2021b; Zajda, 2014). According to estimates by the European LEADER Association for Rural Development, about 3,300 LAGs have been established up to the year 2019, covering over 50% of the rural population in the EU (European LEADER Association for Rural Development, 2019). In Poland, during the EU Programming Period 2014-2020, there were 324 LAGs, of which 7 were urban, 24 specialised in fishing issues, 12 aimed at the development of fisheries and rural areas and 293 aimed at integrated rural development (Zajda et al., 2017). A number of other countries have experienced the establishing of urban LAGs, such as the Netherlands, Greece, Italy, UK, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, Portugal, Sweden and Romania (European LEADER Association for Rural Development, 2016; Servillo & De Bruijn, 2018), but in-depth analyses of their activity remain scarce (Kola-Bezka, 2020a, 2020b; Panciszko, 2020; Puşcaş & Beleiu, 2020; Zajda et al., 2017).

The development of LEADER-type programmes and the CLLD approach was strongly related to theoretical concepts of territorial governance (Esparcia et al., 2015) and neo-endogenous development (Ray, 2006). The latter concept was particularly concerned with the issue of balancing endogenous and exogenous factors in local development. Programmes of this type are concerned with supra-local goals only to a small extent, but they give local stakeholders a high degree of independence in defining development goals and activities based on local needs, which result from the characteristics of a given functional region (Bosworth et al., 2016; Furmankiewicz et al., 2020). Partnership cooperation allows to increase the effectiveness of local government development policies in terms of meeting the needs of the residents (Adamski & Gorlach, 2007; Babczuk et al., 2017).

2. Methods of Research

The research covers all existing Urban LAGs in Poland, as retrieved from information obtained from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Ministry of Infrastructure and Development (Ministerstwo Infrastruktury i Rozwoju, 2014). The gathering of general data on the existing ULAGs in Poland in the 2014-2020 EU Programming Period was followed by obtaining Local Development Strategies (LDS) prepared by ULAGs from their official websites. LAG strategies in Poland share a similar structure of chapters due to top-down ministry and regional authorities' recommendations (Ministerstwo Infrastruktury i Rozwoju, 2014; Panciszko, 2020). They usually contain information on the number and structure of partners participating in the cooperation, a description of the participation of local stakeholders in the preparation of the strategy, the characteristics of the area of operation (strategic diagnosis), a SWOT analysis, the designated mission, the main and specific goals; and the main types of tasks to be performed (referred to as 'operations' in the strategies). They also contain descriptions of effect indicators. Due to their similar structure, they are highly suitable for comparative analysis.

The article presented here details the analysis of the provisions concerning main and specific goals and planned activities, with the use of the content analysis method, commonly utilised in social, political and management sciences (Neuendorf, 2017;

Szewrański & Kazak, 2020). A qualitative description of the provisions in the strategies served as the main method for the analysis (Sandelowski, 2000).

3. Results

Urban LAGs in Poland have only been established in the Kuyavian-Pomeranian voivodeship (*województwo kujawsko-pomorskie*, province with self-government). This was a direct result of decisions made by the regional authorities. In six cases, the established ULAGs overlapped with the areas of entire towns, while in one case they covered seven inner-urban districts (in Bydgoszcz). The population in the ULAG area was rounded up from 29 thousand (Brodnica) to 137 thousand inhabitants (Toruń) (Table 1). The ULAG area ranged from 14 (Chełmno) to 116 (Toruń) square km (Figure 1).

Table 1. Basic data on Urban LAGs in Poland

No.	Name of ULAG (in Polish)	City/Town	Area sq. km	Number of inhabitants in LAG area	Funds for LDS implementation (EUR)	Number of partners
1	Stowarzyszenie LGD "Dla Miasta Torunia"	Toruń	116	136 999	1 416 857	94
2	Stowarzyszenie Bydgoska LGD "Dwie Rzeki"	Bydgoszcz	39	135 432	1 388 418	72
3	LGD Miasto Włocławek	Włocławek	84	107 815	1 451 929	128
4	Stowarzyszenie LGD "Grudziądzki Spichlerz"	Grudziądz	58	97 676	1 257 198	76
5	Stowarzyszenie LGD Inowrocław	Inowrocław	30	75 001	1 122 178	40
6	Stowarzyszenie LGD Chełmno	Chełmno	14	20 215	816 880	84
7	Stowarzyszenie LGD Miasta Brodnicy	Brodnica	23	28 579	685 788	42

Source: Author's research based on ULAG LDS. Data sorted by number of inhabitants in ULAG area.

Fig. 1: Location of Urban LAGs in Poland (numbers according to table 1)



Source: Author's compilation

The number of partners (legal entities and natural persons who were members of the ULAG association) ranged from 40 (Inowrocław) to 128 (Włocławek). It should be mentioned that there are two regional capital cities in the Kuyavian-Pomerania province: Bydgoszcz is the seat of the voivode (regional branch of central authorities), and Toruń is the seat of regional self-government authorities (which exercise direct supervision over the LAG) (Przybyła et al., 2019) – both cities were engaged in CLLD. The ULAGs have received grants for the implementation of their activities ranging from EUR 685,788 (Brodnica) to EUR 1,416,857 (Toruń). All ULAG strategies were financed exclusively by the European Social Fund. Support from this fund could be allocated towards the implementation of three types of projects:

1. Activities in the field of active integration of local inhabitants. The submitted projects could be concerned with the creation of self-help clubs providing care and assistance services for the dependent; community day-care centres and youth clubs to help educate and activate young members of local communities; and work clubs to support unemployed people in finding employment. This group of tasks also supported counselling aimed at enabling social mobilisation and a return to the labour market, the organisation of therapeutic classes and trainings allowing one to gain new professional qualifications. It was also possible to utilise the fund to cover the costs of employing assistants of disabled persons and of marginalized families.

2. Activities in the field of organising the local community and social animation. This group of tasks covered the costs of employing people whose aim is to integrate residents and stimulate them towards joint activities for the benefit of local communities. Support was also granted to projects in the field of social and civic education, as well as those aimed at the organisation of events and meetings having to do with integration, culture, sports and environmentalism. This could also involve establishing self-help services, or simply covering the costs of volunteer work.

3. Activities supporting the development of social entrepreneurship. Here, support was allocated to the creation and development of social economy entities, i.e. companies and organisations working towards the professional reintegration of people at risk of social exclusion.

The maximum support limit was set at PLN 150,000 (about EUR 35,000) for projects aimed at providing employment opportunities for its participants; and PLN 50,000 (about EUR 11,900) for projects dedicated to increasing the efficiency of social action. The ULAGs organised grant competitions in which the grants detailed above were awarded to the local entities applying for them. LDS were fully adapted to the imposed recommendations (Table 2), involving issues such as: the promotion of social, professional and entrepreneurial activity of residents, the development of social entrepreneurship, the training of animators and leaders for the purpose of organising local social activity, the social inclusion of excluded groups, activities promoting and making use of cultural heritage. In practice, only the so-called 'soft projects' fell into the scope of the envisaged actions. The ULAGs were financed virtually exclusively from the ESF and thus were prevented from using the grant for common investment activities or local infrastructure development ('hard projects').

**Table 2. The main and specific goals of Urban LAGs in Poland
(abridged version of the original text).**

<i>No.</i>	<i>City</i>	<i>Main goals</i>	<i>Specific goals</i>
1	Toruń	Improving the social/professional situation of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion; Increase in integrated activities in the field of local community organisation and social animation	Increasing the effectiveness of the implementation of social and environmental activities; Increased social and professional activity and entrepreneurship among people at risk of poverty or social exclusion; Increasing the effectiveness of the implementation of activities in the field of organising the local community; Strengthening the potential of animators and leaders in the field of social animation
2	Bydgoszcz	Support for residents in the field of social inclusion	Increasing the activity of the community with the use of forms of active integration of an environmental nature, including social and employment activation and activation in accordance with the Municipal Revitalization Programme
3	Włocławek	Creating conditions for social inclusion and support for residents in the field of social and professional activation	Active integration in the field of local community organisation and social animation, social economy and social entrepreneurship
4	Grudziądz	Strengthening the role of social capital in socio-economic development	Increasing the social and professional activity of the inhabitants
5	Inowrocław	Improving the social and professional situation of the inhabitants; Reducing the scale of social exclusion and poverty	Increased social and professional activity and entrepreneurship of the inhabitants; Activation of socially excluded and poor people
6	Chełmno	Increasing the number of activities in the area of active integration of an environmental nature for the benefit of the excluded and people at risk of social exclusion and their environment; Support in organising the local community and fostering social animation as well as improving the quality of social capital	Support for activities aimed at social and professional activation; Increasing the number of activities in the field of animating the life of the local society; Acquisition of skills and activation of residents and promotion of the LAG area; Support for social economy initiatives
7	Brodnica	Creating conditions for social inclusion and social and professional activation	Social and professional activation of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion; Organising and animating the local community; Supporting social potential for the development of social economy

Source: Author's research based on Urban LAG Local Development Strategies

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The results represented here indicate that ULAG activity in Poland was focused almost exclusively on social issues in the field of the social and professional activation of residents. This scope of activities was imposed on them by voivodeship authorities and

the operating principles of the European Social Fund. Therefore, it can be assessed that they have little relation to the concept of neo-endogenous integrated development, which combines various activities, with both economic investment and social issues taken into account (Furmankiewicz & Campbell, 2019). ULAG activities proved to be highly specialised and monofunctional. By comparison, traditional, rural LAGs implemented a much wider range of activities, as they supported small investment projects of local entrepreneurs and farmers, the activities of local non-governmental organisations, but also the development of small infrastructure owned by the commune (Hoffmann & Hoffmann, 2018). The ULAGs were therefore of a significantly different nature when compared to rural LAGs, where the development of local infrastructure and investments of local entrepreneurs (and farmers) was an important element of supporting local development. The ULAGs were prevented from establishing goals with the prospect of fully and freely meeting local needs, as the three main themes of potential operation were designed by the authorities in a top-down manner. By comparison, the municipal LAGs in Romania, organised in cities with more than 20,000 inhabitants, could carry out both soft and hard (infrastructure) projects (Puşcaş & Beileu, 2020). Characteristically, only one out of 16 Polish regional self-governments decided to support ULAGs. It resulted from the lack of interest of the regional and central policymakers, in creating cross-sector partnerships in large Polish cities and towns. Likewise, Urban LAGs have been relatively rare in other EU countries (European Leader Association for Rural Development, 2016). This means that the CLLD idea was not popular in urban areas, despite the models of various types of urban partnerships having been known for many years in the UK (Hemphill et al., 2006). The potential opportunities for cross-sector cooperation in cities are significant, as, compared to rural areas, they are characterized by a high concentration of entrepreneurship and NGOs. Theoretically, cities provide many stakeholders who could potentially implement small projects under the CLLD. One example includes housing cooperatives, frequently found in Poland (Płuciennik & Hełdak, 2019). There are third sector organisations which could implement many local projects aimed at social inclusion, and for people with disabilities or senior citizens (Kurtyka-Marcak et al., 2019).

One of the more interesting issues for further research would be an attempt to determine why the ideas of neo-endogenous development with the use of intersectoral territorial partnerships enjoy only a limited popularity in urbanized European areas, despite the possibility of obtaining additional funds for local activities from the EU. With Urban LAGs so scarcely represented in literature on the subject, it might also prove interesting to pursue an international comparison of their activity.

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