

PERCEPTION OF INTERSECTORAL PARTNERSHIPS BY INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS (THE CASE OF LOCAL ACTION GROUPS)¹

Agnieszka Pawlowska

Institute of Political Science, Rzeszow University, Poland

Associate Professor

E-mail: a.pawlowska@1gb.pl

Anna Gasior-Niemiec

Institute of Political Science, Rzeszow University, Poland

Assistant Professor

E-mail: ag_n@gazeta.pl

Anna Kolomycew

Institute of Political Science, Rzeszow University, Poland

Assistant Professor

E-mail: anna_kolomycew@o2.pl

—Abstract —

The notion of intersectoral partnership is understood in terms of voluntary and institutionalized cooperation between actors representing public, private and civic sectors. The idea of partnership is related to the new approaches to regional and local development across the European Union. One of the main fields in which these approaches are implemented is the field of rural areas development, where partnerships take the form of Local Action Groups (LAGs).

The paper discusses some aspects of partnership-based approach as imported to Poland. The strengths and weaknesses of this approach will be exemplified by the case of LAGs established in one of the Polish regions. Discussion is based on the empirical data gathered by authors of the paper.

Key Words: *Partnership, Rural areas, Local Action Group, Poland.*

JEL Classification: R58.

¹ The paper has been prepared as part of the research grant no. N N114 250039 financed by the National Science Center in years 2010-2013.

1. INTRODUCTION

The notion of intersectoral partnership is understood in the paper in terms of voluntary but institutionalized cooperation between actors representing three sectors – public, private-economic and social (civic, not-for profit). The inclusion of social partners, who may represent branch organizations such as trade unions, non-governmental organizations, informal social networks or individual activists, makes this kind of intersectoral partnerships different from public-private partnerships (PPP) which were promoted in the West since the 1980s in the framework of the New Public Management. The three-sector partnerships discussed in the paper are more typical of New Public Governance as an approach to the realm of public policies, which is claimed to be more sensitive to societal participation.

Also, the idea of this kind of partnership is strongly related to new approaches to regional and local development that have gained prominence across the European Union since the 1990s. These new approaches emphasize concepts such as decentralization, subsidiarity and partnership as fundamental principles upon which to base public policies. Moreover, they stress the significance of endogenous resources and social networks as essential factors of regional and local development. One of the main fields in which these approaches are implemented in the EU Member States is the field of rural development.

The intersectoral partnership-based approach to rural development has been institutionalized in the EU in the form of the LEADER initiative which has become an integral element of the European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). **Local Action Groups** are associations embodying the idea of intersectoral partnerships established in the framework of CAP.

The aim of the following paper is to discuss some aspects of the LEADER approach as imported to Poland, which is one of the “new” EU Member States. The strengths and weaknesses of the LEADER approach in Poland will be exemplified by the case of Local Action Groups (LAGs) established in one of the Polish regions – the *Podkarpackie Voivodship*. In particular, empirical data indicating the LAGs’ perception by their members will be presented and interpreted in order to see to what extent the Polish LAGs have managed to

“import” not only the form but also the spirit of the EU’s LEADER approach to rural development.

2. THE LEADER APPROACH IN RURAL AREAS DEVELOPMENT

The LEADER approach has been devised as a mechanism to support bottom-up efforts which are to trigger and sustain development in underprivileged rural areas in the European countries. In addition, it has been seen as a way to compensate for some negative side-effects of the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), including its adverse socio-economic impact on some segments of the rural population, unemployment, depopulation, lowering standards of public utilities, diminishing access to public services as well as related ecological and environmental problems (see e.g. European Communities,2006). In contrast to the top-down and uniform rural development policies as administered nation-wide in the West since the late 1950s through mid-1980s, the policies basing on the LEADER approach have been characterized by several innovative principles. Namely, they are claimed to be: 1) bottom-up; 2) area-based; 3) partnership-based; 4) integrated and multi-sectoral.

In 2004 Poland became an EU Member State. The EU membership meant, *inter alia*, the country’s inclusion in all of the EU policies, including in rural areas. The 2004-2006 first steps in the LEADER approach in Poland resulted in the creation of several intersectoral partnerships across the countryside, whose major task was to be trained in the LEADER approach and to elaborate their Local Development Strategies. Following the largely positive experiences of the 2004-2006 pilot activities, in the subsequent period the LEADER approach has been granted a status of a fully-fledged public programme. As a result, 338 LAGs have been called into existence, covering virtually all of the Polish rural areas.

Each of the LAGs is composed of members residing in at least two self-governing communes (*gminas*). The Local Development Strategies (LDSs) that they have prepared cover the territories of all participating communes, which are characterized by some common features, including topography, history, heritage, type of local economy, structural and social problems etc. The LAGs are authorized to organize grant competitions for the local entities (institutions, organizations, businesses, individuals) with a view to providing funding for those of their projects that are congruent with the LDSs. In other words, the LAGs – represented by their organs, such as the Board, the Council and the Secretariat –

invite, collect, review, select and recommend for EU funding locally prepared developmental projects.

In the remaining sections of the paper the LAGs established in the *Podkarpackie* region are focused upon, which occupy rural areas in the south-eastern part of Poland. Altogether, there are 31 LAGs in the region, all of which constitute intersectoral partnerships (IPs) registered as associations.

The empirical findings presented and discussed in the present paper have been generated as part of a research project carried out at the University of Rzeszow, which is the main public university in the *Podkarpackie* region. The research project was dedicated to investigating mechanisms to create and operate IPs as exemplified by the rural LAGs. The collected data have enabled an insight into legal forms and internal structures taken by these IPs, their membership, their main fields of activity, decision-making processes, promotion and information strategies etc. Also, their actual role in local/rural development has been investigated, including empowerment of local civil societies and mobilization of local communities and their endogenous resources around common goals.

3. THE INVOLVEMENT OF INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS IN THE LOCAL ACTION GROUPS

The questionnaires were distributed among all of the members of the LAGs in *Podkarpackie* region. In total, 518 members (33% of all) returned the filled questionnaires. They revealed that 26.6% of all the LAG members identify themselves as representatives of local government/administration/public sector; 19.7% – as representatives of non-governmental organizations; 1.4% – as representatives of trade unions, and 8.1% – as representatives of the private-economic sector; while 1.7% – as representing some “other entity” (without specifying which). Further, as many as 34.4% (178) of the respondents chose to indicate an option “unrelated to any institution” – those were classified as individual LAG members, and only their answers will be analyzed here.

Based on the distribution of the answers as displayed in Table 1, we conclude that methods used to build the LAGs’ membership were fairly inclusive. They were aimed at generating a broad representation of the local people. However, in technical terms, rather “passive” forms of circulating information about the LAGs were used, such as invitations put on websites, announcements published in local newspapers and notices spread along official administrative channels.

However, it is worth highlighting that almost 40% of the persons who eventually became the LAGs' members had *received a personal invitation* to join the partnerships. Undoubtedly, this form of membership-building is symptomatic of the presence of strong social networks which are based on personal relationships and previous cooperative experiences. On the one hand this manner of recruitment reflects good local knowledge about the membership potential in the local communities involved (compare: Rose,2000:149-152). On the other hand this manner of recruitment could be exclusionary as far as keeping an open access to the local policy networks. Nevertheless, in the discussed case this seems not to be the case, since more than 15% of the LAGs' members are individuals who just took the initiative independently and joined the partnerships without any informal or formal intermediation by an organization or a social network.

One of the most important factors in the intersectoral partnerships' development at the local level is the reasons that motivate the local community members to engage in this form of voluntary cooperation. Nearly 70% of our respondents indicated that their involvement in their LAGs had stemmed from their desire to act for a common good (see Table 2). This result is interesting. Apart from its declarative "social capital" contents, it shows that general propensities of the individuals involved rather than their specific interests or expectations related to the LEADER approach were key determinants in their decisions to get involved in the LAGs. In other words, the prospective LAGs' members seem not to have had much specific knowledge about the LAG's nature a precise vision of the partnership or specified objectives to be reached owing to this kind of partnership before joining the IPs.

However, for every fourth member of the analyzed LAGs, participation in this kind of partnership was also associated with a desire to gain professional experience and to take the opportunity to improve one's individual qualifications. While evidencing a trend towards professionalization of not-for profit organizations, the perception of an institutionalized intersectoral partnership as an opportunity to acquire new skills could also indicate that this form of local cooperation is perceived in terms of both organizational (institutional) and substantive innovation in the Polish rural areas.

The actual operation and success of the Local Action Groups are to a large extent dependent on the nature and quality of their decision-making processes as well as on the effectiveness of their internal and external communication strategies. On

the basis of the reported quantitative research, we may conclude that the communication processes inside the LAG structures are evaluated by their members in a positive way: more than 87% of the respondents assessed their LAGs' internal communication as "good" or "very good". The impact and participation of the LAGs' members in the LAGs' decision-making was slightly worse appreciated (see Table 3).

Noteworthy, despite the provisions that guarantee equality of the partners representing different sectors, almost one tenth of the respondents felt that, in practice, decisions taken were not consulted with them. In addition, nearly 7% of the respondents admitted that even though formal consultations had been organized, this procedure did not make them feel that they had a satisfying impact on their LAGs's activities.

According to the respondents, the dominant mode of decision-making in their LAGs involves taking decisions by the LAGs' management organs (59.4%) (see table 4). The second most frequent pattern of decision-making involves taking decisions by the management organs after consultation with the LAG members (42.6%). It should be noted that the latter mode is quite typical of the traditional system of decision-making by the local administration units in Poland. Namely, the local authorities will take their final decisions in an unchanged form even if during public consultation an opposing opinion is expressed by the local community.

What seems a bit puzzling is that despite the (declared) limited influence on decisions taken by the LAGs, the interviewed members evaluated overall performance of the partnerships relatively well. The same applies to the level of their personal engagement in the LAGs' activities (see Table 5). These indications by the LAGs' members appear contradictory. Basing on other research and observation, these results might evidence some formal weaknesses inherent in the LAGs' formula as adopted in Poland. In other words, even though this kind of three-sector partnerships have attracted the local communities attention as potentially fruitful frameworks for stimulating rural development, in practice they have turned out to be too complex and rigid to fully meet the expectations of all of the involved stakeholders.

These inferences are largely corroborated by the distribution of answers to the question about the actual members' involvement in the LAGs' operation (see Table 6). Over 90% of the respondents believed that the main manifestation of

their involvement in the partnership is their personal participation in general meetings, which, in practice, boils down to their acceptance (by the vote) of draft decisions proposed by the LAGs' boards. Relatively few respondents indicated that their participation is also related to conceptual work and elaborating new action plans to be undertaken by their LAGs. In addition, we may notice a relatively high percentage of the LAGs' members whose involvement is mostly reduced to contacts with public administration (local and regional)/public authorities. This indication confirms the hypothesized strong position and influence of the public sector representatives in the LAGs' structures. Good contacts with public administration are seen as key.

Overall, analyzing the degrees and types of involvement of the individual members from the local communities in their LAGs' activities, it could be stated that this formula of three-sector partnership in Poland has revealed a number of limitations that make it difficult to make a full use of the combined endogenous potential of the partners representing the relevant sectors (see Table 7).

However, based on further results, it might be pointed out that the biggest problem faced by these three-sector partnerships in the *Podkarpackie* region is the shortage of financial resources allowing for their effective operation (73.5% of the answers). Still, every fifth of the surveyed LAG members in this region indicated formal and legal regulations underpinning the operation of the LAGs as serious barriers, which generated excessive bureaucracy in the partnerships.

Table 1: Ways of recruiting members of the LAGs

How did you become a LAG member?	% of answers*
Anyone who might be interested in the membership of the LAG was invited to participate	46,9
I received a personal formal invitation	19,8
I received a personal informal invitation	17,9
I was nominated by my local community	6,8
I was delegated by an NGO	0,6
I was delegated/seconded from my working place	5,6
I volunteered on my own accord	15,4

*Respondents could select more than one answer.

Table 2: Motivations of local community members to act in the framework of the LAGs

Types of local community motivation	% of answers*
to gain new experience and qualifications	24,2
curiosity associated with this new form of collective action	39,1
other people's encouragement	5,0
pressure of the LAG's organizers	3,1
a need to act	68,3
personal needs and motivation for action	39,8
other factors	0,6

*Respondents could select more than one answer.

Table 3. The individual members' influence on decisions taken by the LAGs

Are you well informed about your LAG's activities?	% of answers	Are the LAG's decisions consulted with its members?	% of answers
Well- informed	56,7	Consulted in a satisfactory manner	68,0
Sufficiently informed	30,9	Consulted in an unsatisfactory manner	6,7
Not sufficiently informed	0,6	Not consulted	9,0
Not informed at all	0,6	Other answer	1,7
No data	11,2	No data	14,7

Table 4: The LAGs' decision-making processes

Modes of decision-making	% of answers
decisions taken by the LAG's board	49,7
decisions taken by the LAG's board after consultations	35,7
decisions taken by the LAG's board after consultations with selected members	10,8
no idea	2,7
other answers	1,1

Table 5: LAGs' performance evaluation

How do you assess your involvement in your LAG's activities?	% of answers	How do you assess general performance of the LAG you belong to?	% of answers
good	41,0	good	67,4
average	40,4	average	15,7
bad	0,6	bad	0,0
no opinion	5,1	no opinion	2,2
no data	12,9	no data	14,6

Table 6: Types of individual members' involvement in the LAGs' internal operations.*

Type of members' involvement	% of answers
information and promotion	6,4
contacts with public authorities	12,2
administrative/technical support	3,8
projects' evaluation	9,0
counseling/projects' preparation	7,7
projects' implementation	21,2
participation in the process of the local strategy's creation	19,2
participation in decision –making processes	36,5
participation in the LAG's general meetings	91,7
other	0,6

*Respondents could select more than one answer.

Table 7. Factors limiting the LAGs' development.

What factors limit the development of the LAG you belong to?	% of answers*
financial	73,5
communication	3,3
staff	10,6
material (e.g. lack of adequate premises for the LAG)	6,6
formal and legal	21,9
societal/social (e.g. low level of social activism, lack of cooperation)	18,5
other	4,6
no limitations	9,3

*Respondents could select more than one answer.

4. CONCLUSION

Partnership-based approach recommended by the EU in the LEADER programme, puts a great emphasis on the value of endogenous resources, including the local population as a true engine of local development, treating “local people as the main asset of rural areas” (European LEADER...,2012). Furthermore, the IPs at large, and LAGs in particular, pool the resources from all sectors and support participation of their representatives in decision-making concerning development of rural areas. The IPs may shape conditions for co-deciding and cooperating for the benefit of local communities. The IPs can be classified as an instrument to apply the principle of subsidiarity to local issues, as they bring decision-making about local communities' development down to the local people.

Importantly, the engagement in these partnerships leads the three sectors and local individuals through a tough process of getting rid of their mutual mistrust, which is typical of the post-authoritarian societies (including Polish society), where the civic sector is severely underdeveloped and social capital is more of bonding than bridging nature to refer to Robert Putnam's theory (Putnam,1993).

However, basing on the research results, another picture of the rural IPs could also be reconstructed – revealing them as coalitions of local individuals who feel like more representing themselves and their local community than acting on behalf of any specific organization or institution. The paper's authors estimate that over 1/3 of those who filled out the questionnaire and identified themselves as LAG individual members, which provides considerable evidence of their personal commitment to local public affairs. Therefore, instead of being in crisis, grass-roots democracy and grass-roots governance – interpreted in terms of ordinary people's networks dedicated to common welfare – seems to be emerging in rural Poland.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

European Communities (2006), *The LEADER Approach. A basic guide*, http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/publi/fact/leader/2006_en.pdf, [Accessed: 3.09.2012]

Putnam, Robert (1993), *Making Democracy Work: civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Rose, Richard (2000), "Getting Things Done in an Anti-Modern Society: Social Capital Networks in Russia" (in: Partha Dasgupta, Ismail Serageldin-Eds, *Social Capital. A Multifaceted Perspective*, Washington, DC: The World Bank, pp. 147-171.

European LEADER Association for Rural Development (2012), *The LEADER Approach*, www.elard.eu [Accessed: 15.9.2012].