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## **LOCAL ACTION GROUPS AS A DETERMINANT OF LOCAL DEVELOPMENT**

Key words: Local Action Groups, territorial partnerships, social capital, rural areas,  
Lublin Region

**ABSTRACT.** The article aims to assess the activities of Local Action Groups (LAGs) in the region of Lublin. The research hypothesis, that territorial partnerships are an important factor in local development, LAG support is seen by local communities through the implementation of grant projects to support the well-being of residents, was verified with the use of research questions. 114 members of LAGs located in the area of Lublin took part in the study, which was based on a research questionnaire prepared by the author of the paper, and 238 participants in the projects implemented by the LAGs took part in direct interviews. The research was conducted in the period from August to September 2019. The descriptive statistics of the STATISTICA 13.1 PL software were used to process the obtained results. Based on the outcomes of the research, the most important motives for joining the partnership were social reasons – the need to act for the benefit of the local community, and reasons of an egoistic nature – the need to introduce changes in the environment that would help self-development, or the willingness to form beneficial relationships. It was also the curiosity about the new form of cooperation. The research participants also ranked the main goals of the LAGs, as well as the categories of projects that should be supported. Among their expectations, the participants in the interviews mentioned: supporting and developing non-agricultural activities, actions to reduce unemployment and supporting the establishment of international cooperation.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The departure from traditional models of public governance based on hierarchical and bureaucratic structures of public administration is a global trend that has been observed for years. New tools for citizen participation in creating the public sphere and implementation of public tasks are constantly emerging. One of such solutions is partnerships, which

(apart from networks) are key instruments of the concept of co-governance [Kołomycew 2018]. Due to the multiplicity of partnerships and their great diversity, the author of the article focuses on one type of partnership – the cross-sector partnership in the form of a Local Action Group (LAG) formed under the LEADER approach.

Local Action Groups (LAGs) are a type of territorial partnership, formed as a bottom-up initiative that brings together representatives of local organisations from the public, private and non-governmental sectors, as well as local residents working for the benefit of the local community. There are 324 LAGs in Poland, the local development strategies of which have been selected for implementation and are financed by the Rural Development Programme for 2014-2020 under the LEADER approach. 22 LAGs operate in the region of Lublin (Figure 1) [KSOW 2022].

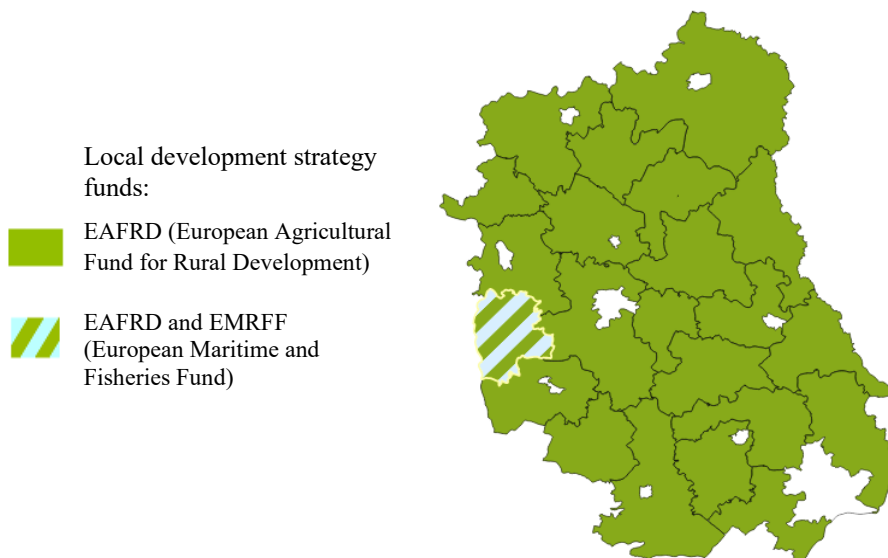


Figure 1. Local Action Groups of the Lublin Region

Source: based on [KSOW 2022]

List of LAGs: Białkopodlaska LAG, LAG „Kraina wokół Lublina”, LAG „Jagiellońska Przystań”, LAG „Owocowy Szlak”, LAG „Razem Ku Lepszej Przyszłości”, LAG „Roztocze Tomaszowskie”, LAG „Zapiecek”, LAG „Zielony Pierścień”, LAG „Ziemi Chełmskiej”, LAG „Ziemia Biłgorajska”, LAG Ziemi Kraśnickiej, LAG „Leśny Krąg”, LAG „Poleska Dolina Bugu”, LAG Hrubieszowskie „Lepsze Jutro”, LAG „Lepsza Przyszłość Ziemi Ryckiej”, LAG „Dolina Giełczwi”, LAG „Doliną Wieprza i Leśnym Szlakiem”, LAG „Krasnystaw Plus”, LAG „Nasze Roztocze”, LAG „Polesie”, LAG „Ziemia Zamojska”, LAG PROMENADA S-12

Public participation understood as the involvement of the local community in public affairs has no longer been a foreign category for many years, but is well-known to public authorities both at the central and local levels [Sobiesiak-Penszko 2012]. Participatory governance means an institutionalised decision-making process sanctioned by public authorities, in which citizens actively participate. What puts new forms of public participation above traditional forms of direct democracy is the possibility of involvement of social groups that had been marginalised and overlooked in the decision-making process, and the local dimension of initiatives. The available mechanisms allow members of local communities to actually influence the shape of development processes [Wampler, McNulty 2011].

Participatory governance should be understood as an approach that consists of institutions as well as formal and informal processes that frame the relationship between public authorities, individual interested parties and their groups [Chhotarey, Stoker 2009]. The essence of participatory governance is the inclusion in joint activities of various entities that represent different sectors. Each of them, thanks to their different experience, skills, competence and access to specific resources (which are not always available to other interested parties), may contribute to the improvement of the effectiveness of actions. The effectiveness of governance involving various groups and their representative offices depends not only on the formal legal and organisational framework but also on the conviction of the engaged entities that joint actions make sense. Mutual trust, as well as knowledge of public affairs and the possibility to act in the public sphere, are essential. Anna Kołodziejczak [2011] emphasises that LAGs, through the activation of residents of rural areas, contribute to the development of the region covered by the Local Development Strategy (LDS).

The paper aims to assess the activities of LAGs in the region of Lublin. Based on the results of empirical research and the literature on the subject, the author of the study formulated a research hypothesis: territorial partnerships are an important factor in local development, LAG support is seen by local communities through the implementation of grant projects to support the well-being of residents. The following research questions were helpful:

- What are the motives for joining a territorial partnership in the form of a LAGs?
- What are the main goals of the partnerships and how are they assessed by the members of the LAGs?
- What categories of projects should be implemented?
- What are the expectations of society with regard to the activities supported by a LAGs?

## PARTNERSHIP AND PARTICIPATION IN THE LEADER APPROACH

At the moment, LAGs are the most formalised and structured type of multi-sector partnership in Poland. Initially, they were established only in rural areas as part of the LEADER approach. The partnerships have evolved over time to become a mechanism for supporting territorial development arising from the grassroots initiatives of the residents of a given area. Currently, they are not only an instrument of the LEADER approach but also of Community Led Local Development<sup>1</sup> (CLLD) and a tool of cohesion policy. It is the partnership of different interested parties, through which the participatory dimension of the LEADER approach manifests itself. Partnerships were, and still are, strongly diversified – also when it comes to the CLLD approach [Journal of Laws 2015, item 378] – which is the result of their goals and the membership composition. Those elements shape the relationships within the partnership structure, the way of making decisions, their effectiveness and possibilities of influence. The participatory nature of LAGs established in rural areas under the LEADER approach can be assessed in three dimensions: the voluntary involvement of different interested parties (representing various sectors) in the process of establishing the partnership; the involvement of members of individual local communities, in which the partnership (LAG) operates; the role of LAGs and their possibility of an impact on the development processes of individual territorial units.

The activity of the LAGs is evaluated positively. Having analysed the results of the actions of the LAGs so far, it can be concluded that the partnerships have contributed to the introduction of numerous changes in the rural areas and have become a permanent and significant element of the structure of those regions [Kiryłuk-Dryjska et al. 2016]. However, LAGs have not fully met all the expectations. They were to become the centres of the development of rural areas, laboratories of innovation, and structures generating human and social capital [Zajda 2011, Kołodziejczyk 2016, Zajda et al. 2017]. The partnerships under the LAG formula were expected to have a much greater impact by combining the resources of various entities involved in their formation. The purpose of such partnerships was also to attract and activate the local community, which, in turn, was to join the process of territorial development [Shucksmith 2010, Bosworth, et al. 2016, Furmankiewicz 2018]. The idealistic, though interesting assumptions about territorial partnerships in Poland, have been verified by the formal and legal conditions, the reality of rural communities and the dominant model of governance at the local level. LAGs operate in the form of special associations supervised by voivodship marshals. Among the principles of the LEADER approach, grassroots initiatives in establishing partnerships

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<sup>1</sup> Community Led Local Development (CLLD) is a voluntary instrument proposed by the European Commission that expands the possibilities offered by the LEADER approach. That opportunity makes it possible for Local Action Groups to comprehensively integrate local needs and solutions and helps them strengthen the relationships between rural, urban and fishing regions.

and their network nature are important. Those factors were supposed to intensify the level of participation, create active social attitudes, arouse a sense of attachment to the local community and shape the responsibility for the common good. The LEADER approach (currently CLLD) assumes that the local community should become involved in territorial development activities. The framework for the development activities is to be set by the Local Development Strategy (LDS) prepared for a given area.

It should be pointed out that the multi-sectoral nature of LAGs – the assumption of participation of representatives of the public, social and economic sectors – was top-down imposed, rather than being the result of bottom-up, active participation of representatives of different environments [Halamska et al. 2010]. Nevertheless, for the partnership to be formed, it was necessary to recruit members who would be willing to voluntarily join the newly created structure. The rules for establishing LAGs assumed the involvement of various types of entities, both institutional and individual. Currently, LAGs function as partnerships of residents, different entities and institutions that undertake cooperation in rural areas, often manage multi-million budgets and implement a number of projects financed from various sources, both domestic and foreign [Hadyński et al. 2015].

An attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of the activities undertaken by the LAGs in Poland was made based on the research conducted by the Agricultural Advisory Centre in Brwinów in 2013, Kraków branch, with the participation of the advisers from Voivodship Agricultural Advisory Centres. The assumed objective was to get to know their opinion on the changes in rural areas following the implementation of Local Development Strategies under the LEADER approach. The LAGs had a positive impact on the socio-economic situation of the rural areas and contributed to, inter alia, the improvement of the social infrastructure in rural regions; the emergence of new social, cultural and sports initiatives; the increase in the knowledge of the residents of rural areas about the functioning of the EU and the impact of the EU programmes on the development of rural regions. In turn, the shortcomings and difficulties related to the functioning of the LAGs are indicated in the conclusions contained in the report on the research performed at the request of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development before the end of the 2007-2013 programme [Kowalska et al. 2015].

## MATERIAL AND METHODS OF STUDIES

To answer the questions that helped to verify the formulated hypothesis research was performed, which consisted of two elements: questionnaire research, in which the diagnostic survey method was used and the research tool in the form of a questionnaire designed by the author of the study. The survey was conducted among 114 members of LAGs (respondents did not have to declare membership in a specific group, but only to be a member of a LAG

implementing projects in the Lublin region), the sampling was voluntary, on an availability basis. The direct interviews were conducted among 238 persons who attended the “Harvest Festival” organised in the Lubelskie Voivodship – the selection of the sample was intentional, based on the declaration of participation in the projects implemented by the LAG. The research was conducted in the period from August to September 2019.

Nominal and ordinal scales as well as a rank scale from 1 to 5 were used for the measurement. To process the results, the descriptive statistics of the STATISTICA 13.1 PL software for graphs from Microsoft Office was used.

## STUDY RESULTS

Based on the results of the empirical research conducted among the members of LAGs in the Lubelskie Voivodship, it can be noticed that the largest involved group were natural persons (62, which amounted to 54.39% of the surveyed population of the members of the LAGs). However, based on the predominance of legal persons in the research group, it cannot be concluded that partnerships in the form of LAGs are seen by the residents of rural areas as the way of activation and influencing the processes of territorial development. The research showed that there were various reasons for joining LAGs. The interest in the new idea, the partnership in the form of LAGs, should be assessed positively. In most cases, the involvement in the activities of LAGs resulted from the curiosity related to the new form of organisation, which are the LAGs, and the willingness to act for the benefit of the local community and the immediate surroundings. The motives also included those of an egoistic nature, such as considering the LAGs to be an opportunity to improve own qualifications, competence and to establish new business relations (Table 1).

The need for self-fulfillment as well as the willingness of personal participation in the transformation of the local environment were important reasons to join LAGs for over 2/3 of the participants in the study. Katarzyna Zajda and Agnieszka Kretek-Kamińska [2014] list similar motives in their work. The bottom-up dimension of the partnerships was undermined by the declarations of a small percentage of the participants that their involvement was the result of pressure from their superiors. Marek Furmankiewicz [2018] indicates in his study that the formation of territorial partnerships was highly stimulated by the possibility of obtaining financial support for local activities.

Many of the LAGs were established upon the implementation of programmes through which they could receive funds. Public authorities are reluctant to establish organisations in which financial decisions are highly influenced by other non-public entities. The development strategies were adjusted, to a great extent, to the support programme rather than to the needs reported during public consultations. Such preferences are also confirmed by studies by other authors. For example, according to the research conducted

Table 1. Motives of involvement as a representative of the local community in the activities of the LAG

Motives for engagement	Number of respondents* (114)	Response rate* [%]
The need to act for the benefit of the local community	98	85.96
Personal need for change in the immediate environment, self-realization	80	70.17
Curiosity related to the new form of activity, which is LAG	45	39.47
Desire to gain new acquaintances	42	36.84
Desire to gain new experience and competencies useful in professional work	30	26.32
Encouragement from family/acquaintances	15	13.16
Pressure from superiors	2	1.75

\* The total number of respondents does not add up to 114, answers do not add up to 100%; respondents could choose more than one answer

Source: own research

by Katarzyna Zajda [2011], the possibility of obtaining extra funding to support local activities was one of the most important motives for joining the LAG structures. In turn, in the Zachodniopomorskie Voivodship, based on Paweł Baran et al. [2011], it was the most important reason for establishing Local Activity Groups. The above means that the motive of the local interested parties to establish such organisations was primarily the economic benefits. Meeting the needs of local residents and the necessity to institutionalise cooperation to obtain financial resources were indicated as the main reasons for establishing LAGs also in the Podkarpackie Voivodship [Pawłowska et al. 2014]. According to the research conducted by Mariusz Sienkiewicz [2015], concerning the partnerships located in the Lubelskie Voivodship, economic activation to bring income to the residents was the main goal of local strategies, while social development was marginalised.

The participants ranked the four main objectives of the activities of LAGs listed in the survey questionnaire. The mean values assigned to the ranks of the objectives in the sample of the participants in the study are presented by percentage in Figure 2. The most important objective, according to the respondents in the surveyed group, was the necessity to “support the social activity of residents and the non-governmental sector (e.g. local associations) – 3.25, the second important objective was to support small business and job creation – 3.04, followed by the development of agriculture, support for multifunctionality of agriculture – 2.96. Improvement of infrastructure quality was considered the least

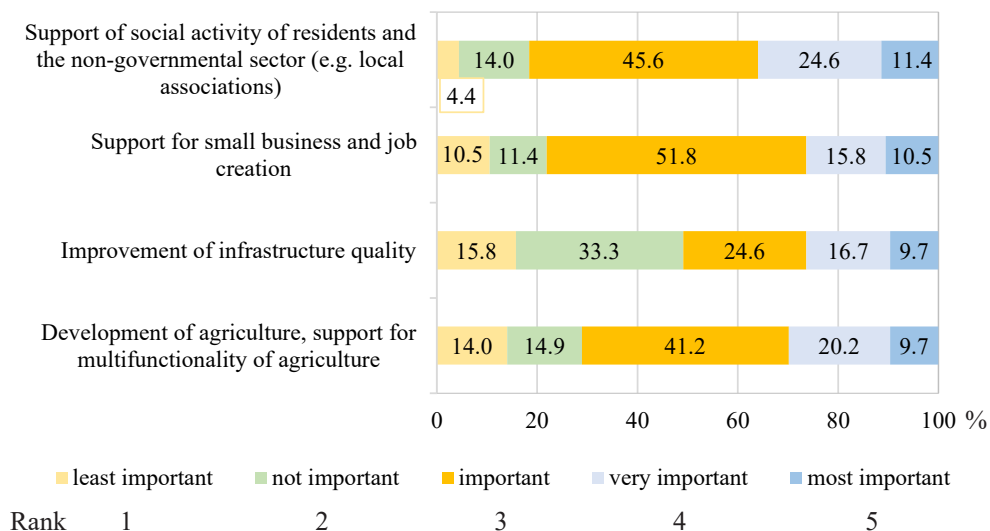


Figure 2. Ranking of leading objectives among the surveyed group of respondents, N = 114  
 Source: own research

important objective – 2.71. The obtained results may be due to the fact that the region of Lublin is an agricultural area involved in the preservation and presentation of its cultural and historical traditions. The above is manifested by the numerous projects financed under the LAGs, the purpose of which is publishing monographs on the culture and history of the region as well as maintenance of local traditions, obtaining funds to take care of the traditional costumes of the Country Housewives’ Clubs and the organisation of various workshops to share the knowledge and information about the region.

The participants in the study also evaluated the importance of co-financing of selected categories of projects implemented to improve the situation of the region of Lublin, where the LAGs operate (Figure 3). More than half of the participants indicated that projects “Renovation and development of villages” should be the priority when it came to co-financing and the next category of project that should be supported financially was “Small projects”. Less than 15% of the participants pointed out the “Creation and development of microenterprises” category. Projects under the “Diversification into non-agricultural activities” category were selected by the smallest number of participants in the research. When analysing the results, it is important to take into account the agricultural traditions of the region of Lublin and understand the resistance of the residents to give up keeping their family traditions related to farming.



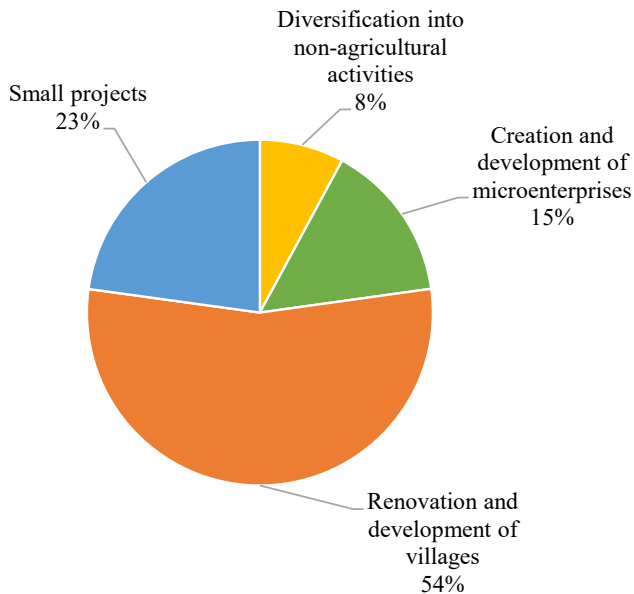


Figure 3. Ranking of the most important categories of the disbursement of funds for local development, N = 114  
Source: own research

During the interview, the participants from the region of Lublin were asked about their expectations towards the activities of LAGs operating in that area. It should be mentioned that the participants were given a choice of more than one response proposal and only the selected answers were rated on the ranking scale from 1 (least important) to 5 (most important). The participants in the interview expected that LAGs would take an active part in projects supporting non-agricultural activities of the region, which would allow the diversification of the income of the local community (66.38%) (Table 2). The next important expectation was to support the reduction of unemployment in rural areas of Lublin through various types of courses, training, grants (61.76%). The development of international cooperation and involvement in projects of an international scope were among the expectations of 43.27% of the participants. 42.43% of the participants were willing to take part in study visits organised by the LAGs to increase their competence and broaden their knowledge. The activation of the local community was also focused on the cultural, tourist and artistic dimensions. Support for cultural events in the area of Lublin, where the LAGs operate, was seen as an important task by 38.24% of the participants in the study. Supporting residents for the activities of the LAGs received the lowest number of responses, 17.64%.

Sławomir Kalinowski [2022], in his research, points out that the region of Lublin is the leader area when it comes to supporting the residents through Social Welfare Centres, which is the result of the agricultural tradition of that area. Economic collapses, unprofitable farming and other factors have contributed to an increase in unemployment in rural

Table 2. Expectations of respondents from the Lublin Region to LAG activities

	Mean	Number of respondents* (238)	Response rate* [%]
Support development of non-agricultural activities in the region	3.01	158	66.38
Supporting the reduction of unemployment levels, organizing training courses	2.88	147	61.76
Supporting the development of international cooperation	1.97	103	43.27
Organizing study visits for members/local entrepreneurs thematically related to their activities	1.76	101	42.43
Supporting promotion of municipalities forming the partnership area	2.75	99	41.60
Supporting cultural activities of the area of activities	3.35	91	38.24
Supporting the involvement of residents in the LAG	3.28	42	17.64

\* The total number of respondents does not add up to 238, answers do not add up to 100%; respondents could choose more than one answer

Source: own research

areas. The support received by the region of Lublin through the implementation of grants co-financed from the EU funds, due to the involvement of the LAGs, undoubtedly contributes to the improvement of the financial situation of the residents in that area since new jobs are created and local culture and heritage are promoted.

## SUMMARY

The results obtained in the course of the research confirm the hypothesis, and the answers to the research questions confirm the importance of LAGs. The main reason for forming partnerships in the Lublin region was the economic benefits for the region, as well as the desire for change and the internal need for self-realization of those who joined the organization. The conclusions drawn from the results can definitely prove a positive impact of the actions of LAGs operating in the region of Lublin.

Due to the availability of external funds, the local community, through the involvement of LAGs, can implement projects important from the point of view of the residents of a given area and thus complement the activities undertaken by the public sector. To sum

up the evaluation of the LAG's activities in the Lublin region, the community expects to continue its activities in:

- improving the economic situation of the region,
- creation of new jobs through activation of the unemployed,
- innovation and development of rural areas,
- raising the level of education of the local community to improve their situation on the labor market,
- supporting cultural events that could serve as a promotion of the region.

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## LOKALNE GRUPY DZIAŁANIA JAKO CZYNNIK ROZWOJU LOKALNEGO

Słowa kluczowe: lokalne grupy działania, partnerstwa terytorialne, kapitał społeczny, obszary wiejskie, Lubelszczyzna

### ABSTRAKT

Celem artykułu była ocena działalności lokalnych grup działania na terenie Lubelszczyzny. Postawiono hipotezę badawczą, że partnerstwa terytorialne są istotnym czynnikiem rozwoju lokalnego, a społeczności lokalne wsparcie LGD upatrują poprzez realizację projektów grantowych wspierających dobrobyt mieszkańców. Hipotezę zweryfikowano za pomocą pytań badawczych. W badaniu wzięło udział 114 członków LGD Lubelszczyzny, którzy wypełnili autorski kwestionariusz badawczy oraz 238 uczestników projektów realizowanych przez LGD, biorących udział w wywiadzie bezpośrednim. Badania były prowadzone w sierpniu i wrześniu 2019 roku. Do opracowania wyników użyto statystyki opisowej programu STATISTICA 13.1 PL. Stwierdzono, że najważniejszymi motywami przystąpienia do partnerstwa były przesłanki o charakterze społecznym, tj. konieczność działania na rzecz społeczności lokalnej, oraz przesłanki o charakterze egoistycznym, takie jak: potrzeba zmian w otoczeniu, która pomogłaby samorealizacji, chęć nawiązania korzystnych znajomości oraz ciekawość nowej formy współpracy. Respondenci określili ranking głównych celów działalności LGD i kategorii projektów, które powinno się wspierać. Respondenci, którzy wzięli udział w wywiadach wśród oczekiwanych wymieniając najczęściej: wspieranie i rozwój działalności pozarolniczej, działania na rzecz redukcji bezrobocia oraz wsparcie do tworzenia współpracy międzynarodowej.

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