

# Local Action Groups as an Example of Sectoral Partnerships at the Local Level

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## Abstract

The idea of sectorial partnership has recently become widely discussed in relation to decision-making processes at the local level. However, its effectiveness, impact and utility in the development of territorial units are not explored enough. The general purpose of this paper is to describe the introductory results of a research project which aimed at investigating mechanisms of building sectorial partnerships in Local Action Groups (LAG). Multi-sectorial partnerships are a key element of the EU Program – LEADER, which supports bottom-up approach consisting of the selection of the best local development strategy and its implementation by the LAGs. LEADER was designed to improve the socio-economic situation in the rural areas, and incorporates a territorial-based approach, multi-sectorial integration, shared decision making processed, and the creation of innovation and strategic plans. By the territorial-based approach I refer to such an approach which focuses on a specific, selected territory with horizontal integration of local activities and multi-sectorial development of the rural areas. It also contributes to a more effective use of endogenous resources such as natural, cultural, technological, and human which can bring economic value for the territorial units, but need to be mobilized and secured.

**Key words:** rural areas, local development strategy, LEADER approach, regional policy

## Introduction

In recent years, sectoral partnerships have become a very popular form of supporting local unit development. At the same time they became an interesting research subject which draws the attention of different academic disciplines. The interest in sectoral partnerships springs from their novelty in local development and the potential of the cooperation of diverse actors with their special and unique resources, possibilities, knowledge, experiences and convergent goals. Such cooperation might magnify the benefits which are impossible for the individual actors to gain by themselves (Potter 2008: 13-14).

Theoretically, sectoral partnerships seem to have a simple structure. All they need is a systematic interaction between representatives of the different social sectors, identification of common goals and division of responsibilities. Obviously, this kind of partnership is much more complicated. The main goals of sector representatives are very often completely different. A serious problem can also be the issue of bearing responsibility and risk taking for decision-making, its implementation and common action. For each sector the consequences of such ventures might be different, especially for the public sector. Increasing sectoral partnership changes the way which the public services systems function and change the model of governance in territorial units involving new actors in a sphere which was so far reserved only for public subjects (Meadowcroft 2007: 197).

### **A brief characteristic of sectoral partnerships**

The concept of sectoral partnership presumes cooperation of different subjects who have similar goals. Considering this explanation in connection with territorial units the following common goals should be pointed out: the socio-economic development of local units, an improvement of local governance and a higher level of public services (Furmankiewicz and Królikowska 2010: 65). Sectoral partnerships cannot only be taken as a form of cooperation. The idea of a partnership seems to be more complex because of complicated relations between those partners. But undoubtedly collaboration constitutes the essence of partnership (Furmankiewicz and Królikowska 2010: 65).

There are also contradictory opinions on sectoral partnerships as a form of social participation. Following Z. Woźniak's perspective, sectoral partnerships are the perfect form of social engagement since they go beyond traditional participation guaranteed by institution of a democratic system. They create possibilities for active participation in territorial unit issues on every step, beginning with the identification and evaluation of its needs to the planning of provision systems and community problems solutions (Woźniak 2002: 100-120). M. Furmankiewicz has pointed out that the significant feature of new-created partnerships is the occurrences of strong (durable) connections, consensus and long-term decision-making and transparency (Furmankiewicz and Królikowska 2010: 45). Elsewhere J. Meadowcroft reminds us that partnerships are actually a representative structure, but refused to treat them as an institution of participatory democracy. He claims that sectoral partnerships only involve specific groups of people who might influence other members of the local community. Therefore, direct participation in created partnerships is limited (Meadowcroft 2007: 197).

The fundamental precondition of a functional territorial partnership is a guarantee of the equality of involved parties. In practice, it is very difficult to ensure partners equality, because of its diversity, which is determined by versatile resources, possibility of acting and expectations placed on the partnership. According to J. Meadowcroft the strongest members of the partnership are the representatives of the economic sector in view of their financial resources and possibilities of influencing the public sector. Private sector representatives are interested in keeping a good investment climate and stabilizing the labor market. Having financial resources and economic knowledge guarantees them full access to active participation in the decision-making process. The material means are the main reason of inequality in comparison with the social sector which is characterized by limited financial resources, shortage of staff (based only on volunteers), and deficiencies in material resources. This situation can generate stronger aspirations for the realization of particular interests. However, at local level the dominant role is still reserved for the public sector representatives. Superior positions of local authorities are clearly visible in relation with the social sector representatives. NGO's, in light of their financial and organizational weaknesses, in fact are dependent on local governments and local leaders (Śpiewak 2008: 151).

The equality of sectoral partners is strongly related with the reciprocal confidence of cooperating subjects. This characteristic seems to be natural in long-term common activities. Nevertheless, the establishment of new partnerships needs to be formalized. But this may distort and even destroy the grassroot model of creating partnerships. Following M. Furmankiewicz and his definition of partnerships, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by sectoral partnership. The sectoral partnership is a relation which occurs between sectoral representatives, which includes common action and cooperation, assumes equality of rights and duties, partners' autonomy and mutual tolerance (Furmankiewicz and Królikowska 2010: 46, see also Googins and Rochlin 2002: 130-131).

Sharing goals does not guarantee the durability of a partnership, but definitely can be a supporting factor. As a matter of fact, the participation of partners in a decision-making process and mutual trust are the basis of a partnership. Both take a long time to become

established. Therefore sectoral partnerships can be treated as a center of building mutual reliance between founding members.

### **Local Action Groups and the idea of the LEADER approach**

Local Action Groups (LAGs) are a perfect example of sectoral partnerships which function in rural areas. The short history of LAGs in Poland makes it difficult to evaluate their effectiveness. It is possible to point out that the LAG approach is an example of effective and instrumental partnership, which was established to create and implement local development strategies. However, sectoral partnerships are not spontaneous grassroots community organizations and they do not have as their primary goal the increased participation in the decision-making process at the local level (Furmankiewicz 2006: 130).

The origin of LAGs is associated with the implementation of the LEADER approach in EU member states. It was created in the early 1990s as tool for the recovery of rural European areas. During the 1970s and 1980s, the European Common Agricultural Policy succeeded in stimulating agricultural production, but simultaneously had some negative effects (social, economic and ecological) which had not been known before in these rural areas. Among them we find the declining numbers of small agricultural producers who were replaced by specialized companies, an increasing level of unemployment, and depopulation of rural areas as well as the appearance of internal tensions and a growing atomization of the rural community.

Initially, the LEADER approach was an experiment (initiated in the Scandinavian states) used to suppress negative trends in rural areas. Gradually, it became an important model of rural development, based on bottom-up initiatives and rural community commitment (Adamski 2008: 88-89). The additional value of the bottom-up approach was to strengthen the coherence of implemented projects, increase the quality of governance and contribute to the consolidation of social capital in rural areas. The anticipated results of the local strategies implementation by LAGs include the efficient use of local resources (both human and natural) as well as the accommodation of needs expressed by different entities located in a given area.

The implementation of the LEADER approach started in EU member states in 1991. Originally, LEADER was as a European Initiative, and was implemented in the individual member states separately. Till the end of 2006 three rounds of LEADER were accomplished.

### **Beginnings of the LEADER approach in Poland**

In Poland, LEADER started in 2004 under the Sectoral Operational Programme "Restructuring and modernization of food sector and rural development 2004-2006", the Pilot Leader + Programme (PPL+) and implemented as a Measure 2.7. The PPL+ was made up of two schemes. The Scheme I was especially important for establishing sectoral partnerships. It was implemented until 2006 and aimed to support the process of creating Local Action Groups, allowing local communities to take part in the analyzing process of the development potential of rural areas as well as preparing Integrated Rural Development Strategy (IRDS) on that basis. Until the end of 2006, under the Scheme I, 167 projects were selected for implementation (from 249 applications). From among applying subjects, the most active were local authorities. Their projects amounted 67 per cent of total number of applications (Śpiewak 2008: 140).

The activities financed under the Scheme I should have helped the integration of local partners in building mutual trust and create foundations for a common ground in the future. The Scheme I includes three groups of activities directed at rural areas: the first group comprised information, trainings and promotion activities according to the LEADER, the second group comprised the creation of Integrated Rural Development Strategies, including indispensable technical support such as analysis and experts' report preparation, and the third

group provided consultative and advisory activities which were crucial in the creation of partnerships.

The multi-sectoral partnership formula gave a special emphasis on the LEADER program, at the same time introducing new methods of governance in local units. Actually, the sectoral partnership formula guaranteed members of the rural community the possibility of formal participation in decision making and implementation processes at the local level (Goszczyński 2008: 114). The interesting aspect of the Scheme I realization in Poland was that it engaged approx. 40 per cent of the population located in rural areas. According to the selection criteria of the prepared strategic documents, it has to be noted that the most significant were the experiences and qualifications of local action group members as well as earlier LAG achievements.

### **LEADER approach in Poland during 2007-2013**

LEADER implementation during 2007-2013 shall contribute to the improvement of the quality of life in rural areas by the development of the public services and the creation of alternatives agriculture. Slow structural changes in the agricultural sector, as well as a significant number of farm producers called for the introduction of new supporting instruments, including planning tools and innovations. New program areas offer investment-oriented measures, such as "Adding value to basic agricultural and forestry production" and "Modernisation of agricultural holdings" with the aim of contributing to the technological development in rural areas through the improvement of the production quality, brand and innovative products creation. The quality of life in rural Poland is closely associated with the fate of local agriculture. That is why such a great emphasis is placed on the modernization and diversification of agricultural enterprises, in addition to the improvement of living conditions in relation to the quality of the environment, natural resources, and infrastructure.

A part of the activities financed by LEADER during 2007-2013 period includes the diversification of economic activities by supporting the development of micro-enterprises in rural areas. Such projects create new opportunities for the rural population, affected by high levels of unemployment. The most important tasks include: improving the value of local products, developing the tourism industry, creating trade chains, providing advisory services, as well as other services and increasing the level of alternative energy use to protect the natural environment.

To overcome the high level of unemployment in rural areas, LEADER provided support for activities which would raise skills of rural communities, enable the access to the labor market and create non-agricultural jobs. The Polish National Strategic Reference Framework 2007-2013 estimated that in 2013 the number of people working in the agricultural industry will be 11 people per 100 ha. Simultaneously, the important aspect of rural areas in Podkarpacie region (apart from the creation of the new economic functions and improvement of living conditions) is to restore, protect and maintain the variety of landscape and natural resources, including the preservation of the good and ecological condition of water and soil, richness of habitats, biodiversity as well as the cultural heritage of the region.

The new formula of LEADER for the period 2007-2013 in its axis 4 included such elements as the creation of local development strategies in selected rural areas and the establishment of local action groups as multi-sectoral partnerships (characterized by bottom-up approach to organize rural communities and deal with local issues). Ultimately, the axis 4 of the Rural Development Program 2007-2013 (LEADER) was designed to become the foundation for the axis 3 of this program, aiming at the improvement of the quality of life in rural areas and diversification of the rural economy (Borek 2007: 16). The total LEADER support for 2007-2013 came to 787.5 mln euros.

An important modification connected with new programming period was the progressive formalization of the application procedure. Currently, the formation of new local action groups requires the fulfillment of a wide range of official procedures. One of them is to establish the partnership as a legal person (according to the Polish legal system). The feasible solutions are foundations, associations or unions of associations with a transparent management and decision-making structure (Adamczyk, Gąsiorek and Pomin 2006: 5).

Another requirement of LEADER was to include all the social group representatives in decision-making bodies. Therefore, for the economic and social partners, as well as the representatives of the local community (including all groups such as farmers, women, etc.) at least 50 per cent participation in decision-making process should be guaranteed. Introduction of this condition aimed to prevent the elimination of social and economic partners and suppress the predominant position of the local authorities. At the same time, this regulation seems to indicate the lack of trust in self-reliant management (including coping with formal issues) within the scope of created partnership structures.

The general, statutory goal of the created LAGs should be active participation in rural development. To achieve this, local partnerships are required to possess the economic, human, administrative, and technical potential as well as a supply base to work out and implement the local development strategies. There are both administrative as well as demographic limits to the creation of LAGs which open this source of funding only to municipalities with fewer than twenty thousand inhabitants (Adamczyk, Gąsiorek and Pomin 2006: 16-17). LAGs cannot overlap.

The creation of LAGs needs to be approved by the regional authority and this approval is a condition for drawing support within the framework of the Rural Development Program 2007-2013. The power of regional authorities, manifested in LAGs' selection process and evaluation of the projects, weaken the idea of a bottom-up partnership. Strict rules of LAG functioning, introduced in the new program period of LEADER, have undermined some of the founding principle of the program - grassroots, participatory development. Furthermore, the excess of control and protection mechanisms (such as par representation in decision-making bodies and the necessity of regional authority's acceptance of planned activities) reduce the confidence of social capital located in rural areas. That's why LAGs should be treated as an incubator of social capital, but not its source (Goszczyński 2008: 115).

### **Summary**

Multi-sectorial partnerships are a key element of the EU Program – LEADER, which supports bottom-up approaches consisting of the best local development strategy selection and its implementation by the LAGs. LEADER was designed to improve the socio-economic situation in rural areas, using a territorial-based approach, multi-sectorial integration, shared decision making processes, and the creation of innovative and strategic planning. Although LEADER is far from being perfect, it certainly contributes to a more effective use of endogenous resources (natural, cultural, technological and human) and promotes the overall socio-economic development of rural areas.

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