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DEVELOPING GOVERNANCE NETWORKS IN RURAL AREAS. THE CASE OF LOCAL ACTION GROUPS IN THE SUB-CARPATHIAN REGION¹

This paper examines intersectorial partnerships (IPs) interpreting them through the prism of governance. IPs are exemplified by area-based rural partnerships (Local Action Groups – LAGs) situated in the Sub-Carpathian region (Poland). Mechanisms of the IPs' creation and decisive factors of their activities are identified. An imperative role of the local authorities in establishing and managing the majority of the analysed LAGs was discovered. The utilitarian attitude of the stakeholders towards their IPs has been confirmed. It has been concluded that LAGs are run in the way typical of the representative democracy standing in contradiction to some basic tenets of the theory of governance; however, the partnership model of accomplishing common projects and the positive outcomes of the projects are likely to produce much added-value in the rural communities.

Key words: intersectorial partnership, Local Action Group, governance, rural areas, Poland

1. INTRODUCTION

Intersectorial partnerships (IPs) – understood in terms of voluntary cooperation of entities representing three sectors (public, private, civic) in the process of identifying and defining problems of a public nature and aiming at a joint elaboration of their solutions, while respecting the principle of the partners' equality as far as sharing resources, responsibilities, risks and benefits² – becomes the frequent method of making choices at all levels of political decision-making – European, national, regional and local. Decentralizing public services and respecting the subsidiarity principle in their delivery makes local policy the natural space for creating such partnerships. At the same time, the results of cooperation of three sectors, or its deficit, are the most noticeable in local communities.

IPs are promoted by the European Union as a handy tool of implementing EU policies. The LEADER Programme and the Operational Programme Human Capital for 2007–2013

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² This definition was formulated by the research team for the purposes of the above mentioned research; it is particularly based on: Geddes 1998: 15; Moseley 2003: 6; McQuaid 2010: 128–130; *Partnerstwa lokalne w Polsce...* 2010: 11.

support creating IPs, which were named in the catalogue of auxiliary instruments for rural development (under the Rural Development Programme for 2007–2013 implemented in Poland).

This article presents IPs established in the form of Local Action Groups (LAGs) in the Sub-Carpathian region, their creation and operation. LAGs resulted from the implementation of the EU cohesion policy, therefore their structure and activities are based on patterns already elaborated in the states of „old” Europe. Nevertheless, political and administrative cultures have „revising” influence on LAGs performance – this is the first assumption of the study. The culture of public sector supremacy over other sectors implies the following assumption, that in spite of legal demand for equality of partners, LAGs are dominated by the representatives of local public authorities. Witnessing procedures of applying for EU funds, analysis of goals and activities framed in projects rises the next assumption of a utilitarian approach to local development and IPs as still another way of getting money from the EU.

This study is based on the results of the research accomplished in the framework of the project „Intersectorial Partnerships in the Process of Creation And Implementation of Local Development Strategies in the Sub-Carpathian Region”, scheduled for 2010-2013 and implemented by the Public Administration and Public Policy Unit of the Institute of Political Science, Rzeszow University. The results of the mentioned research have been compared with the results of two other research projects: the one performed at the Wrocław University of Environmental and Life Sciences (Furmankiewicz and Królikowska 2010), another is the common project of the Foundation of Environmental Partnership Foundation and the Unit of Sociology of Rural Areas, the Institute of Sociology, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń (*Partnerstwo lokalne w Polsce...* 2010).

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

IPs can be analyzed from different theoretical angles. M. Furmankiewicz and K. Królikowska believe that the following theories are the most useful: the theory of social exchange, the theory of rational choice, game theory, the theory of social capital, the theory of network exchange and network analysis (Furmankiewicz and Królikowska 2010: 12–30). The definition of IP, presented in the Introduction to the paper, was formulated on the basis of the *governance approach*, which appeared – shortly speaking – as the result of losing by the free market its self-regulating capabilities and the low effectiveness of public policies.

„Governance is a negotiation mechanism for formulating and implementing policy that actively seeks the involvement of stakeholders (...). It is a model of decision-making that emphasizes consensus and output and that claims to be participatory” (García 2006: 745). Governance is a dynamic and interactive, complex and multi-level process implemented in network relations and by common decisions of actors who belong to three sectors: public, private and civic. It is furthermore characterized by (Peters and Pierre 1998: 225–227; Pawłowska 2007: 163):

- dominance of decision-making networks: it is not public institutions but an amorphous set of actors that determines the catalog of public services and the manner of providing them;

- the state's diminished ability to exercise direct control over social policies: state agencies function more as negotiators in decision-making networks, whose actors have equal status;
- mergence of public and private resources: the state uses non-state actors to attain what it cannot achieve by itself and *vice versa*;
- the use of various instruments to implement the goals of social policy: application of „unconventional” methods of obtaining funds and for the provision of public services.

Governance is currently the preferred mechanism of making public decisions; it allows to accomplish goals that otherwise wouldn't be accomplished with restricted resources of public institutions; it optimizes the system of public services delivery, creating an opportunity to articulate those social needs and interests, which are not expressed properly through political contest; reduces the level of possible social conflict resulted from political decisions.

As Bob Jessop estimates, an interesting example of creating and granting an ethical dimension to the discourse and practice of governance is the concept of *good governance* (Jessop 2007: 6). It is a response to the need of subsidiarity in relations between levels of public administration as well as between the latter and a citizen, a businessman and a non-governmental organization; on the other hand – in decreasing the legitimacy of politics and politicians – it is also the way to rebuild public trust by engaging numerous actors in making public choices.

Intersectorial partnership is the form of cooperation and the mechanism of coordinating decisions in the network environment. According to strategic documents and normative acts, as well as principles of good governance, IP has become the inherent element of problem resolution in the public domain. It cannot be treated as a legal instrument, but rather the political scheme of nowadays and in the perceivable future, although changing under evolving conditions, values and economic, social and political objectives.

IPs occur in Poland mostly as area-based partnerships, among which Local Action Groups dominate. LAGs are established in rural areas, they encompass a population of no more than 150 000 inhabitants. They are usually associations of public, private and civic corporations, as well as individuals. The basic principle is that public partners in LAGs cannot exceed 50% of all members. Currently, there are 338 LAGs in Poland.

3. METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH

In this research, IPs are exemplified by 31 Local Action Groups situated in the Sub-Carpathian region. The quantitative research was planned to cover all of them, i.e. the questionnaire was distributed among the members of all LAGs in the region and among members of the LAGs' boards. The results of the latter questionnaire are discussed in the paper.

The questionnaire was distributed during the sessions of general assemblies of the LAGs, reaching also the members of LAGs boards – individuals and representatives of corporate bodies. The high number of returned questionnaires is a considerable advantage of this

method of gathering data, as well as reaching those members who are truly engaged in LAGs' activities – not reaching those who are active, but couldn't participate in a particular session is its back draw.

Altogether, 134 members of 26 LAGs boards filled out the questionnaire. They constitute 89% of all boards' members of all the LAGs in the region³. The highest number of returns from one group was 11, the lowest – 1, medium number of returns was 5. Data was gathered from March until November 2011. The SPSS application has been used for data processing.

The results of the research on the LAGs presented in this paper are only preliminary. The next phase of the research project is based on qualitative research, including interviews with pre-selected 8–10 members of pre-selected 8–10 LAGs in the region, as well as interviews with employees of the LAGs' offices and officials representing their monitoring institution (i.e. regional administration). Some ambiguities that have emerged out of the quantitative research are to be clarified and explained during in-depth analysis that is now under way.

4. RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

Those who answered the questionnaire represented different subjects:

- local governments: 32,09% of respondents;
- NGOs: 24,63%;
- businesses: 5,22%;
- individuals: 35,82%;
- other: 1,49%.

The LAGs observe the principle of at least 50% share of other than public members of their boards. Those representing NGOs, businesses, individual persons and other categories constitute together 67,16% of all the respondents. Almost 25% of the respondents are members of NGOs. Business actors are severely underrepresented, which seems to be a staple feature of the IPs in Poland as also revealed by other research carried out before. For example, a research project conducted in 2009 indicated that in a sample of 46 LAGs from all over Poland the share of business partners was only 13%⁴ (*Partnerstwa lokalne w Polsce...* 2010: 33; see also Furmankiewicz and Królikowska 2010: 161–162). A surprisingly high share of individual partners, who constitute 35.82% of respondents from LAGs' boards seems a peculiar feature of the Polish LAGs.

The data concerning selected issues examined in the questionnaire are presented in the tables 1–11.

The core mission of the LAGs is to author, update and implement strategies of local development. According to the Local Government Act of March the 8th 1990, community government is responsible for all public affairs of a local nature, except those reserved to

³ The LAGs' boards usually count 3–10 members.

⁴ Although these data describe membership of LAGs themselves, not membership of LAGs' boards, the author of this paper estimates that the composition of boards reflects the composition of LAGs in reference to the representation of the three sectors.

other public bodies. Local development rests in the catalogue of those affairs. As a result, community governments are interested in IPs as the mechanism supporting local development. It has been confirmed by the results of the research presented in table 1, where devising the role of local governments in establishing LAGs has been indicated. This tendency has been also approved by the results of the research held by M. Furmankiewicz and K. Królikowska, although in this case devising the role of local governments was indicated less frequently (65% of responses) (Furmankiewicz and Królikowska 2010: 78); as well as the data presented in the report *Partnerstwa lokalne w Polsce – kondycja, struktura, wyzwania (Local partnerships in Poland – state of the art, structure, challenges)*, where 51% of respondents indicated the sole initiative and another 7% – co-initiative of local authorities in establishing LAGs (*Partnerstwa lokalne w Polsce...* 2010: 19).

Table 1
Entity that initiated LAG

Local government	76,1%
NGO	14,9%
Representative of local business	0,7%
Individual	4,5%
Hard to say	1,5%
Other	0,7%
Missing data	1,5%

Table 2
Prerequisites for choosing the LAGs' profile*

Natural features of LAG's territory	37,31%
Local needs	80,59%
Rich traditions of local cooperation	15,67%
Prerequisite to institutionalize local cooperation to get financial support	50,74%

* in tables 2–6, selection of more than one answer was possible

Table 3
The method of recruiting members of LAGs

All institutions and organizations that could be interested in participation were invited	83,58%
Selected institutions and organizations were invited	5,97%
Information about LAG and invitation to membership was published on the website	23,88%
Information about LAG and invitation to membership was published in a customary way	24,62%
Informal contacts were used	42,53%

Table 4
The way of decision-making in LAGs

Voting	97,76%
Getting consensus without voting	9,70%
By circulating the decision draft	1,49%
Hard to say	0,74%

Table 5
The way of decision-making in LAGs' boards

Voting	90,29%
Getting consensus without voting	17,16%
By circulating the decision draft	2,23%
Hard to say	2,23%

Table 6
The way of consulting LAGs' strategies with LAGs' members

The project was passed to LAGs' members who were expected to give their remarks in writing	48,50%
The project was discussed during a dedicated LAG's session	61,19%
Other	8,95%
The strategy was accepted without consultation.	1,49%

Table 7
Is local community informed about LAG's activities?

Yes	97,76%
No	1,50%
Missing data	0,74%

Table 8
Are LAG's decisions consulted with the local community?

Yes	67,91%
No	29,10%
Missing data	2,99%

Table 9
The way of consulting LAGs' decisions*

Consultations during LAG's meetings with the participation of citizens	76,92%
Consultations during citizens' meetings	36,26%
Consultations during meetings of local councils	41,75%
Publications in local press	26,67%
Publications on the website	62,63%
Taking surveys	3,29%
Other	1,09%

* selection of more than one answer was possible

Table 10
Would LAGs be created without financial support from EU?

Yes	2,99%
No	79,86%
Hard to say	14,92%
Missing data	2,23%

Table 11
Will your LAG survive after closing EU financial support?

Yes	32,83%
No	24,63%
Hard to say	40,30%
Missing data	2,24%

The decisive factor in LAGs' creation – according to respondents – were local needs (table 2). Half of the surveyed persons pointed at the prerequisite to institutionalize inter-sectorial cooperation in order to get access to financial resources offered by the EU. It is worthy to mention that according to the results reported in *Partnerstwa lokalne w Polsce...* respondents acknowledged creating partnerships as the precondition for getting financial support from the EU as very important (60%) as well as broadening the opportunities to finance projects (50%). The author of this paper interprets the above data as evidence of a utilitarian approach to IPs, although an issue of building local bonds and activating local communities turned out to be equally important (*Partnerstwa lokalne w Polsce...* 2010: 17–18).

In the prevailing majority of LAGs an open formula of recruiting partners was enacted – all corporate bodies that might be interested in participation in the LAGs were invited (table 3).

However it remains unknown at this stage, who and in what way decided about entities, which might be interested in being part of LAGs; whether truly all business organizations were invited or only some of them were selected; what was the criterion of selection. Half of the surveyed persons pointed at „informal contacts” as a way of recruiting partners. That might be a sign of self-organizing local community, i.e. the local ability to build social networks through participatory interactions (Kooiman 2010: 82).

Making decisions both in LAGs (table 4) and in the LAGs’ boards (table 5) is typical for representative democracy. The overwhelming majority of the respondents pointed at voting as the way of taking decisions. Only 17,16% of those surveyed pointed at getting consensus without voting in LAGs’ boards, while 9,70% – in LAGs themselves. This result is interpreted as the traditionalist attitude towards up-to-date forms of taking decisions in IPs. Inability to conduct the decision-making process that comes-up with a consensus, as well as the concern that such a decision can be easily challenged, are further reasons of abstaining from non-voting manners of making choices. The results of the research published in *Partnerstwa lokalne w Polsce...* confirmed above remarks (*Partnerstwa lokalne w Polsce...* 2010: 24).

LAGs try to preserve transparency of their activities informing local communities about decisions made (table 7), less frequently consulting them before (table 8). Almost one third of respondents answered negatively the corresponding question. Those who answered positively, usually pointed at LAG’s meetings with participation of citizens as the way of referring to local communities (table 9). Numerous respondents pointed at citizens’ meetings and meetings of local councils. Web-sites and local press are also frequently availed.

Creating local development strategy is to be the common effort of partners in LAGs. A considerable part of their activities is dedicated to working-out this document as the prerequisite to apply for project funding. The results of the research reported in *Partnerstwa lokalne w Polsce...* indicate, that in 39% of surveyed LAGs’ broad public consultations – multi-level, multidimensional, based on workshops – preceded the completion of local development strategy; in 24% of cases LAG’s strategy was prepared by external experts; in 19% of LAGs – surveys were conducted and strategy was based on their results; in 10% – strategy was „borrowed” from predecessors (preceding association) of present LAGs (*Partnerstwa lokalne w Polsce...* 2010: 38).

In the survey that is discussed here, respondents were asked about the way LAGs’ strategies were consulted among partners (table 6). Debating on the project during dedicated LAG’s session was indicated most frequently. In some cases such a debate was preceded by the distribution of the project among LAGs’ members who were expected to express their comments; in other cases it was the only way of consulting strategy. Few respondents indicated passing the strategy of voting without previous consultations.

In the opinion of the majority of the respondents, their LAGs would not have been created without the EU’s financial support (table 10). The opinions were more ambivalent as far as the LAGs’ future was concerned after closing of the EU’s support. Slightly more than 40% of the respondents chose an answer „hard to say” (table 11). Yet, one third seemed to have no doubts that their group would continue to exist; one fourth presents an opposite opinion. It seems that without external stimulus, followed by considerable financial support,

IPs – in their prevailing majority – would not be created⁵. Their future – although holding up financial assistance from the EU seems to be remote – depends on the persistence of relations between partners and the scope of social capital that emerged as a result of commonly accomplished projects.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The crisis of public finances and declining legitimacy of political authorities alter the way public decisions are made and implemented. Actors became stakeholders, their number and variety grew. Decision-making centers transform into governance networks, which are also implementing structures, instead of until now administrations. Intersectorial partnerships – the kind of governance network – particularly those area-based and organized as LAGs, are the arrangements aggregating resources of all sectors and empowering their representatives to decide about the directions of rural development and the way it is accomplished.

Although the formal requirements concerning the share of partners in LAGs is observed, the idea of a balanced impact of all stakeholders on decisions is checked by political and administrative cultures of particular social and institutional milieu. The studied LAGs were created predominantly due to an initiative of the local authorities, which was facilitated by the existing legal regulations, their know-how and resources being at their disposal as well as traditional ways of perceiving the government's role as a legitimate addressee of all societal expectations and claims. On the other hand, IPs are the platform of co-deciding and cooperating of various actors; furthermore they perform the tasks aimed at local welfare. LAGs – reducing mutual distrust between stakeholders and impairing the supremacy of local authorities – linking traditional ways of managing public affairs with the governance approach.

The supremacy of the local authorities in the LAGs determines the way in which the partnerships are run, especially in reference to their decision-making procedures, which are typical of the representative, and not participatory or deliberative democracy (Sroka 2009). Also, relations with their internal and external environment resemble those practiced by conventional local collective bodies: their stakeholders accept proposed solutions rather than shape them; decisions are at the most consulted rather than negotiated. The results of the present research show that the partnerships in the Sub-Carpathian region stand in contradiction to some basic tenets of governance.

Although the IPs were an effect of bottom-up initiatives, what was critical for their emergence was the LEADER Initiative and financial resources related to it. Therefore, the utilitarian attitude of the stakeholders towards their partnerships and rather adjusting their activities in accordance with external requirements. It seems, however, that following the development of social capital as a result of commonly performed projects, IPs will become more civic, innovative and creative structures, likely to produce much added-value in rural communities.

⁵ It is worthy to mention that there are some LAGs that were created as successors of previously existing IPs. For example, the Strug River Valley LAG originates in Regional Agricultural and Industrial Association „Strug River Valley” established in 1994 in Tyczyn.

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ROZWIJANIE SIECI WSPÓLRZĄDZENIA NA OBSZARACH WIEJSKICH NA PRZYKŁADZIE LOKALNYCH GRUP DZIAŁANIA W WOJEWÓDZTWIE PODKARPACKIM

W artykule omówione zostały partnerstwa międzysektorowe (PM), widziane przez pryzmat teorii współzrządzenia (*governance*). Egzemplifikacją PM są Lokalne Grupy Działania (LGD) usytuowane na obszarze województwa podkarpackiego. W publikacji przedstawiono mechanizmy powstawania PM i ich działalność. Wykazano wiodącą rolę samorządów lokalnych w powstaniu większości badanych PM i zarządzaniu nimi. Potwierdzona została teza o utylitarnym podejściu interesariuszy do ich partnerstw. W konkluzjach stwierdzono, że LGD działają w sposób charakterystyczny dla demokracji przedstawicielskiej, co pozostaje w sprzeczności z podstawowymi założeniami teorii współzrządzenia. Jednakże partnerski model realizacji wspólnych projektów oraz ich pozytywne rezultaty skutkować będą wartością dodaną w rozwoju wspólnot wiejskich.

Słowa kluczowe: partnerstwo międzysektorowe, Lokalna Grupa Działania, współzrządzenie, obszary wiejskie, Polska