

Territorial Partnerships – Utilitarian Constructions or Genuine Ingenuities.

The Case of Local Action Groups in Sub-Carpathia

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Abstract: *The paper examines territorial partnerships (TPs) exemplified by area-based rural partnerships (Local Action Groups — LAGs) situated in the Sub-Carpathian region (Poland). Distribution of membership, mechanism of their creation and decisive factors of their activities are identified. An imperative role of the local authorities in establishing and managing of LAGs has been uncovered. The hypotheses on the utilitarian attitude towards TPs, raised in the paper, hasn't been entirely corroborated. The results of the research indicated local needs as the most important prerequisite of creating TPs. The conclusion of the analysis is that although LAGs stood in contradiction to the basic tenets of the LEADER approach, the partnership model of accomplishing common goals is likely to produce much added-value in the rural communities.*

Keywords: *Territorial partnership, Local Action Group, rural areas, Poland, LEADER*

Introduction

The use of partnerships in delivering public services can be traced back to the 1980s, when they appeared on a broad basis, in reference to the New Public Management (Moseley 2003). At first, partnerships were of public-private character but as early as in the 1990s the potential of the civic sector was appreciated in this respect. Partnerships were helped by the recognition of the principle of subsidiarity

(Buller 2000) — alongside decentralization — as one of the major guidelines for public sector reforms, as well as the broad reception of governance as the complex way of policy formation and public services delivery.

Since the early 1990s partnerships were recommended as the European Community's instrument to fight unemployment, poverty and exclusion. Almost simultaneously, they started to be seen as a handy tool to solve complex area-based problems in many rural communities, such as unemployment, outflow of the young people, economic divide.

Territorial partnership (TP) is a voluntary cooperation of actors anchored in the specified territory, representing public, private and civic sectors. Those actors collaborate in identifying and defining problems of a public nature and jointly elaborate their solutions. The principle of the partners' equality as far as sharing resources, responsibilities, risks and benefits among actors is respected (Little 2001; Shortall 2004; Shortall and Shucksmith 1998). TPs have been widely investigated since the late 1990s (Moseley 2003) — numerous studies reported the experience of the rural partnerships either in one country (Bruckmeier 2000; Buller 2000; Marquardt et al. 2012; Mehnen et al. 2013; Osti 2000; Pérez 2000; Scott 2003; Shortall 2004; Shortall and Shucksmith 1998; Shucksmith 2010; Šaradín and Šulák 2015) or comparing the experience of several countries (Chevalier 2012; Chevalier et al. 2012; Dargan and Shucksmith 2008; Derkzen 2008; Halamska and Maurel 2010; Kull 2008). Those studies predominantly examined partnerships, which took the form of Local Action Groups (LAGs), established in the framework of the LEADER Programme of the European Union. LEADER, apart from supporting development of rural areas — still neglected in spite of significant funding of European agriculture — was supposed to bring 'added value' of closer cooperation of local stakeholders, based on the set of principles, which earned the name 'LEADER approach'. Those principles were: area-based local development strategies, bottom-up approach, public-private partnerships, facilitating innovation, integrated and multi-sectoral actions, networking, and cooperation (European Commission 2006).

In Poland, LAGs were investigated in the projects of Halamska et al (2010), Bukraba-Rylska (2011), Furmankiewicz and Królikowska (2010), Furmankiewicz et al. (2010), Kniec (2010), Psyk-Piotrowska et al. (2013), Pawłowska et al. (2014). The study reported in the present paper discusses the existing LAGs in one of the sixteen Polish regions — the peripherally placed Sub-Carpathia. Yet, the paper refers only to the partial results of the larger research (more in: Pawłowska et al. 2014), and it aims to test one of its hypotheses, i.e. hypothesis concerning the utilitarian character of LAGs in Poland.

The paper is organized in the following way: theoretical background, hypothesis and methodology of the research are discussed in the succeeding part of the paper.

The results of the research are presented in the third part; they are followed by discussion and eventually by conclusions.

Theoretical framework, hypothesis and methodology of the research

The partnerships applicable to the public sector refer to cooperatively delivered services (i.e. public-private partnerships; public-civic partnerships) and cooperatively implemented policies (i.e. multi- or cross-sectorial partnerships). Students of partnerships usually agree on the few of their features, such as bringing together interests drawn from more than one sector to produce agreement; having collective aims and a strategy to achieve them; sharing risks, resources and skills; achieving common benefit and synergy (Hutchinson and Campbell 1998).

Territorial partnerships are forms of cooperation involving several actors whose common denominator is their anchorage in the same, relatively homogenous territory. Those actors are close to each other in a geographic sense as well as in a symbolic way. They have approximately similar experiences related to the economy, society and culture of the given area. Such area-based partnerships are characterized by: the formal organizational structure meeting the needs of decision-making and implementation; the merger of interests and the commitment of a range of different partners; the common action programme (Geddes 1998; Shortall 2004). Local partnerships of this kind are believed to be capable of solving diverse and interrelated problems that appear in rural areas, more efficiently than actors acting independently. Territorial partnerships — prompted by an idea of good governance and promoted by the EU's policies — are also the product of the neo-endogenous approach, adopted by LEADER, 'whereby top-down programmes meet bottom-up approaches to development' (Dargan and Shucksmith 2008: 286).

The present analysis is based on the hypothesis that the Polish TPs, exemplified by LAGs, are in a way utilitarian 'constructions' — their actions are based on calculated decisions, and are not entirely consistent with the objectives inherent in the LEADER approach, which is their original framework. The utilitarian attitude towards TPs has been already identified by Javier Pérez (2000) in reference to TPs in Spain, or by Petra Derkzen (2008) in reference to TPs in Wales. In reference to Poland, this hypothesis seems to be shared by Pascal Chevalier and Marie-Claude Maurel (2010), as well as Maria Halamska et al. (2010).

Utilitarian approach to territorial partnerships is accompanied by the desire to keep them, as a fitting form of cooperation between the various community stakeholders. Thus, efforts to 'domesticate' solutions promoted by the LEADER, i.e. to

adapt partnerships to the conditions prevailing in the rural areas in Poland — the residual business, few and weak civic organizations and the dominant local government.

When the reported research was held (2010–2013), there were 338 LAGs in Poland. They covered 89 % of the territory of the country (which amounted to 93.22 % of the areas entitled to be supported by the Rural Development Programme) and were inhabited by 91.29 % of the Polish rural population (which amounted to 44 % of the entire population of the country) (MRiRW 2009).

Present research addressed 31 LAGs situated in the Sub-Carpathian voivodship (South-East border region of Poland). The quantitative research addressed all LAGs — questionnaire was distributed among their members (N=1557). It consisted of 30 closed and open questions — the first half of them referred to the following issues: members' recruitment procedure; prerequisites for establishing a LAG; the way of informing and consulting LAG's members and the residents of the area of a LAG; the decision-making within the group and a LAG's future. This part of the questionnaire was addressed to all respondents. The second half of questions was addressed to the respondents who declared themselves as individual members of the LAGs. Those questions concerned: the manner and prerequisites of being involved in a LAG; the scope and manner of being informed and consulted on LAG's decisions; the representativeness of a LAG for a local community; evaluating an activity of a LAG and their own activity within the framework of a LAG; barriers to the development of a LAG and personal involvement in local development before a LAG was established. Also questions concerning the respondent him/herself: gender, age, education, place of residence, relationship with the area of activity of the LAG, employment, and experience in political and social activities were included. The return of questionnaires was 33 % out of 26 LAGs. The quantitative research was held since March till November 2011.

As the present article refers only to the one hypothesis made in the course of the research, the results of its qualitative part will be analysed fragmentarily.

The quantitative research was supplemented by semi-structured interviews with members of selected LAGs. Initially, the research project addressed 8 to 10 LAGs from four sub-regions (according to NUTS) of Sub-Carpathian region. To some extent those sub-regions represent the internal diversity of the discussed territory. From 8 to 10 interviewees were to be selected from among members of selected LAGs. This intention, however, was not accomplished due to disinterest or reluctance to participate in research and organizational difficulties, such as changes in offices and boards of LAGs, and "tight" calendar of LAGs' activities. Eventually, the decision was made to carry out qualitative research in those LAGs that were interested and which managed to find people ready to give an interview. All in all, 75 persons from 13 LAGs were interviewed between November 2011 and June 2013.

As the selection (if we can call it “selection” at all) of interviewees was rather random, the representativeness of this stage of the research can be easily questioned. Therefore, the results of this stage of the research complement the present discussion only occasionally.

Results of the research

The members representing non-public sectors (NGOs, businesses, individual persons) constituted together 63.9 % of all the respondents (Table 1). Business actors were severely underrepresented, which seems to be a staple feature of the TPs in Poland¹. The high share of individual partners — they constituted over one third of all members in the Sub-Carpathian LAGs — seems a peculiar characteristics of the Polish partnerships, as well². It means that those respondents legitimately represented only themselves. In fact, to gain membership of a LAG they usually needed the support of either other members or local residents. Especially in the latter case, such persons — in their own opinion and in the opinion of their neighbourhood — might have represented the whole community.

Table 1 Share of different types of entities among respondents (%).

Local governments	26.6
Federations of local governments	1.4
NGOs	19.7
Businesses	8.1
Individuals	34.4
Other	1.7
ND	8.1

Source: own research.

A fairly common practice observed during the study was joining the LAG by members of social organizations (especially of rural housewives), which didn't have legal personality at the time LAGs were established. Being not eligible to join the LAG as an organization, its members joined individually to influence the LAG's activities and be able to use the resources that LAG offered. This phenomenon might be an evidence of the character of civil society in rural areas in Sub-Carpathia, where preference was given to informal activities, based on neighbourly ties, firmly rooted in local tradition of cooperation. On the other hand, Sub-Carpathia was one of Polish regions with the highest percentage of registered NGOs in rural areas. Furthermore, at the time of the research, more organizations were registered in the rural than in urban municipalities (in 2012 — 55.9 %) (GUS).

Nearly 75 % of respondents indicated that LAG, they were members of, had been set up by local authorities. Slightly more than 12 % of respondents indicated an NGO as the architect of their LAG. The remaining 13 % of respondents pointed at an individual person, a business partner, or other actor, either chose the answer ‘hard to say.’ The particular engagement of local authorities in establishing TPs is due to three reasons: firstly, the mission — in reference to LAG, it is adopting, updating and implementing of local development strategy, which addresses the territory of participating municipalities. The development of local community is the responsibility of local governments as well. LAGs therefore could be interpreted as the tool of community development. Secondly, LAGs brought additional resources to local development, maybe not very large comparing to the budget, which was at the disposal of municipalities, but sufficient to make an effort to claim them and to support with them minor, maybe not so pressing, but needed investments, for which always lacked money. And thirdly, the potential of local governments predisposed them to organize LAG, as well as accomplish of larger (costly) projects. Municipalities have financial resources and potential to access funds to cover the costs of projects before these projects would be cleared and the funds returned. They have property that can be dedicated to the use (free or for a minimal charge) of LAG. Local officials have the know-how regarding the acquisition of European funds, and the mayors and local councillors have contacts, often informal, with officials in monitoring institutions that might facilitate the creation and subsequent operation of the LAG.

The key variable which might confirm or falsify the hypothesis on the utilitarian attitude towards TPs is the interpretation of the reasons for which they were established. LAGs’ members were asked about prerequisites for choosing the LAG’s profile. More than one reason for the creation of LAG was usually indicated (Table 2), however, the choices were not assigned values. Other words, respondents were not asked to organize their answers in order from the most to the least important.

The local needs seem to be the principal factor — two thirds of respondents pointed at this prerequisite. Over 46 % of surveyed persons pointed at the necessity to institutionalize territorial cooperation in order to gain access to financial resources offered by the EU. Considerable number of respondents noted the importance of natural features of LAG’s territory (it could be an important reason to join forces for the development of tourism in the region), and only every fifth respondent mentioned a tradition of previous cooperation at the local level as the basis for the present collaboration in the framework of LAG. The latter figure might be an evidence of already mentioned deficiency of civil society in the region.

Table 2 Prerequisites for choosing the LAGs' profile* (%).

Natural features of LAG's territory	37.4
Local needs	74.8
Rich traditions of local cooperation	20.9
Prerequisite to institutionalize local cooperation to get financial support	46.5

* Selection of more than one answer was possible.

Source: own research.

Individual members were also asked about their motives to enter TPs. Their answers are presented in the Table 3. Preferences were not assigned to the answers, therefore they have an equal weight.

Table 3 Individual members' objectives of the commitment to the LAG* (%).

Personal need for action	35.9
The need to do something for the good of the local community	61.8
Pressure from the organizers of the LAG	2.8
Encouragement by family, friends and colleagues	4.5
Curiosity of the new form of action	35.4
The desire to gain new experience and skills useful in the professional work	21.9
Other objectives	0.6
ND	19.6

* Selection of more than one answer was possible.

Source: own research.

Over 60 % of respondents pointed at the need to do something good for their community as their objective to join the LAG. It indicates that neither private interest nor expected benefits from the participation in the partnership were crucial. It also seems that the future individual LAGs' members did not have any knowledge or vision of partnerships and what goals they are to achieve. Over one third of respondents cited personal predispositions — the need for being active and/or curiosity of a new form of action — as the reason for their accession to the LAG. Remarkably, also a large part of those responding to the survey expected that participation in the partnership will allow them to improve their professional competence.

Interesting conclusions can be drawn from the comparison of the above observations and the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. Senior citizens (61 years and older) dominate among the individual members of Sub-Carpathian LAGs (49.4 % of respondents). Most of them are no longer active professionally

and want to devote their time to matters of importance to their local community. In addition, as confirmed by the information obtained during the interviews, these are people who have always been local activists, i.e. were involved in the local affairs already before 1989. The second largest group (29.7 %) of LAGs' individual members in the category of age were young people (18–35 years). In the case of involvement of people in this age group, two factors may be crucial:

- 1) the inherent volunteer potential;
- 2) the desire to build their own network of contacts in order to develop personal career.

Decision-making within LAGs may indicate the hierarchy of principles of their members, which can take us closer to test the hypothesis of the present paper. The logic of partnership — inherent in LEADER approach — would suggest building consensus among local actors in order to attain common decisions. But legal regulations, experience and expectations of monitoring institutions push LAGs toward traditional patterns of majority voting. 92.8 % of the respondents indicated voting as the way of taking decisions in the LAGs. Only 9.8 % of the respondents (respondents could select more than one answer, therefore the numbers do not add up to 100) indicated 'getting consensus without voting' as the way decisions are made in their group.

These data are somewhat corroborated by the results of the part of questionnaire addressed to individual members, who were asked about the actor taking up actual decisions in the LAG (Table 4).

Table 4 Actor taking up actual decisions in the LAG* (%).

The Board of the LAG	51.7
The Board after consultation with all LAG's members	31.7
The Board after consultation with selected LAG's members	11.2
I don't know, how decisions are made	2.8
Other answer	1.1
ND	12.9

* Selection of more than one answer was possible.

Source: own research.

Over a half of respondents pointed at the Board of the LAG (its executive) and only the Board taking decisions. But almost one third indicated that decisions of the Board are taken after consultations with all members of the LAG. It is probable, that the way of making decisions depends on the issue. We may diagnose that there was some internal discussion preceding final decision, however, the high proportion of respondents indicating the Board being the unique decision-making body leads

to recognize its arbitrariness. Further it leads us to the conclusion, that LAGs move along “beaten paths” when it comes to decision-making — their level of innovativeness in this respect is limited.

Territorial partnerships were established to mobilize local resources to make them more involved in rural development. The respondents were asked about their assessment of LAGs as partnerships for local development. The distribution of answers is presented in Table 5.

Table 5 Assessment of LAG as partnership for local development (%).

This solution works	56.7
This solution rather works	36.8
This solution doesn't quite work	1.8
This solution doesn't work at all	0.6
Other answer	0.6
ND	3.5

Source: own research.

Over 93 % of respondents agreed that TPs work for local development — well over half of the respondents seemed to have no doubts about it; some over one third of them rather agreed with this statement.

A positive evaluation of LAGs' activities should correspond to expectations concerning their continuation with or without financial support from the EU. 68.3 % of respondents agreed that without EU funding their LAG would not have been created. The opinions were more ambivalent as far as the LAGs' future (following the termination of EU support) was concerned. Almost one half of the respondents chose an answer ‘hard to say,’ yet, one third of respondents was positive that their groups will continue to exist (Table 6). This corroborate previous assessment of LAGs' as partnerships for local development.

Table 6 Would LAGs be created without financial support from EU?/Will LAGs survive without EU financial support? (%).

	Creation	Survival
Yes	6.4	32.8
No	68.3	26.6
Hard to say	23.4	40.3
Missing data	1.9	2.2

Source: own research.

Discussion

In the course of discussion I want to mark some staple features of investigated LAGs. Overrepresentation of individuals among members in the time when the research was held was basically the result of two conditions. Accession to LAGs by numerous individuals was due to the lack of legal personality of the organizations to which they belonged (only in the course of LAGs' activities some civic organizations gained their legal personality). Therefore — in order their organizations benefited from LAGs — they decided to participate individually.

Another feature, which has been noticed in this research, as well as other studies, is double identification of some of LAGs' members (Halamska et al. 2010; Furmankiewicz 2013). This, however, is not exclusively Polish case. Michael Kull, investigating LAGs in Germany, recorded the same phenomenon, and called it 'multipositionality' (2008). Double identification, 'multipositionality,' or tokenism (as Furmankiewicz named it) is understood as representing an NGO or business in the LAG, while being at the same time an employee of the municipality, councilman or mayor. In the interpretation of Furmankiewicz, this situation makes the representation of interests of private and civic sectors dubious. On the other hand, in Michael Kull's research some respondents perceived it as an advantage, due to the professionalism of local office holders.

Double identification strengthened the role of public institutions inside LAGs, which coincides with the principal role of local authorities in Sub-Carpathian LAGs. It, however, does not make them unique either in reference to the LAGs in other Polish regions or other European Countries³. In Northern Ireland, two thirds of LAGs were initiated by local governments (Scott 2003: 285). The special role of local officials in creating and functioning of LAGs basically refers to two factors:

- 1) local authorities were the most interested in building LAGs due to the community development carried out as their own task;
- 2) better access to numerous resources (organizational, financial, human) and know-how about EU programmes.

The key role of the local executive, i.e. the mayor, played in LAG's establishment was frequently and strongly emphasized, for example in the following manner:

(...) well, it was also owing to the mayors' help, because a group like ours, if it had had no support on the part of this mayor, that mayor and another one, it would have stood no chance of achieving anything at the Marshal Office [*regional self-government — LEADER's Managing Authority*] (...) they, being from territorial self-government, are knowledgeable about all those structures, [*they know*] where to find money and how to arrange it all (VI/8/ZA).

The special interest of local authorities in LAGs was further explained by Pascal Chevalier and Marie-Claude Maurel (2010: 38), who stated that ‘the majority of local officials are convinced that the LEADER Programme is a good business.’ According to them, this ‘godsend’ from the EU ‘can support construction of the infrastructure indispensable to their municipalities.’ The present research revealed that for a number of civic organisations this was the primary drive as well. It was often articulated during interviews that complemented quantitative research. One of our interviewees said:

To tell you the truth, it was all initiated by the people from the [*territorial*] self-government, small town mayors, rural mayors. This started because you need to find the money, and how else to find it? There was no other way than to create this association [*i.e. the LAG*]. (IV)

Interestingly, also the number of NGOs emerged because of the opportunity, created by LEADER Programme, to obtain financial support for their activities. Previously existing informal groups (mostly of rural housewives and young people) transformed into associations and recorded in the court in order to obtain legal personality necessary to apply for financial support. In 2008, in Sub-Carpathian region, 4600 NGOs were registered as active, while in 2014 — 5300 (GUS). Obviously not all organizations were created due to the LEADER, however, in respect of some of them situated in rural areas LEADER might contributed. Often, however, the question of the sustainability of these organizations is raised — will they be active when the inflow of EU funds is closed?

Local needs followed by the prerequisite to institutionalize cooperation in order to get financial support were pointed as the main reasons to establish LAGs. Indeed, apart from the support for farmers, rural areas in Poland didn’t benefit as much as urban ones from the economic transformation and accession to the EU. With minor revenue and underdeveloped local infrastructure, rural areas — especially those distant from the cities — were in the deadlock. Local authorities recognized the new opportunities for financing the development of their municipalities as the chance that cannot be missed. Therefore, their serious commitment to LAGs. This commitment was also shared by numerous NGOs, which mostly have to rely on subsidies from public authorities; access to additional funding made them more independent and active. Thus, the thesis on the utilitarian attitude towards TPs needs to be moderated in respect of local authorities and social organizations; in respect to individual members it has to be rejected, as majority of those who responded to the questionnaire declared either the will to be active for sake of their community or personal need for action or curiosity of the new form of action as the reasons of their engagement in the LAG.

Patterns of traditional decision-making support the view, that ‘external’ outcomes of TPs (accomplished projects) prevail over the internal ‘learning’ of partnership way of doing things (deliberation, consensus-building). It is worthy to notice, that the first are those which LAGs are accountable for. To the lesser degree they are monitored according to consensus building or overall accomplishment of the principles of LEADER approach. It could be also assumed that partners were not familiar with alternative to voting decision-making procedures. Furthermore, choices made in voting are easier to control while those being the result of a long process of negotiations can be easily questioned and contested. Results of present research reaffirm earlier findings by Mark Scott researching LAGs in Northern Ireland. He noticed, that: ‘Often, inexperienced community interests expressed difficulty in adapting to partnership meetings, suggesting the need for participants to develop partnership-working skills and for partnerships to embrace commonly agreed practices rather than adopt procedures familiar to a single group of stakeholders.’ (2003: 291).

The results of the research show the overall satisfaction with TPs as the solution for local development. Still, no one would even have thought about establishing a TP focused on rural development had it not been for the EU’s external stimulus. The role of external support is not so obvious in respect of LAGs’ future. Opinions on the possibility of maintaining the partnerships are divergent, which was expressed both in quantitative and qualitative research. Some of our interviewees put it bluntly:

At this time, when funds are available, then somebody has to manage them, thus it [LAG] definitely is needed. On the other hand, when all means are exhausted, all activities are completed, virtually this structure has no sense. (III/1/C)

Another interviewee joined above opinion saying:

There would be a chance, but you’d have to find the aim of this association [LAG], what it would have to do. (VI/5/CA)

Such opinions indicate a lack of ideas for the development of TPs’ potential in the absence of inflow of EU funds. But other interlocutors looked at the problem from another angle — for them LAGs have become a permanent part of the local environment, so the problem would not be what to do, but how that ‘something’ is to be financed. Here, local government appeared an important stakeholder once again:

If [local] authorities push this association [LAG] and want it to function, it will work, and if the authorities withdraw themselves, it will not have a chance. (VI/4/CA)

The above statement does also indirectly refer to the state of civil society in Poland — weak and dependent, particularly in the rural areas. However, hopes and expectations concerning TPs as the civic organizations were also expressed:

We, in addition to LEADER, are a normal association, and no one will tell us: 'you get no money from LEADER, close the association'; no — we are legal and operating as-association, and this is our treasure, these some years of work pays off, because here are the people who are adamant, not to be chuck out of this social activity. (IV)

The results of the research in relation to the LAGs' future cannot be unambiguously interpreted. As with other EU initiatives, LEADER's outcomes depend on the specific characteristics of the local community. A continuation of activities taken by LAGs can be anticipated in those municipalities, where civic engagement had been already substantial before LAGs were established. In other places it is much dependent on the social capital developed as the 'added value' of LEADER Initiative. This issue would need, however, further investigation.

Conclusions

Without a doubt, LEADER was the driving force for cross-sector partnerships. Though, the desire to take advantage of the benefits of the program prompted the LAGs' animators to juggle the stakeholders' affiliation to different sectors. The problem of dual representation hasn't been addressed efficiently by policy makers for the 2014–2020 programming period. The requirement that no single interest group represents more than 49 % of the voting rights in the LAG⁴ is insufficient to prevent public sector's overrepresentation in TPs.

Determination to benefit from the LEADER Programme was so great that principles of LEADER approach were treated only nominally. It refers, *inter alia*, to making decisions inside partnerships — dependent on traditional, hierarchical structures. Currently, when the paradigm of community-led local development is being implemented, LAGs are expected to meet the challenge to better align decision-making to the logic of partnership.

The attitude towards TPs was linked, on the one hand, to the limited pool of available funds and also the large needs of rural communities in the field of technical and social infrastructure. On the other hand, perhaps it was also related to the lack of experience in terms of pooling the resources of various sectors in order to achieve common goals, which was particularly visible in the very weak involvement of representatives of the business sector. Notwithstanding, the results of the research make us to revise the original hypothesis on the utilitarian attitude towards the LAGs, which might rather be categorized as pragmatic.

In the long run, the result of top-down imposed partnership model of local development in rural areas can manifest itself in the 'added value' — improved trust between stakeholders and between partnerships and locals who will eventually con-

sider TPs a good way of doing things. Partnerships still have a chance to turn into innovative and creative actors in terms of local development, thereby departing from the original businesslike approach. It is worth to recall the words of Javier Pérez: ‘paradigm shift would only come, if ever, in the mid- or long term.’ Observing the change in the perception of the LAGs, the author adds that the partnership will cease to be a ‘source of power and of public funding,’ and became ‘a more radical tool for development’ (2000: 203–204).

It is worth noting that Pérez, as well as other authors writing about European TPs in the turn of 20th and 21st centuries, had formulated his observations over a decade before the present study was accomplished. However, with regard to Polish society, but I believe also in respect to other societies of Central-Eastern Europe, his opinion has lost little of its meaning. Partnership approach in those countries was introduced later than in Spain or other countries of the “old” Europe. Owing to EU Rural Development Programme for 2014–2020, LAGs prolong their activities. They can also advance their organization and better adjust to local conditions implementing community-led local development, which is an upgrade of LEADER approach. The year of 2020, when LAGs will have to fend for themselves, will bring the real test of their genuineness.

Notes

- ¹ A study conducted in 2009 indicated that in a sample of 46 LAGs from all over Poland the share of business partners was only 13 % (Knieć, 2010).
- ² Study conducted by Knieć (2010) revealed 41 % share of individual members in 46 LAGs from all over Poland.
- ³ 44 % of the respondents in the study of Knieć (2010) pointed at local authorities as initiators of LAGs.
- ⁴ Art. 32 (2), Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013.

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