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The functioning of the local group of actions “Brama Lubuska” in the opinion of residents of member communes

Summary. The aim of the article is to present the level of knowledge about the Leader programme and the Local Action Group among the inhabitants of the LAG “Brama Lubuska” area consisting of 14 member communes. The study was carried out by means of a questionnaire survey on a sample of 200 inhabitants of communes comprising the LAG “Brama Lubuska” in 2015 and 2020. Most of the inhabitants have heard about the Leader programme and the Local Action Group. In addition, respondents are positive about the group’s initiative and activities. It is possible to notice an increase in satisfaction with the quality of advice provided at the LAG headquarters. The inhabitants are beginning to notice the undertakings carried out under the Leader initiative in the area of member communes. As the main source of information on the LAG and Leader, the respondents indicate the media, leaflets and information received in commune offices.

Key words: Local Action Group, local development, Leader, rural areas, counties

Introduction

Rural areas account for approximately 90% of the European Union’s territory and are inhabited by more than half of the Community. Rural areas are the primary suppliers of raw materials and food products while simultaneously serving recreational purposes. Furthermore, they become increasingly attractive for the urban population, who escapes from the city rush by investing their capital in these areas. The increase in migration from cities to rural areas, primarily near large metropolitan areas is due to lower housing prices and lower home construction costs. Moreover, it highlights the growing economic status which makes it possible to live in a more ecological area.

Between 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 in Poland, the rural development policy was implemented on the basis of the Rural Development Programme (RDP). One of the directions of action RDP was the Leader programme, in French (acronym): “linking rural development activities”, which involved many grassroots initiatives¹. The idea of creat-

¹ In the years 2004–2006, under the Rural Development Plan and the Sectoral Operational Programme (SOP), a pilot Leader+ programme was launched to support projects related to the development and implementation of the LSR of rural areas. The programme was supposed to increase the attractiveness of areas from the point of view of potential residence and business activity [MRiRW 2004].

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ing such links is a peculiar method of implementing and mobilising rural development through the activation of local communities, which constitutes a certain type of cooperation of the rural community².

The history of the initiative Leader dates back to the '90s of the 20th century, yet in Poland, it rose in importance in 2007 when the process of establishing Local action groups (LAGs) began³. Furthermore, the process of creating and implementing the Local Development Strategy, along with innovative projects, was also launched through sectoral cooperation and increased activation of the rural community⁴ (Table 1).

Table 1. History of the Leader initiative

Leader programme	Duration	Main activities and assumptions
Leader I	1991–1993	Creating a new approach to aid rural development
Leader II	1994–1999	Continuation and expansion of experience and activities of Leader I
Leader +	2000–2006	Implementation of Local Development Strategies, creations of links activating local communities at the local level
Leader (axis 4)	2007–2013	Increased activation of the rural population, raised efficiency in managing local resources and their importance
Leader (CLLD – Community-Led Local Development) (cont. of Leader 2007–2013)	2014–2020	“Supporting local development in rural areas” within the priority of “supporting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas”

Source: own study based on Hadyński J., Kiryluk-Dryjska E., Chmieliński P.: Program Leader w zrównoważonym rozwoju obszarów wiejskich (Leader Programme in Sustainable Rural Development), IERiGŻ-PIB, Warszawa 2015, Information about Leader, <http://www.prow2007.sbr.pl/index,32,60,pl.html> (access: 20.12.2020).

On the one hand, Leader is a relatively simple method, focusing on several primary principles: territoriality – the programme is implemented on a given territory, which,

² A. Wojewódzka-Wiewiórska: The role of local action groups in rural development in Poland based on a selected example, *Annals of the Polish Association of Agricultural and Agrobusiness Economists* 2019, XXI(4), p. 579–582; K. Zajda: Problems of functioning of Polish local action groups from the perspective of the social capital concept, *Eastern European Countryside* 2014, 20, p. 73–90.

³ Principles of creating Local Action Groups: 1) The LAG must involve a three-sector partnership, i.e. consisting of representatives of three sectors, 2) it must have administrative potential, necessary to manage public funds and implement the LDS (Local Development Strategy), 3) it must operate in an area of between 10 and 150 thousand residents and conduct operations developed within the LDS, 4) only one Local Action Group can prosper in a given area.

⁴ A. Nedelcua, A. Tatarub, J. Subić, B. Kuzmand: The Local Action Group, Local Sevelopment Model based on community. Case study LGA “Land of Vineyards and Wine” Vrancea. *Procedia Economics and Finance* 2015, 22, p. 706–710; A. Volk, S. Bojnc: Local action groups and the LEADER co-financing of rural development projects in Slovenia, *Agricultural Economics* 2014, 60 (8), p. 364–375; J. Reijnen: The role of local authorities in fostering local initiatives. [In] Sutton A (ed.): *Local initiatives. Alternative path for development*. Press Interuniversitaires Europeennes 1987, p. 55–57.

as a rule, must be coherent, i.e. have a common identity⁵. The initiative's grassroots character constitutes the second principle, under which the inhabitants should be activated in the decision-making process through the LAGs⁶. The integrity of approach and managing cases in the context of a specific area, as well as focusing attention on its conditions, resources, opportunities and limitations are associated with the third principle. The fourth rule relates to the partnership⁷.

Based on the same principles, LAGs consist of three categories of partners, i.e. public, private and social sectors. The first group comprises primarily of municipalities or, less frequently, county local self-governments. The second consists of entrepreneurs and private individuals, while the third includes organisations, i.e. various associations and foundations⁸.

The partnership further indicates that the group is open to new members and does not limit itself to the circle of the founding individuals. The fifth principle revolves around self-management at the local level⁹. The LAG is a decision-making unit managing its finances according to the established rules¹⁰. Innovation constitutes the sixth rule. Leader focuses on searching for new innovative methods of solving problems which the inhabitants of a given area encounter¹¹.

However, as Ewa Kiryluk-Dryjska et al. [2016]¹² indicate, there is a problem with the recognition of the programme and Local action groups among the inhabitants of rural areas, which may result in the lack of, or insufficient use of pro-development instruments intended for particular municipalities. Therefore, the article attempts to confront the thesis posed by Ewa Kiryluk-Dryjska theses with the results of research carried out at the LAG "Brama Lubuska". The aim of the study was to determine the level of knowledge of the Leader programme and the activities of the Local action group "Brama Lubuska" and to assess changes in this respect in the years 2015–2020.

⁵ R. Hoffmann, N. Hoffmann: The Leader Programme as an impulse for new projects in rural areas, *Quaestiones Geographicae* 2018, 37 (2), p. 141–150.

⁶ N. Krasniqi: The role and impact of local action groups in rural development of Kosovo. *Journal of Agribusiness and Rural Development* 2020, 1 (55), p. 17–28.

⁷ M. Furmankiewicz, K. Królikowska: Partnerstwo terytorialne na obszarach wiejskich w Polsce w latach 1994–2006 (Territorial partnership in rural areas in Poland in 1994–2006), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Przyrodniczego we Wrocławiu, Wrocław 2010.

⁸ A. Wojewódzka-Wiewiórska: The role of local..., op. cit., p. 579–582; K. Zajda: Problems of functioning..., op. cit., p. 75–90.

⁹ J. Hadyński, E. Kiryluk-Dryjska, P. Chmieliński: Program Leader w zrównoważonym rozwoju obszarów wiejskich (Leader Programme in Sustainable Rural Development), IERiGŻ-PIB, Warszawa 2015, p. 20–50.

¹⁰ E. Psyk-Piotrowska, K. Zajda: Struktura i uwarunkowania kapitału społecznego lokalnych grup działania (Structure and conditions of social capital of local action groups), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2013, p. 15–30.

¹¹ M. Wieruszewska, R. Kamiński, P. Krośniak: Między interwencją a interakcją (Between intervention and interaction), Wydawnictwo Naukowe SCHOLAR, Warszawa 2011, p. 18–29.

¹² E. Kiryluk-Dryjska, J. Hadyński, P. Sobieszkańska: Ocena skuteczności działań programu Leader przez mieszkańców obszarów wiejskich w Polsce (Evaluation of the effectiveness of the Leader program by the inhabitants of rural areas in Poland), *Studia KPZK* 2016, 167, p. 357–366.

Materials and methods

The paper is based on the study by Jakub Hadyński et al. [2015], illustrating the opinion of the inhabitants about the Local Action Group and the Leader programme. The survey, conducted in two periods, was attended by 200 random persons from a deliberately selected area of 14 municipalities forming the LAG “Brama Lubuska”¹³. The sample was representative in 5 out of 7 survey groups (Table 2). Indeed, the 60+ and 16–19 groups were not 100% representative of the respective fractions.

This is due to the fact that programmes under the Leader initiative mostly refer to unemployed people and their main objective is activation and/or assistance in expanding their activities. The study was also to focus on reaching young people - potential beneficiaries of Leader programmes.

The study was conducted at the turn of August and September in 2015 and 2020, in a paper form (direct form), covering the inhabitants from the member communes. The source material were the results questionnaires results. Groups in both periods did not overlap and numbered 100 each. In order to obtain a uniform evaluation of the results in the 2020 survey, residents of the Łagów municipality were omitted, as in 2015 they were not part of the association. The survey consisted of three parts. The first one related to the development of individual municipalities, the second – the knowledge of the Local action group “Brama Lubuska” and the Leader programme, while the third part consisted of the respondent’s metrics, which made it possible to create age groups according to the BDL numbering. Each of the respondents independently completed the questionnaire.

The study makes use of literature on rural development, Rural Development Programme for 2007–2013 and 2014–2020, Leader programme, and operation of the Local Action Group. Furthermore, the paper includes references to the Local Development Strategy of the LAG “Brama Lubuska” (2007–2013 Local Development Strategy “Działaj z Nami” of the LAG¹⁴, 2014–2020 Local Development Strategy of the LAG “Brama Lubuska”¹⁵), evaluation reports and information leaflets.

Research results and discussion

The LAG “Brama Lubuska” was established in 2007 and is located in the Lubuskie Voivodeship, accounting for 23.5% of its surface area of Gorzów and Zielona Góra sub-regions. Moreover, it borders with Wielkopolskie Voivodeship from the east. The Association has a huge tourist, localisation and agricultural potential. In the area of the

¹³ Bledzew, Międzyrzecz, Przytoczna, Pszczew, Skwierzyna, Dobiegniew, Drezdenko, Stare Kurowo, Strzelce Krajeńskie, Zwierzyn, Lubrza, Łagów, Skąpe, Szczaniec, Świebodzin (excluding the city of Świebodzin).

¹⁴ Stowarzyszenie LGD Brama Lubuska (The Brama Lubuska LAG Association): Lokalna Strategia Rozwoju LGD „Działaj z Nami” 2007-2013 (Local Development Strategy of the LAG “Działaj z Nami” 2007–2013), <http://www.lgddzn.pl/files/2014/lsr/lsr.doc> (access: 20.12.2020).

¹⁵ Stowarzyszenie LGD Brama Lubuska (The Brama Lubuska LAG Association): Lokalna Strategia Rozwoju LGD “Brama Lubuska” 2014–2020 (2014–2020 Local Development Strategy of the LAG “Brama Lubuska”), http://www.lgddzn.pl/files/lsr/lsr_bl_30_01_2020.pdf (access: 20.12.2020).

Association there are many forms of nature conservation and historical monuments. Moreover, the LAG is located at the crossing of two important national roads – A2 freeway and S3 expressway. The area is favourably located and well connected with larger towns, as they are in close proximity to the communes comprising the Association. However, the demographic situation of the municipalities forming the LAG is deteriorating from year to year: the number of population has decreased (125 919 persons in 2019, no data for 2020), while the processes of ageing¹⁶ and dynamic emigration of the population are progressing. Furthermore, in 2010, the rate of the natural increase assumed a negative value.

Table 2. Characteristics of respondents by age, education, and socio-professional activity in 2015 and 2020

	2015 n = 100 [%]	2020 n = 100 [%]	Average of years 2015 and 2020
Age			
16–19	7	11	9,0
20–24	10	9	9,5
25–34	21	20	20,5
35–44	20	20	20,0
45–54	15	16	15,5
55–64	17	18	17,5
over 65	10	6	8,0
Education			
Primary	8	6	7,0
Lower secondary school	5	3	4,0
Vocational	20	25	22,5
Secondary	20	15	17,5
Higher vocational	30	31	30,5
Higher	17	20	18,5
Socio-professional activity			
Student	17	30	23,5
Unemployed	8	6	7,0
Pensioner	10	6	8,0
Employed	65	58	61,5

Source: own study based on the survey results.

¹⁶ Population according to age: 2007: pre-working – 14%, working – 69%, retirement – 17%, 2019: pre-working – 15%, working – 64%, retirement – 21% [BDL, GUS 2020].

Both in 2015 and 2020, more than half of the respondents were women. In 2015, 51% of respondents aged 20–44 while 49% of surveyed individuals aged 16–19 and 45–64. In most cases, the respondents were characterised by higher vocational (30%), vocational (20%) and secondary education (20%). The largest socio-professional group participating in the study consisted of employed persons (65%), while the least numerous were the unemployed (8%). In 2020, the structure of the population participating in the study was similar. The majority of respondents were characterised by higher vocational (31%), vocational (25%) and higher education (20%). More than 56% of surveyed individuals were people aged 25–44. The employed accounted for 58%, while 30% were studying at school or university. The survey was the least frequently participated by the unemployed and retired persons (6% each).

The respondents positively assessed the level of municipal development. It is possible to observe a certain shift in particular years. In 2020, the respondents were more inclined to indicate good and very good assessments than in 2015 (Figure 1).

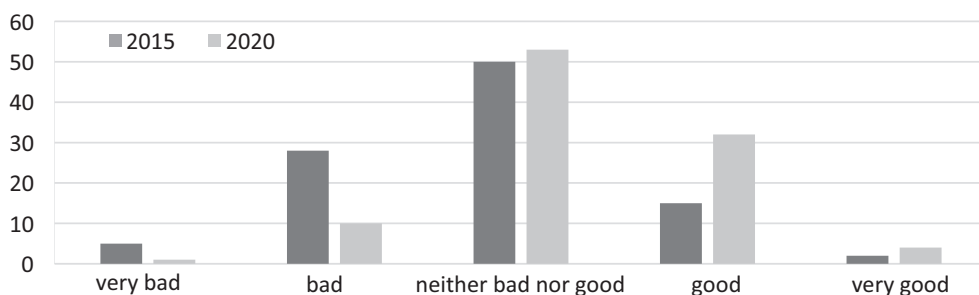


Figure 1. Evaluation of the level general of municipal development in 2015 and 2020 [%]

Source: own study based on the survey results from 2015 – n = 100, and 2020 – n = 100, Hadyński et al. 2015.

A similar situation occurred in relation to indicating the investments conducted in municipalities and determining the degree of satisfaction with their implementation. In 2015, the respondents demonstrated an average level of interest in investments implemented in the municipality. 56% of the respondents stated that they had heard about new investments, yet only 48% indicated examples of such initiatives. In turn, in 2020, as many as 60% of inhabitants had heard about the investments, while 58% were able to point those implemented by the municipality, which indicates that the level of knowledge and interest in the municipal development is increasing (Figure 2). Investments most often indicated by inhabitants include: reconstruction of pavements, cycle paths and village halls.

From 2015 to 2020, municipalities launched a more dynamic promotion of their investments. Most of them were active in social media and maintained their own websites.

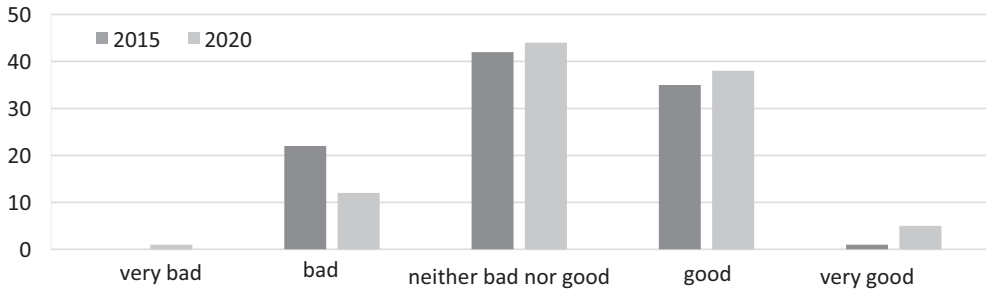


Figure 2. The level of respondents' satisfaction with general investments implemented in the municipality in 2015 and 2020 [%]

Source: own study based on the survey results from 2015 – n = 100, and 2020 – n = 100, Hadyński et al. 2015.

The study furthermore indicated rising knowledge of the Leader programme. In 2020, 58% of the respondents stated that they are acquainted with the Leader programme, which, compared to 2015, constitutes an increase of 8 percentage point (p.p.) (Figure 3). It is also worth indicating that, among people familiar with the Leader programme in 2015, the largest group consisted of persons aged 25–44, with higher education (73%), higher vocational education (71%) and employed (61%)¹⁷. However, in 2020, the highest knowledge was demonstrated by young individuals aged 18–35 (70%), studying (58%) and employed (70%), with higher or secondary education (60% each). The respondents indicated media, leaflets and information obtained in the municipal offices, as well as the headquarters of the Local action groups as their primary sources of information. Moreover, the majority of the surveyed individuals expressed an opinion that the Leader initiative should focus primarily on social development.

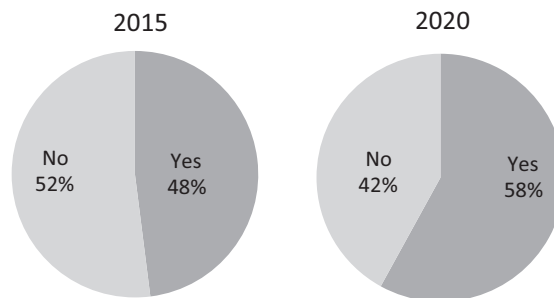


Figure 3. Knowledge of the Leader programme in 2015 and 2020

Source: own study based on the survey results from 2015 – n = 100, and 2020 – n = 100, Hadyński et al. 2015.

¹⁷ Structure of the population who did and did not hear about the Leader programme. Each category = 100%.

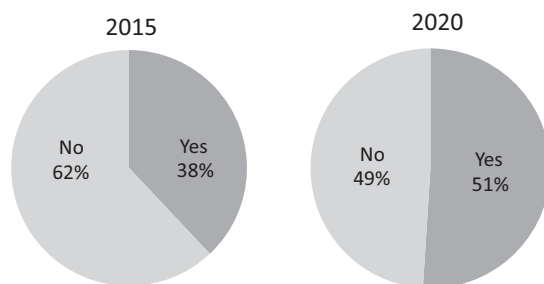


Figure 4. Knowledge of the activity of the Local action group “Brama Lubuska” in 2015 and 2020

Source: own study based on the survey results from 2015 – n = 100, and 2020 – n = 100, Hadyński et al. 2015.

An upward trend occurred also in the case of the LAG “Brama Lubuska”. In 2020, more than half of the respondents claimed that can describe what the LAG does yet only 43% were able to indicate examples of projects. In comparison, in 2015, there were only 14 of them (Figure 4). Similarly to the knowledge of the Leader programme, persons with higher education, studying, employed and aged 25–44 were acquainted with the LAGs.

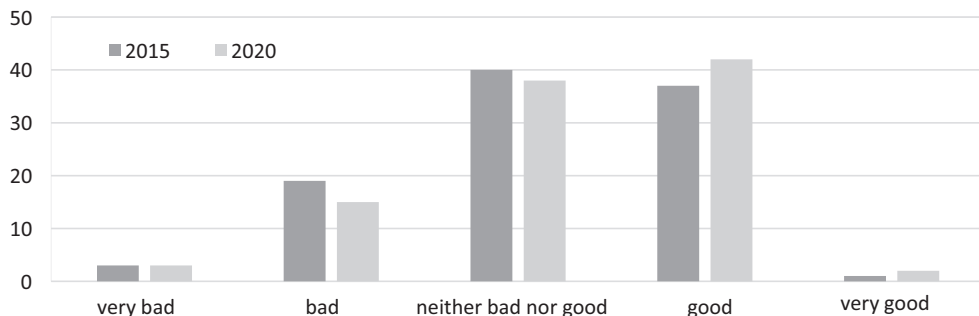


Figure 5. Assessment of the activity of the Local action group “Brama Lubuska” by respondents in 2015 and 2020 [%]

Source: own study based on the survey results from 2015 – n = 100, and 2020 – n = 100, Hadyński et al. 2015.

Nevertheless, it should be indicated that, in both study periods, the activity of the Local action group “Brama Lubuska” was assessed positively. In 2020, it is possible to observe a shift towards a good assessment. The respondents evaluated the quality of the LAGs’ advisory services, as well as the quality of assistance in completing the applications (Figure 5).

Conclusions

The LAG “Brama Lubuska” area is an area with great tourist, localisation and agricultural potential, but still struggling with demographic problems. Still more people leave the area than live in it. As Szaban [2019]¹⁸ points out, an opportunity for the area is the increase in the quality of technical infrastructure, the opening and development of new companies, as well as activation and social security.

The residents more frequently recognise the Leader programme, as well as are able to identify actions and projects undertaken by the Local Action Group. With regard to the study by Jakub Hadyński et. al [2015]¹⁹, in which more than 60% of respondents did not possess any knowledge of the Leader initiative, it should be considered a satisfactory result. This may indicate an increase in the awareness and knowledge of the residents, which, as Julita Orłowska [2018]²⁰ and Jacek Chądzyński et al. [2007]²¹ claim, constitutes one of the basic factors of local development. In their research, Ewa Kiryluk-Dryjska et al. [2016]²² indicate that the wide dissemination of information on the Leader initiative by Local Action Groups, potentially “inspiring the inhabitants of rural areas to increase the entrepreneurship, is also of great importance in raising awareness”²³. With regard to the significant potential of the areas of the LAG “Brama Lubuska”, such a popularisation may become crucial for its dynamic development.

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¹⁸ D. Szaban: Poziom życia w powiatach województwa lubuskiego (The standard of living in the poviats of the Lubuskie Voivodeship), *Wiadomości Statystyczne. The Polish Statistician* 2019, 64 (11), p. 25–41.

¹⁹ J. Hadyński, E. Kiryluk-Dryjska, P. Chmieliński: *Program Leader...*, op. cit., p. 20–100.

²⁰ J. Orłowska: Czynniki i bariery rozwoju lokalnego. [W:] *Współczesne problemy ekonomiczne w badaniach młodych naukowców. Tom 1. Wzrost, rozwój i polityka gospodarcza* (Factors and barriers of local development. [In] E. Gruszewska, K. Karpińska, A. Protasiewicz (eds.): *Contemporary economic problems in research by young scientists. Volume 1. Growth, development and economic policy. PTE. Białystok* 2018, p. 44–56.

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²² E. Kiryluk-Dryjska, J. Hadyński, P. Sobieszkańska: *Ocena skuteczności działań programu Leader przez mieszkańców obszarów wiejskich...*, op. cit., p. 357–366.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 365.

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