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THE “LOWER SILESIAN RURAL RENEWAL” PROGRAM AS AN EXAMPLE OF A REGIONAL POLICY INSTRUMENT OF IMPACT ON RURAL AREAS

Abstract. This paper deals with issues related to local support programs which include implementation instruments for a regional policy focused on rural development. The purpose of the study is to discuss the particularities of the “Lower Silesian Rural Renewal” program as an example of a local instrument for implementing regional policy assumptions. The research period is 2008–2018. Geographically, this study covered 119 Lower Silesian municipalities which accessed financial support under the regional program concerned. The research was based on secondary sources collected with the documentary method and a literature study. The descriptive and comparative methods were used to produce the results. In the study period, ca. 2,000 local projects worth nearly PLN 31 million were co-financed under the “Lower Silesian Rural Renewal” program. The conclusion from this research is that local support programs for rural development offer the following advantages: a unique adaptation to local particularities; easier access for beneficiaries; and activation of the local community. In turn, the small amount of subsidies for eligible projects (from PLN 1,000 to PLN 30,000) can be considered a disadvantage of the “Lower Silesian Rural Renewal” program. On the other hand, great interest from beneficiaries and the large number of projects implemented suggest that Lower Silesian organizations and local communities need and willingly use that instrument.

Keywords: regional policy, support programs, regional development, rural areas

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, more and more attention is paid to the role of cities, regions, or smaller territorial entities in supporting the economic development and setting its directions on the geographical area they are located in. In rural areas, this means adopting an approach where sustainable development goals and economic development

strategies are pursued by taking into account the unique social and institutional aspects and the peculiar local economic potential. Therefore, focus is on solutions which are better adapted to local particularities and take into consideration the significant disparities between regions. This allows to find ideas and instruments oriented on a specific location (region, municipality or town). They are developed at regional level by local authorities,

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local organizations or communities which know best the specificity of a given area. Their objective is to raise competitiveness, look after unique resources, activate local communities, and build social capital on a local scale. These solutions are assumed to complement more comprehensive national or international schemes which sometimes fail to address the specific local conditions. Hence, local support solutions comprise small grants awarded by voivodeship-level authorities to local initiatives which drive positive changes in the life of the local population.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The purpose of this study is to characterize the "Lower Silesian Rural Renewal" local support program as an example of a regional policy instrument used to solve rural development problems at local level. The timeframe of this research is the period from 2008 (beginning of the program) to 2018. The geographic range includes 119 rural and urban-rural municipalities located in the Dolnośląskie voivodeship where projects financed under the program considered were carried out throughout the research period. This field of research was chosen primarily because the Dolnośląskie voivodeship was one of the first in Poland to manifest interest in this problem and officially accepted "rural renewal" as a program carried out by the Dolnośląskie voivodeship authorities. This paper uses secondary sources of data. The literature review and discussion were based on available bibliographical sources. The documentary method was also used in order to collect source materials. This allowed to access the documentation of the program and fund allocation reports; both types of materials were provided by the Marshal Office of the Dolnośląskie voivodeship (primarily by the Rural Areas Development Department). The descriptive and comparative methods were used in processing the results. The findings are presented as a description, in tables and graphically.

STATE OF THE ART

In the era of rapid changes in rural areas – driven by reinvestment and recapitalization with European Union funds – it is important to look at rural development from the regional perspective. According to the guidelines published by the European Economic and Social Committee, villages and small towns should be

provided with access to financial resources which will enable them to better respond to the needs of the residents (European Economic and Social Committee, 2017). Narrowing the gap in social and economic development between regions is one of the fundamental objectives of the European Union. The structural policy (also known as cohesion policy) is a basic tool used in the pursuit of this goal. The guidelines, rules and instruments set out in the policy are supposed to stimulate long-term adaptation of social and economic structures to make the regions and national economies more competitive. The goals of the cohesion policy (economic growth, creating new jobs, increasing innovation and competitiveness) outline the developmental objectives for regions and local government units as active entities of the European structural policy. Therefore, local government units are believed to be responsible for economic and social development of their territory (Hübler, 2009). In rural areas, more and more attention is paid to non-agricultural development which is meant to enable a better use of labor and to increase the activity of rural residents (Uglis, 2004; Nowakowska, 2015; Bogusz, 2018). Villages and small towns have valuable assets which may be used to maintain or develop the local economy. They are related to agriculture, forestry and energy production, rural tourism, health tourism, cultural festivals, environmental protection and education (ECOVAST, 2013).

Endogenous factors play an important role as regional development factors. They are decisive for the quality of human relations, mutual correlations and interactions. Also, they facilitate cooperation by stimulating competition and enterprise, which has a beneficial impact on regional competitiveness (Horton, 2005). In addition to local government, businesses, scientific and educational centers, and active non-governmental organizations are an inherent component of the process of local development. The beneficial processes of endogenous local development are the effect of bottom-up social initiatives and of local enterprise and innovation (Heffner, 2008). The cohesion policy requires the beneficiaries to present project concepts adapted to local realities (Ward and Lowe, 2004), submit applications for funding and engage in project implementation. Structural funds will not solve all the problems of European rural areas. However, external financial support stimulates rural development processes (Michalewska-Pawlak, 2013). Despite the fact that the external public policy may be an

impulse to endogenous changes, it cannot make a great change in the use of local assets whose specific attributes result from geographical and climate conditions, natural resources, population structure, infrastructural investments, local leadership skills or governance quality of local authorities (Bosworth et al., 2015).

Programs designed to support rural and agricultural development and to reinforce the potential of the local population have become a tool of the regional policy. Initially, they were implemented as mechanisms meant to rearrange and streamline actions taken in rural areas, or as exchange-oriented initiatives. Thus, the village renewal movement was established together with special supporting programs whose essence was to provide bottom-up motivation for residents and to propose a method for designing rural development strategies. The village renewal program is related to the approach represented by the European Council for the Village and Small Towns who formulated "A Strategy for Rural Europe" in 1994. The strategy emphasizes the importance of actions taken to preserve the vitality and traditional values of rural areas. The village renewal movement is believed to be an important local driving force of rural development (ECOVAST, 1994). In Poland, village renewal is the largest and longest operating regional program of motivating local communities; the Opolskie voivodeship was the first to implement it. The program has a local nature and is usually associated with the place of residence. Village Renewal is a process of providing life conditions for rural residents, with the local community acting as an empowered animator (Wilczyński, 2003).

RESULTS OF INVESTIGATION

The Dolnośląskie voivodeship is a heterogeneous region in terms of economic and natural conditions. It is highly urbanized, with most of the population living in large urban centers. However, 29% of the population live in rural areas (Kutkowska, 2012). Local particularities and experience from the implementation of the program in the Opolskie voivodeship convinced Lower Silesian authorities to introduce their own village renewal program as an instrument of regional policy. Its goals included actions taken to integrate rural communities, provide rural areas with capital (in terms of technical and social infrastructure, landscape, architecture, and services), initiate undertakings to improve living conditions

in villages, and ensure economic independence to villages. Therefore, better conditions for settling, investing, and developing businesses that give jobs and salaries in non-agricultural areas were expected. Officially named "Lower Silesian Rural Renewal", the program started to be implemented in 2008. Each year, the Dolnośląskie Voivodeship Assembly allocates budget funds to projects covered by the program to ensure the continuity of ongoing projects, as included and planned in rural strategies. Program implementation is based on three rules: a bottom-up approach (engagement and responsibility of the local community); subsidiarity (village/municipality partnership); synergy of local development factors: villages have leadership, a development strategy accepted and developed by the residents, and are provided with municipal support in the implementation of the strategy (UMWD, 2019).

Under the "Lower Silesian Rural Renewal" Program, the Board of the Dolnośląskie voivodeship has been annually announcing two calls for applications for funds to implement investment projects ("Renewal of the Lower Silesian Rural Areas" [ODW]) and what is referred to as soft projects ("Undertakings promoting the idea of Lower Silesian rural renewal" [PPIOWD]). In 2008–2018, a total of almost PLN 31 million was allocated in the budget of the Lower Silesian regional assembly to the implementation of the Lower Silesian Rural Renewal Program. The expenditure of funds in each year covered by the analysis, split into two grants disbursed under "Lower Silesian Rural Renewal" Program, is presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Under the ODW, funds have been granted since 2008. The grant co-finances social infrastructure projects, i.e. projects regarding: renovation and equipment of public facilities; construction and reconstruction of bike lanes and hiking trails; and purchase of folk costumes and musical instruments for bands who cultivate the traditions of local communities. The beneficiaries are rural and urban-rural municipalities with a population of up to 5,000. Financial support is provided as a refund of up to 50% of eligible project costs, however no more than PLN 30,000. Each year, several dozen municipalities were financed under the program (170 in 2008). Throughout the program term, support was granted to 1207 projects (Table 1).

"Undertakings promoting the idea of the Lower Silesian Village renewal" (PPIOWD) is the second grant available under the local subsidy program

Table 1. Number and value of applications submitted and funded under the “Renewal of the Lower Silesian Rural Areas” grant (2008–2018)

Year	Number of projects applying for funds	Amount requested (PLN)	Number of applications funded	Funds granted (PLN)
2008	196	3,122,779	170	2,748,635
2009	127	2,225,393	126	2,200,552
2010	131	2,980,020	128	2,791,396
2011	102	2,868,598	101	2,807,840
2012	99	2,472,847	86	2,099,209
2013	105	2,551,202	91	2,167,115
2014	91	2,379,201	85	2,237,495
2015	108	2,380,354	108	2,380,354
2016	115	2,944,272	115	2,944,272
2017	105	2,851,943	93	2,516,117
2018	107	2,977,614	104	2,489,328
TOTAL	1,286	29,754,223	1,207	27,382,313

Source: own study based on data from UMWD, 2019.

Table 2. Number and value of applications submitted and funded under the “Undertakings promoting the idea of Lower Silesian rural renewal” grant (2009–2018)

Year	Number of projects applying for funds	Amount requested (PLN)	Number of applications funded	Funds granted (PLN)
2009	39	144,943	39	144,943
2010	101	412,664	101	412,664
2011	77	339,430	77	339,430
2012	152	704,729	104	483,339
2013	159	733,475	129	597,360
2014	88	415,910	88	415,910
2015	127	596,996	84	398,510
2016	64	304,853	51	245,086
2017	54	255,110	42	196,232
2018	53	253,880	42	200,000
TOTAL	914	4,161,990	757	3,433,474

Source: own study based on data from UMWD, 2019.

covered by this study. It was designed to support local initiatives and was targeted at non-governmental organizations, associations, and informal groups of

residents. The amount to be financed varies in the range from PLN 1,000 to PLN 5,000. Funds are allocated to the production of information boards, calendars and

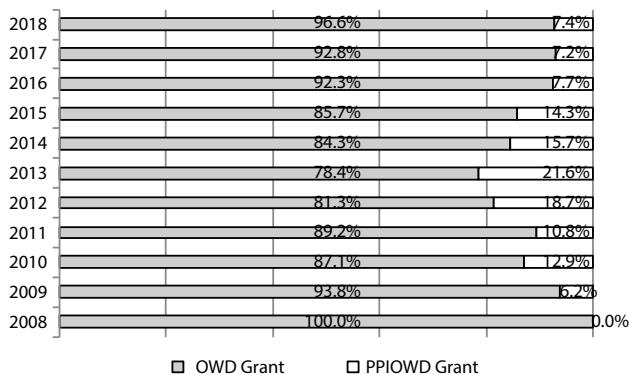


Fig. 1. Structure of total funds allocated under the “Lower Silesian Rural Renewal” program in 2008–2018

Source: own study based on data from UMWD, 2019.

advertising materials, to the organization of events, and to website development. In 2009–2018, even though the amount of fund per project was small for this kind of grants, 757 projects were co-financed with a total of over PLN 3.4 million (Table 2).

The comparison of Tables 1 and 2 reveals relatively small differences between the number of projects applying for funds ($1286 + 914 = 2200$) and of funded applications ($1207 + 757 = 1964$). This means that ca. 9 out of

10 submitted applications were successful in obtaining some funds. The analysis of results shows that the total value of funds granted under the PPIOWD was significantly smaller than under the ODW. The share of the two grants in the total amount of funding allocated by the Lower Silesian Rural Renewal program is shown in Figure 1.

The share of funds disbursed under the ODW varied in the range of 78.4% in 2013 to 100% in 2008. The “Undertakings promoting the idea of the Lower Silesian rural renewal” grant has been implemented since 2009. That year, it accounted for 6.2% of total co-financing allocated under the “Lower Silesian Rural Renewal” Program. In the next years, the share of support provided under the PPIOWD increased until 2013, and then began to decrease. In 2016–2018, it stabilized at approximately 7% of the amount disbursed under the aid scheme considered (Fig. 1). This research also included an analysis of selected data on the program’s geographic heterogeneity. Figure 2 compares the use of funds in the ODW between 2008 and 2018.

As shown by the results, municipalities differ strongly in the amount of funds accessed under the “Lower Silesian Rural Renewal” (ODW) Program (Fig. 2). Understanding the real causes of this state of affairs is a challenge for further research.

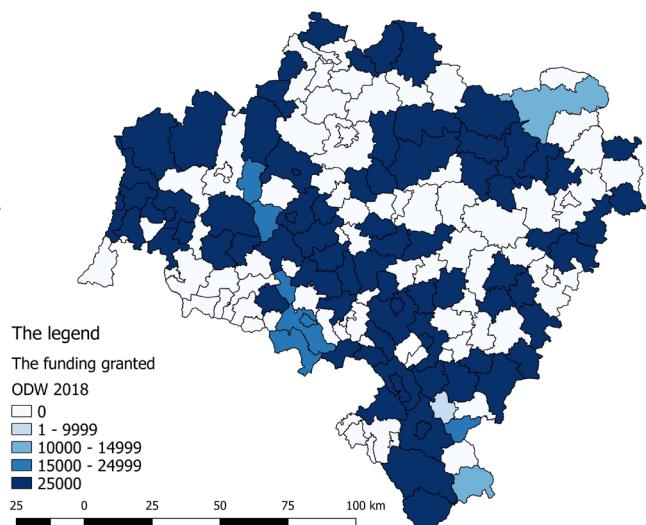
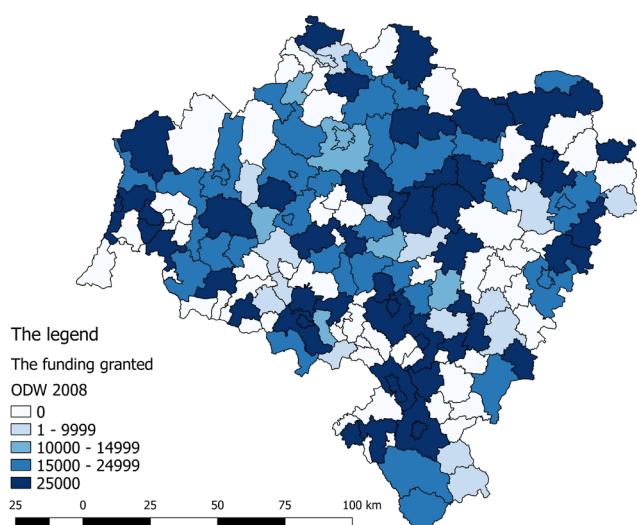


Fig. 2. Geographic distribution of funds granted under the “Renewal of the Lower Silesian Village” program in 2008 and 2018 (by municipality)

Source: own study.

DISCUSSION

An effective implementation of a local rural development policy depends on access to funding and on the local community's capacities, which in turn depend on the quality of local resources, social ties and leadership of local institutions (Orbán, 2015). The literature provides many examples of studies on the impact of regional policy on rural development emphasizing the importance of a network-based community development model which allows for individual freedom to create and produce new community goods and values (Jørund Lønning, 2018). The challenges of local development arising from the variety of needs of the citizens, organizations, enterprises and local authorities require sophisticated and comprehensive strategies and socially responsible good practices conducive to building social well-being. Special programs, cooperation networks and exchange of experiences are proposed, with the main objective being to strengthen local social capital and to strive for sustainable rural development (David et al., 2013). Renewal of villages is among the most frequently analyzed issues related to the implementation of regional policies for rural areas. The prevalence of rural renewal in Poland as a method of rural revival in particular regions can be considered the basic objective, whereas EU funding should only provide necessary assistance rather than be an end in itself (Wilczyński, 2007). Examples of good practices in the field of rural renewal are available in both national (Pasis and Kasprzycki, 2007) and foreign literature (Damyanovic and Reinwald, 2014). This suggests that an efficient use of financial resources allocated to support local initiatives at municipality or village level can bring benefits to residents and be an inspiration for others to undertake similar activities in their *little homelands*.

As shown by the analysis of the implementation of the “Lower Silesian Rural Renewal” program, the beneficiaries cooperate in formal and informal organizational structures. They raise funds for their initiatives and bear responsibility for specific results affecting the development of their territory. As a result of the “Lower Silesian Rural Renewal” program, the residents' approach to regional cooperation has changed, and so has their awareness of benefits brought by their own initiatives. Also, they have a greater sense of responsibility for their environment (Wijatyk and Czyszczon, 2011).

In the Dolnośląskie voivodeship, research was carried out to determine whether the socio-economic

development gap between rural and urban-rural municipalities has narrowed. It was shown that despite new tools and instruments of local development designed to ensure geographical convergence, the gap between rural and urban-rural municipalities persisted in 2002–2010 (Kazak and Pilawka, 2013). This may confirm the need to search for and implement other solutions that are more tailored to local particularities and can contribute to regional policy objectives, as exemplified by the implementation of the “Lower Silesian Rural Renewal” Program.

The research on the implementation of the Integrated Regional Operational Program for Regional Development of the Dolnośląskie voivodeship (ZPORR) in 2004–2006 showed that, just as in the Lower Silesian Rural Renewal Program, the geographic distribution of funds disbursed is highly uneven. In the case of ZPORR, a higher concentration of financial support was experienced around the main economic centers of the region (Wrocław, Głogów and Wałbrzych) and in the Kłodzko Valley. This can be explained by the accumulation of other stimuli referred to as *pull factors* (Pilawka and Kazak, 2013).

CONCLUSIONS

A regional policy for rural areas may be implemented through various assistance instruments. There are universal national and European-level rural development support programs. However, the approach where local communities and authority representatives contribute more to setting development targets and creating initiatives in the form of local assistance programs is used increasingly often. This is because they are more focused on regional particularities and are able to consider conditions that are unique to their geographical area. Issues often discussed in the context of activation of rural residents and rural development include the renewal of villages. It is recognized as one of the elements of rural development which combines respect for tradition with the need to find a place for villages in a changing world. The “Lower Silesian Rural Renewal” program presented in this study is an example of a local program supporting the renewal of villages as a tool for rural development. The program is led and financially supported by the Marshal's Office of the Dolnośląskie voivodeship. The financial resources allocated under the program can be used in small projects, both *soft* and *hard*. This type of support complements the European Union funds generally available for rural renewal and development.

The advantage of such a local program is that it adapts smoothly to regional or municipal particularities and is relatively easily accessible to potential beneficiaries. On the other hand, a disadvantage may be the small amounts of funding available under the program because this raises the question whether the project is worth enough to reshape Lower Silesian rural areas to a considerable extent. Based on this research, it can be concluded that the "Lower Silesian Rural Renewal" program seems to be an important and necessary tool for development support, as evidenced by great interest from the beneficiaries and the multitude of projects implemented on a local scale in Lower Silesia. The opening of programs and grants intended primarily for local government units and organizations activates processes undertaken by Lower Silesian municipalities. Simultaneously, it shows a deep need for additional sources and forms of investment funding that previously could not be covered by local budgets. In the future, positive experience from the implementation of small grants may provide an educational framework for a larger group of local leaders and could promote stronger social ties and networks which, in turn, will contribute to a better use of unique regional resources and accelerate rural development. In this sense, small amounts of funding available to individual projects are not necessarily a disadvantage of the program, provided that they contribute to social capital. To validate the above thesis, an in-depth analysis and more detailed research must be carried out in the future.

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PROGRAM ODNOWA WSI DOLNOŚLĄSKIEJ JAKO PRZYKŁAD INSTRUMENTU ODDZIAŁYWANIA POLITYKI REGIONALNEJ NA OBSZARACH WIEJSKICH

Abstrakt. Artykuł dotyczy zagadnień związanych z lokalnymi programami pomocowymi będącymi instrumentami realizacji polityki regionalnej ukierunkowanej na rozwój obszarów wiejskich. Celem opracowania jest omówienie specyfiki programu Odnowa Wsi Dolnośląskiej jako przykładu lokalnego instrumentu wdrażania założeń polityki regionalnej. Zakres czasowy badań dotyczy lat 2008–2018, a zasięg terytorialny objął teren 119 dolnośląskich gmin, które korzystały ze wsparcia finansowego w analizowanym programie regionalnym. Badania oparto na źródłach wtórnego, które zebrano dzięki metodzie dokumentacyjnej i studium literatury, a przy opracowaniu wyników użyto metody opisowej i porównawczej. W ramach programu Odnowy Wsi Dolnośląskiej w analizowanym okresie wsparcie otrzymało około 2 tysiące lokalnych projektów na sumę prawie 31 mln złotych. Z przeprowadzonych badań wynika, że zaletą lokalnych programów pomocowych wspomagających rozwój obszarów wiejskich stanowi ich unikatowe dopasowanie do miejscowej specyfiki, łatwiejszy dostęp dla beneficjentów i aktywizowanie społeczności. W przypadku programu Odnowy Wsi Dolnośląskiej za wadę można uznać niewielką wartość dotacji dla wspieranych projektów (1–30 tys. złotych). Z drugiej strony duże zainteresowanie beneficjentów i liczne zrealizowane projekty wskazują, że jest to potrzebny i chętnie wykorzystywany instrument przez dolnośląskie organizacje i lokalne społeczności.

Słowa kluczowe: polityka regionalna, programy pomocowe, rozwój regionalny, obszary wiejskie