

Cross-border Cooperation Between Local Action Groups from Poland and the Czech Republic: Three Case Studies

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Abstract: The paper presents three case studies of cooperation projects involving Local Action Groups (LAGs) from Poland and the Czech Republic. The research involved an analysis of the content of documents, LAG websites and interviews with LAG representatives. The projects were financed from the funds of “Sub-measure 19.3” of the 2014-2020 Rural Development Programme (RDP) in Poland. The aims of the projects concerned, among others: promoting the area of the LAG by exchanging experiences related to tradition, culture, including the promotion of healthy or traditional local dishes; promoting methods of waste segregation and processing; and developing local tourist services through international promotion and networking of services. As the main difficulty the respondents indicated differences in the principles behind accounting the projects, which had to be settled separately with regard to national RDP programmes, even though they are components of a single cooperation project. Czech respondents pointed to a high level of limitations regarding the scope of financing LAG activities. The COVID-19 pandemic, language barriers and geographical distance were mentioned much less. Cross-border cooperation between the LAGs remains relatively weak as partnerships tend to focus on local issues and needs. This may limit the diffusion of innovation and good practices between rural areas.

Keywords: community led-local development; rural development programme; local action groups; cross-border cooperation; Poland; Czech Republic

JEL Classification: O21; D71; L31

1. Introduction

Much attention is paid in contemporary development policies to both the participatory methods of resource management at the local level (Castro et al., 2020; Silva, 2020) and the international cooperation of local communities (Baldersheim et al., 2002; Handley, 2001). Community-Led Local Development (CLLD), derived from European Union (EU) LEADER-type initiatives and programmes (Masot & Alonso, 2017), is nowadays an important method of increasing the participation of local communities in managing local resources and supporting sustainable socio-economic development (Konečný, 2019; Kostalova & Vavra, 2021). In literature on economy it is often analysed as neo-endogenous development, within which an attempt is made to combine local (bottom-up) and supra-local (top-down) aims and needs (Bosworth et al., 2020; Furmankiewicz et al., 2020, 2021a). This results in the forming

of territorial partnerships known as Local Action Groups (LAGs), which receive EU funds for the preparation and implementation of local development strategies (Boukalova & Kolarova, 2014; Furmankiewicz et al., 2021b). One of the important principles of CLLD is cooperation and networking, which means initiating cooperative relations and information exchange between LAGs (European Commission, 2006; Zajda, 2013a) and between local stakeholders within the partnership (Doitchinova & Zaimov, 2015). This principle allows for activity at four levels: the European, the national, the regional and the sub-regional (Magryś, 2009). The first level covers the activities of organizations with a European scope, such as the European LEADER Association for Rural Development (ELARD), which supports about 2,200 LAGs from 26 countries, including non-EU states that implement the LEADER methodology (Marhoff, 2019). Examples of national level organizations include the Polish LAG Network - Federation of Regional LAG Networks based in Łągow, and the National Network of LAGs in the Czech Republic based in Hradec nad Moravicí. The Lower Silesian LAG Partnership Network (Poland) in turn is a regional level example. Both national and international rural networks facilitate access to intangible resources of rural communities such as skills, knowledge or social networks (Magryś, 2009; Skrzypczyński et al., 2021). Literature on the subject often considers cross-EU CLLD approach, as well as European trans-border networks and information transfer as a form of “Europeanisation” processes (Furmankiewicz et al., 2020; Heidenreich, 2019; Maurel, 2008).

Individual LAG engagement in national and international cooperation projects, involving from two to a dozen LAGs, may also be of great importance for local development (Pylkkänen et al., 2020). Collaboration projects usually consist of joint activities over a specified period of time and are financed by the EU or using other sources. Such projects may include both LAGs located in one region (creating, for example, a single marketing product, promoting innovation in short food supply chains), as well as supra-regional and international agreements between LAGs located in many different countries (implementing, for example, the exchange of experiences and information). Territorial partnerships focus on local development, hence literature on the role of international cooperation in the transfer of knowledge and innovation between LAGs is relatively poor. Information on international LAG cooperation projects appears mainly in descriptions within the context of general, national cooperation of local communities. In this paper, we try to contribute to the popularization of the subject of international LAG cooperation, which has so far been relatively rarely discussed in European literature. We focus on regional cross-border cooperation and discuss three examples of projects involving LAGs located in the Lower Silesia region in Poland, and the Liberec and Hradec Králové regions in the Czech Republic.

2. International Cooperation of LAGs in Literature

Local Action Groups, both in Poland and the Czech Republic, are associations of partners representing the public sector (municipalities, municipal budgetary units such as museums, community centres), the economic sector (enterprises, businesspeople, farmers) and the social sector (non-governmental organizations and private persons). They can operate in a selected functional region covering several municipalities in rural areas or several units (districts) in the

city, in accordance with the principles of the CLLD approach promoted by the EU (European Commission, 2014; Furmankiewicz, 2021; Kola-Bezka, 2020; Konečný, 2019). They prepare local development strategies and receive funds (incl. from the EU) for local initiatives supporting social activity and economic development in line with local needs. Such form of territorial governance is one of the possible ways to increase the effectiveness of managing local resources (Babczuk et al., 2017; Boukalova et al., 2016). In addition to local activities the EU documents also draw attention to the “networking” and “collaboration” of LAGs (European Commission, 2018), allowing support for the creation of national and regional LAG networks (Magryś, 2009), as well as their voluntary individual cooperation within so-called cooperation projects for which a special budget line is often allocated (De Luca et al., 2018; Zajda, 2013a). As part of the 2014-2020 Rural Development Programme in Poland, international cooperation may be carried out under Sub-measure 19.3. “Preparation and implementation of activities in the field of cooperation with the local action group”. Cooperation projects may include LAGs located in one region, but also supra-regional and international agreements. They can, inter alia, exchange experiences and information on methods of stimulating development and local social activity.

Similar types of cooperation projects were implemented in the 2007-2013 programming period. According to the research by Wojewódzka-Wiewiórska (2017) 34 international and 189 national projects were implemented in the years 2007-2013 as part of the “Axis 4” of the RDP (within “Measure 421” of the LEADER approach) in Poland. Joint activities most often concerned the development of tourism and the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage. The costs and difficulties related to the coordination of activities due to geographical distance, language barriers and the diversity of legal conditions and formal requirements for LAGs in different EU countries were considered by the author to be the main barriers to international cooperation (Wojewódzka-Wiewiórska, 2017).

Hoffmann and Hoffmann (2018) presented three examples of LAG-formulated international projects concerning the development of the tourist offer in rural areas. One of the projects included the promotion of the international “European St. James Route” with cooperation between partners from Poland, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. Studies of 22 LAGs from the Lubelskie Province (województwo lubelskie) in Poland showed only one organization to have expressed the will to implement an international project (Guzal-Dec, 2018). According to Kalisiak-Mędelska (2013) three LAGs (among 20 existing partnerships) in the Łódź Province (województwo łódzkie) in the 2007-2013 Programming Period have prepared international cooperation projects: Przymierze Jeziorsko (two projects with partners from Germany), Gniazdo (one project with a partner from Lithuania) and Mroga (one project with a partner from France). The efforts involved within these activities were focused towards, inter alia, the promotion of local tourist and cultural resources, as well as pro-ecological traditions and attitudes, including joint events integrating communities from different countries. The author assessed that the projects of interregional and international cooperation in this voivodeship have been implemented to an “insufficient degree”. Similarly, Zajda (2013b) noticed a relatively weak international cooperation of LAGs from the Łódź Province (województwo łódzkie), offering insight into the cooperation project of the Mroga LAG with a partner from France (LAG Nord Meusien), which involved the

preparation of an open-air museum and the reconstruction of a historical battle aimed at tourists (Zajda, 2014).

Also, in the Czech Republic the international cooperation of LAGs attracted less attention when compared to local issues. An analysis of the content of articles related to the LEADER programme in regional newspapers indicated that only 5% of them provided information on the international activity of LAGs (Lošťák & Hudečková, 2010). According to an ex-post evaluation of the 2007-2013 Rural Development Programme in the Czech Republic, LAGs expressed more interest in inter-territorial cooperation than in transnational cooperation – an observation similarly valid in Poland (EKOTOXA & IREAS, 2016). During this period, Czech LAGs were involved in more than 40 transnational cooperation projects supported by the RDP. In more than half of these, the partner LAG was from Slovakia. Only four Czech-Polish cooperation projects have been supported by the State Agricultural Intervention Fund of the Czech Republic (State Agricultural Intervention Fund, 2021).

An analysis of European LAGs' international cooperation projects in the 2007-2013 programming period by Pylkkänen et al. (2020) found that local rural stakeholders showed little interest in developing international contacts. Krasniqi (2020) reported the cooperation of the Vitia LAG in Kosovo with the German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ) in the area of training local leaders. Similar problems have been noticed in Slovenia, which led to the conclusion that there is a need for additional efforts at promoting interregional and international cooperation among local communities operating in the LAG (Bedrac & Cunder, 2010).

The analysis of the literature discussed above shows that local communities have been involved in implementing international projects mainly in the field of knowledge and information exchange, with a prevalence of trainings and projects related to the creation of tourism products. In the following sections we analyse three case studies of Polish-Czech cooperation.

3. Methodology

Three examples of cooperation projects implemented by LAGs from Poland (Lower Silesia region) and the Czech Republic (Liberec and Hradec Králové regions) serve as the subject of the analysis detailed in this paper (Figure 1). These include:

1. Sustainable tourist traffic in the Western Sudetes on the Polish-Czech border (two LAGs from Poland and one from the Czech Republic);
2. Culinary festival: traditions cultivated in Polish and Czech villages (two LAGs from Poland and the Euroregion Glacensis association from the Czech Republic);
3. ECO LAG international cooperation project (five LAGs from Poland and one from the Czech Republic).

The projects were financed under Sub-measure 19.3 “Preparation and implementation of activities in the field of cooperation with the Local Action Group of the Rural Development Program in Poland” financed by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development.

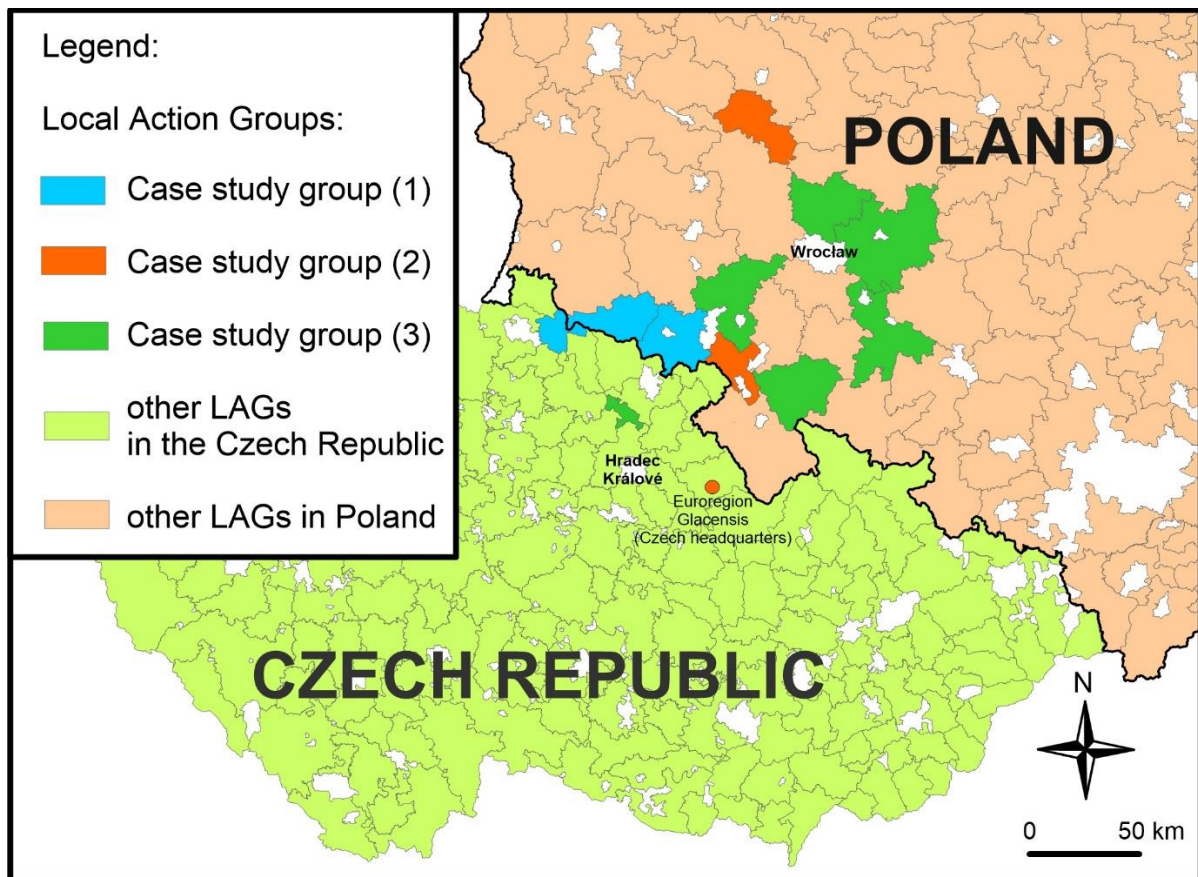


Figure 1. Case study of cooperating groups of LAGs: 1) “Sustainable tourist traffic in the Western Sudetes on the Polish-Czech border” project; 2) “Culinary Festival: Traditions cultivated in Polish and Czech villages” project; 3) “ECO LAG Project of international cooperation”. Source: Authors own work based on data from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development in Warsaw, Poland and the National Network of Local Action Groups of the Czech Republic in Prague.

The research made use of the methodology of analysing the content of documents formulated by LAGs for the 2014-2020 EU Programming Period (actions planned in practice most commonly for 2022 or 2023), as well as LAG websites and telephone interviews with the managers of specific projects or heads of LAG offices. The interviews on the Czech side involved each LAG participating in cooperation projects in stages of both preparation or implementation. In Poland, the interviews were carried out only in the offices of the lead partners responsible for the coordination of the entire project.

The questions included matters such as: the objectives and scope of activities in the project, and respondents' views on the following matters: to what extent have the original plans been achieved, what benefits has the LAG obtained from the project, what were the main problems regarding the cooperation, what is the possible scope of activities for the future, and why are there only relatively few LAGs involved in international cooperation. The interviews have been conducted in November and December of 2021.

Cartographic materials have been obtained from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development in Warsaw, Poland and the National Network of Local Action Groups of the Czech Republic in Prague. This paper is used to present the preliminary results of ongoing research across the Polish-Czech borderland.

4. Results

The “Partnerstwo Duch Gór”, “Kwiat Lnu” LAGs (Poland) and “Rozvoj Tanvaldska” LAG (Czech Republic) implemented a project named “Sustainable tourist traffic in the Western Sudetes on the Polish-Czech border” (case study group 1). The main goal of this project was the international promotion and networking of services in lesser-known places in the area of operation of all 3 partners. Part of the project involved the preparation of joint advertising material and the organization of joint conferences. The partnerships operate in the attractive tourist area of the Karkonosze/Krkonoše Mountains and the Izerskie/Jizerské Mountains, where tourism is an important element of income for local communities (Böhm & Šmída, 2019; Przybyła & Kulczyk-Dynowska, 2017).

The objectives and tasks of the project on the Polish side were considered by the representative of the “Partnerstwo Duch Gór” Partnership to have been successfully achieved. Nevertheless, great difficulties have also been indicated in the implementation of the project, as each task involved had to be separately approved by the national RDPs. Despite many meetings and arrangements, the Czech side did not receive financial support from its RDP, while the project on the Polish side had already been approved and could boast a signed contract, which made it impossible to adjust the scope of the ultimate enterprise. As stated by the project manager: “The Czechs had not abandoned us, but they had to carry out tasks using their own resources. Had they not done so, we would have a problem with settling the project”. As a result of these problems with financing joint actions, the respondent expressed the opinion that she did not see the possibility of further cross-border and international cooperation due to the unfavourable way of financing the projects. The LAG also does not intend to implement cross-border projects using funds distributed by the Nisa/Nysa Euroregion, due to the lack of funds for pre-financing activities and the long time it takes to have funds reimbursed after the completion of a project. The LAG's own income as an association's is insufficient to finance such activities.

On the Czech side, a mutual meeting, such as a conference, is the only sort of activity which can be considered a valid project output. It should be emphasized that the project was not financed from the Czech RDP and the entire affair was perceived by “Rozvoj Tanvaldska” LAG representative as “bringing about costs without much benefit for the Czech side”. He saw no potential for further development of cooperation under the current conditions of the Czech RDP. The existing collaboration with Polish partners is implemented mainly through the Nisa/Nysa Euroregion. The LAG representative identified the main problem as resulting from the difference in conditions set by the RDP for the Czech Republic and for Poland. For the Czech Republic these rules exclusively allow “nothing more than meetings and the creation of promotional materials”.

The “Partnerstwo Sowiogórskie” and “Ujście Baryczy” LAGs (Poland) pursued the “Culinary Festival: Traditions cultivated in Polish and Czech villages” project (case study group 2). Initially, the Polish LAGs planned to work in cooperation with the “Sdružení Splav” LAG (Czech Republic). The project was aimed at promoting the area of operation of the respective partners and exchanging experiences related to tradition, culture and local

heritage, including the promotion of healthy eating and culinary workshops on local dishes. Ultimately, the Czech LAG did not participate in the project because they could not reach an agreement with the Polish partners on the particular activities and outputs. The project leader (the "Partnerstwo Sowiogórskie" LAG) turned to the Czech association of the Glacensis Euroregion for assistance, as the organization had experience in the implementation of cross-border projects. It eventually agreed to help and provide cooperation on the condition that it would act as a cost-free partner and would not be involved in financial settlements. The resulting project yielded the following results: a promotional film, a set of video clips on the preparation of local dishes (available online), and a publication in the form of a culinary book entitled "Tastes of the past". A series of workshops with public participation was planned but ultimately abandoned due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

A representative of the "Sdružení Splav" LAG stated that there is ongoing cooperation with the various Polish organizations (e.g., with regard to environmental projects in collaboration with the Polish Ecological Club), but that they are not receiving support from the Czech RDP. This leads the respondent to conclude that: "there would certainly be room for cooperation in a number of activities", indicating that the main obstacle towards the successful implementation of the project was that the thematic definition of the supported activities was too narrow. As a result of the demands by the Czech RDP the projects were difficult to prepare and there were difficulties in the cooperation with the State Agricultural Intervention Fund of the Czech Republic. Support was offered mainly with regard to soft projects (educational events, creation of promotional materials, brochures), without the possibility of undertaking actions based around investment. This was considered a significant limitation.

Five LAGs from Poland (the "Qwsi" LAG, the "Dobra Widawa" LAG, the "Szlakiem Granitu" LAG, the "Kraina Wzgórz Trzebnickich" LAG, the "Brzesko-Oławska Wieś Historyczna" LAG) and the "Královédvorsk" LAG (Czech Republic) participated in the "ECO LAG Project of international cooperation" (case study group 3). This particular project was educational in nature and was devoted to promoting useful methods of segregating and processing (upcycling) waste among LAG residents. A total of 107 upcycling workshops were held in the Polish LAGs participating in the project, with the additional publication of an educational brochure. Representatives of the Polish LAGs participated in two-day study trips in the Dvůr Králové nad Labem municipality. They became familiar, inter alia, with the operation of the municipal waste segregation and utilization system, including the waste segregation plant in Rychnověk. The Polish participants of the project also learned about modern techniques of waste processing, as well as the consequences of incineration and storage of waste in illegal places, and the correct way of segregating waste and upcycling. The project leader intends to further enhance the Polish-Czech cooperation with regard to developing tourism. The Polish respondent mentioned the following major obstacles to cooperation: the COVID-19 pandemic, language barriers and geographical distance resulting in a lack of opportunity for frequent personal contacts with the foreign partner.

No mutual international meeting has taken place on the Polish side. According to the Czech LAG representative, the exchange of experience served as the only practical benefit

drawn from the project. He believed that Poland enjoyed better conditions within the RDP than the Czech Republic in terms of transnational cooperation projects. The Czech LAG representative saw no potential for further development of Czech-Polish cooperation.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The analysed cooperation projects concerned mainly know-how exchange, educational events, and the development of tourist and local gastronomic products. The recognized obstacles were related mainly to differences in RDP procedures observed in both countries and the lack of own funds to finance the cooperation. The COVID-19 pandemic, language barriers and the geographical distance between the partners were less frequently mentioned difficulties in cooperation. The feeling of no tangible benefit discouraged further cooperation.

The implemented projects often involved LAGs located in the mountainous area of the Sudetes, which is an important cross-border tourist region on the border of Poland, the Czech Republic and Germany (Dołzbłasz, 2017; Jędruch et al., 2020; Potocki et al., 2014). Such activities undoubtedly favour the diversification of rural development towards undertakings other than those typically related to agriculture and are considered an important direction of development in contemporary EU rural development policy (Stacherzak & Hełdak, 2019; Struś et al., 2020; Trnková, 2021). Areas located in the Sudetes, struggling with unfavourable social and economic phenomena like depopulation, decapitalization of fixed assets and development difficulties in the protected border zone, were referred to in the 20th century as a “problematic area”, in large part also due to their peripheral, border location (Ciok et al., 2006; Sikorski et al., 2020). Currently, due to the far-reaching integration of Poland, the Czech Republic and Germany within the European Union, the border is no longer a strong administrative barrier, also in the Sudetes. This ensures the relative technical ease of developing tourism, establishing economic links and fostering the cooperation of local communities in border regions, with the added boon of support from EU funds (Kachniarz et al., 2019; Kulczyk-Dynowska, 2018). The Czech Republic has the second longest border with Poland. However, while individual cooperation between Polish and Czech towns is developing intensively (Böhm et al., 2021; Furmankiewicz, 2007), LAGs as formal associations enjoy relatively little involvement in such activities.

The conducted questionnaire survey shows an asymmetry in the perception of the benefits from collaborative projects. The activities within the case study groups were financed by the Polish RDP and were seen as beneficial mainly by Polish LAGs. The Czech LAGs expressed dissatisfaction with the established rules for providing support from the Czech RDP within the measures made available in the current programming period. In their opinion, the supported activities were very narrowly defined and limited only to educational events, meetings or the producing of promotional materials. The preparation of the project was substantially difficult and the supported undertakings were not perceived by the Czech LAG representatives as beneficial. The interviewed Czech managers stated that the Czech-Polish cooperation is an ongoing process, but it continues outside any support from the RDP. Under the conditions of the Czech 2014-2020 RDP the three interviewed Czech LAG representatives did not anticipate any further significant development of cooperation.

The respondents recognized differences in the procedures of the national RDP as a significant barrier to the implementation of international cooperation projects. This problem has already been noticed in the evaluation of the 2007-2013 LEADER programme in the Visegrád Group countries (Dvořáková Líšková et al., 2019). This should be alarming for policy makers, who specify the goals and rules of programmes that support the networking of LAGs. Analyses suggest that the current RDP procedures provide very limited actual support to the promotion of international networking. This is not conducive to European integration understood as an increase in social ties (networking) and an increase in positive attitudes between local communities from different countries. Our and also other researchers' outcomes suggest that most LAGs focus on local traditions and are internally socially closed, i.e., they rarely engage in international contacts (Pylkkänen et al., 2020; Schiller, 2008). This subject requires further research on a larger scale.

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