

Do Area-based Partnerships Favour the Development of Short Food Supply Chains? Analysis of Local Product Offers on the Websites of Local Action Groups in Two Regions of Poland

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Abstract: Local Action Groups (LAGs) are cross-sectoral, area-based partnerships of local stakeholders working for social and economic development in functional regions. Their main task is to redistribute public aid funds as part of grant competitions for grassroots initiatives of local social organizations, farmers, entrepreneurs and local government institutions. LAGs can also play an important role in developing local food markets. The main aim of this research was to establish the extent to which LAGs promote local food products related to short food supply chains through their home websites. The authors have analyzed the websites of LAGs from two regions of Poland: Lower Silesia and Lesser Poland in an attempt to establish whether they contain permanently posted content related to offering and promoting local products (including traditional ones). Research has shown that almost half of all LAGs surveyed (47%) do not promote local products on their websites. However, examples of good practices indicate that they have the potential to carry out such tasks.

Keywords: area-based partnerships; local and traditional product promotion; short food supply chains; website content analysis

JEL Classification: Q18; P25; D71

1. Introduction

Cross-sectoral territorial partnerships referred to as Local Action Groups (hereinafter: LAGs) support the socio-economic development and activity of inhabitants in functional rural and fishing regions (Biczkowski, 2020; Furmankiewicz et al., 2021a; Moseley, 2003; Phillipson & Symes, 2015), as well as in cities and urban districts (Panciszko, 2020; Servillo & De Bruijn, 2018). The idea has been developed in the European Union (EU) since the 1990s (Barke & Newton, 1994; Lacquement et al., 2020), while in Poland they began to be established after the state's accession to the EU in 2004, initially as part of the LEADER+ Pilot Programme (Furmankiewicz et al., 2015; Zajda, 2014). According to Polish law, LAGs constitute a legal form of association. Within their ranks, residents, representatives of social organizations, local companies, local governments and other institutions are responsible for the preparation of territorial development strategies. After their approval, LAGs receive EU funds for the organization of local grant competitions for farmers, entrepreneurs, social organizations and

public institutions, as part of Community-Led Local Development (hereinafter: CLLD) (Furmankiewicz et al., 2021b; Rodriguez et al., 2019; Servillo & De Bruijn, 2018). Financial support under the CLLD may be obtained, among others, for projects by local stakeholders in the field of small processing, networking in the field of creating short supply chains and local markets, as well as promotional and marketing activities (Ministerstwo Infrastruktury i Rozwoju, 2014). Also, LAGs as associations can undertake their own activities and implement projects with the use of various funds available to non-governmental organizations. Among the diverse spectrum of local issues tackled by these organizations there is also the question of developing local agricultural markets, undertaking action aimed at developing short food supply chains and promoting the local product, both in terms of producing food and crafts (Cube Group, 2022; Jasiński & Rzytki, 2007; Ruskai et al., 2021). These products often represent unique local features resulting from long-term historical and cultural traditions, and are part of the region's offer directed at tourists (Furmankiewicz & Trnková, 2022; Jasiński & Rzytki, 2007). 324 LAGs have been operating in Poland between the years 2015-2023 (within the 2014-2020 UE Programming Period). LAGs are required to maintain their own websites as platforms for information regarding their activities and the competitions they organize (Cejudo-García et al., 2022; Ruskai et al., 2021).

The aim of our research was to determine to what extent do the LAGs from two regions of Poland (Lower Silesia and Lesser Poland) promote local (and traditional) products by small producers based in their area of operation through their websites, thus contributing to the development of short food supply chains.

2. Local Products in Short Food Supply Chains

The desire to shorten food supply chains in order to reduce the costs resulting from transport and brokerage is not a new economic trend. For most of human history fulfilling nutritional needs was pursued through traditional means, involving direct contact between the producer and the consumer (Chaturvedi et al., 2014). Unfortunately, in recent decades, as a result of the intensifying and uncontrolled processes of globalization and concentration of land and capital, strong price competition and the industrialization of agriculture, the world is dealing with unsustainable development in the agri-food sector (Raftowicz, 2022). A manifestation of this is the currently dominant form of food distribution, based on long (often global) supply chains, which generates negative economic, social and environmental effects in the development of many traditional rural areas. Hence, the end of the 20th century saw an increased interest in the development of alternative supply chains which emphasized the promotion of local sales and the restoration of beneficial relations between food producers and consumers, taking into consideration the principle of sustainable development (Brunori, 2007; Goodman, 2003; Goryńska-Goldmann, 2019; Marsden et al., 2002; Ploeg van der & Frouws, 1999; Ricketts Hein et al., 2006). These issues have also been reflected in the EU policy, where the shortening of food supply chains has been included in the European Green Deal initiative for a sustainable economy, which is expected to establish new directions for development by the year 2050 (Kapała, 2022b; Poponi et al., 2021). The Farm to Fork (F2F) Strategy published in 2020 has also outlined a vision for the future of the

agri-food sector in EU (Schebesta & Candel, 2020). The implementation of this strategy will depend to a large extent on local capacity for cross-sectoral cooperation in the implementation of sustainable agriculture, including support for short supply chains (Poponi et al., 2021).

The idea behind short food supply chains is for the process of supplying agri-food products to be pursued with respect to the principles of sustainable development, which is based on three types of proximity: (1) physical – meaning local sales, (2) organizational – aimed at reducing the number of links in the supply chain and (3) social – consisting in constant communication and diffusion of knowledge between the producer and the consumer (based on trust), which is associated with the presence of social capital (Evola et al., 2022; Kapała, 2022a; Malak-Rawlikowska et al., 2019; Raftowicz, 2022).

A key element of short food supply chains is their local character (Kalfagianni & Skordili, 2019; Morris & Buller, 2003). A product is local or regional when food is produced, processed, marketed and consumed in a designated geographical area, while the product itself has unique characteristics, such as: taste, freshness, high quality, cultural identity, local tradition, local speciality, environmental value, health benefits or compliance with the conditions of sustainable production (Bresso, 2011).

For the offer of local products and short food supply chains to function efficiently, there is a need for cooperation between various local stakeholders, including those from rural and surrounding urban areas (Dani, 2015; Kachniarz & Raftowicz, 2020; Skrzypczyński et al., 2021; Struś et al., 2020). A significant impact on the functioning of short food supply chains (apart from networks of producers and sellers) is exerted by non-governmental organizations – including LAGs, which develop strategies for implementing local initiatives and often support or develop the functioning of local supply chains from producer to consumer in their area of operation (Cube Group, 2022; Ruskai et al., 2021).

3. Methodology

The analysis covered 17 LAGs with their seats located in the province (voivodeship – self-governing region) of Lower Silesia (Dolny Śląsk) and 32 LAGs with seats located in the province of Lesser Poland (Małopolska) (Figure 1). In both these provinces tourism and agritourism are an important sector of the economy, fervently pursued especially in mountainous border areas (Potocki et al., 2014; Przybyła & Kulczyk-Dynowska, 2019; Stacherzak & Hełdak, 2019; Więckowski, 2010), which favours the sale of local traditional products. To a large extent, local governments and LAGs from both provinces also benefit from EU funds (Biczkowski et al., 2021; Kachniarz et al., 2019).

The first stage of the analysis involved an inventory of LAG websites, which were then subjected to a standard content analysis (Neuendorf, 2002). Efforts were made to answer the following research questions:

- Does the LAG promote local products on its websites?
- If so, how many local producers from its area are promoted by the LAG?
- Was there a catalogue available for download on the website in the form of a document with product photos and contact details enabling contact with this manufacturer?

- Does the website link to other websites of local producers?
- Does it have its own local product certificate with a logo, awarded to local products of consistent quality?
- Does it have its own online store that allows the customer to buy goods from local producers?
- If it has an online store, how many products can be purchased there?

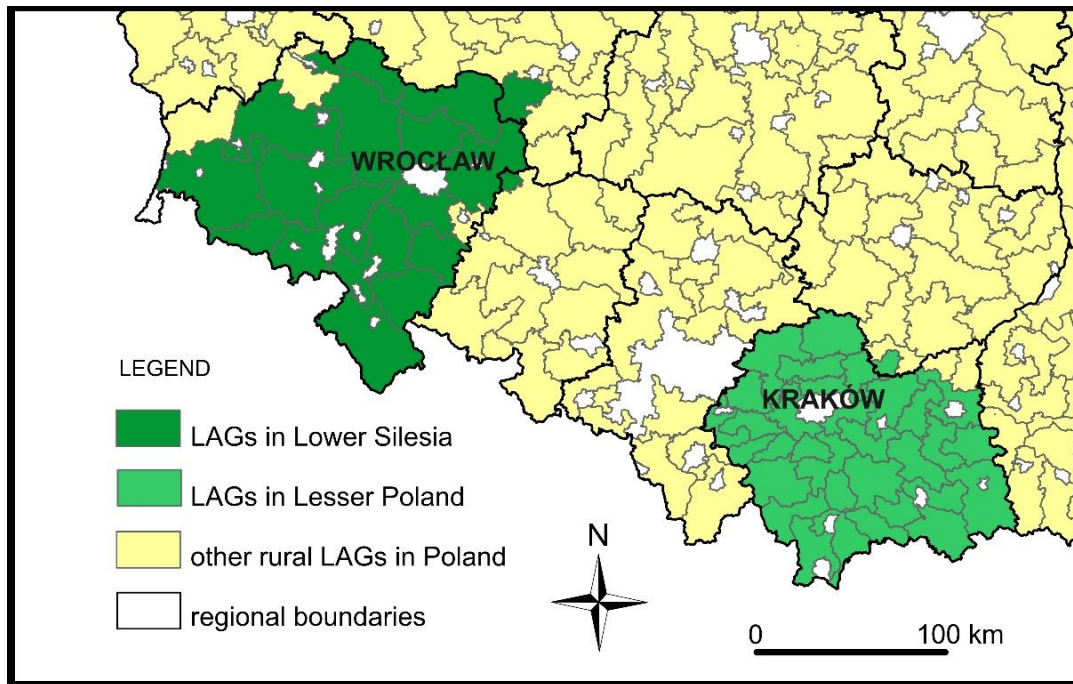


Figure 1. Territorial range of LAGs covered by the research in Lower Silesia (Dolny Śląsk) and Lesser Poland (Małopolska). Note: LAG borders do not coincide with the borders of regions. Source: authors' own elaboration

The analysis took into account only information from LAG websites in the form of permanent subpages or additional websites to which the LAG home websites referred, but which were clearly described as promoting local products and maintained by a given LAG. One-time information provided in the news section that appeared temporarily, about local fairs, producers, local promotional events taking place at a given time was not taken into account, as it did not enable a permanent search for products by a potential local or external customer, who could read the information on the website at any time. The analysis was carried out in the first half of 2022.

The analysis included only food products that can be purchased on the spot from the producer, in local retail and catering outlets or by mail order. For example, highlighted recipes for local dishes for self-preparation were not taken into account.

4. Results

The promotion of local products, usually sold within the framework of short supply chains, was regularly conducted on the analysed websites of 11 LAGs from Lower Silesia (64% of the existing total) and 15 LAGs from Lesser Poland (46%) (Figure 2). The websites listed either specific products or manufacturers who often offered several products.



Figure 2. Number of LAGs from the Lower Silesia and from Lesser Poland provinces, which consistently promoted local food producers on their websites. Source: authors' own elaboration

The most frequently promoted products included vegetable and fruit preserves, honey, bakery products, confectionery, sometimes delicatessen products such as dumplings, less often local wines. The LAGs from Lower Silesia which promoted a local product, listed between 4 and 37 producers along with their products. LAGs from Lesser Poland – between 3 and 23 producers along with their products. In six LAGs in Lower Silesia local products (dishes) were promoted in eating establishments, while in the Lesser Poland – in seven LAGs. Five LAGs from Lower Silesia and a single LAG from Lesser Poland offered direct links to the homepages of the local producers they promoted.

Various types of catalogues listing producers or local products were offered for download by nine LAGs from Lower Silesia (52%) and another nine from Lesser Poland (only 28% of all LAGs from this province) (Figure 3). Most often these catalogues were prepared in the form of a document in the Adobe pdf format and printed in colour. They usually included not only food products but also crafts, and often also local services. The catalogues enabled direct contact with the producer in order to purchase their products.



Figure 3. Number of LAGs from Lower Silesia and from Lesser Poland, which made available on their websites a catalogue of local products in the form of a document file. Source: authors' own elaboration

Some of the surveyed LAGs reported on their websites that they had organized certification procedures for a local product from their area of activity, which usually made use of a special promotional logo (Figure 4). In Lower Silesia, six LAGs informed about having granted a local product certificate (35%), just as six LAGs from Lesser Poland (only about 19% of LAGs operating there). In Lower Silesia, from 3 to 31 local food products were certified, while in the province of Lesser Poland from 3 to 22 such products.



Figure 4. Number of LAGs from the Lower Silesia and from the Lesser Poland which informed on their websites about having granted a local product certificate with its own logo. Source: authors' own elaboration

In Lower Silesia the largest number of certified food products were offered on the local market by the "Ślężanie" LAG, the "LAG for sustainable development of the municipalities of Kąty Wrocławskie, Kobierzyce, Siechnice, Żórawina, Domaniów – Leader A4" and "Partnerstwo Doliny Baryczy (Partnership for the Barycz Valley)". For example, the Partnership for the Barycz Valley has developed the local brand "Dolina Baryczy Poleca (Recommended by the Barycz Valley)" (Figure 5). It is one of the better functioning territorial partnerships located in a fishing region (Glinka, 2015; Raftowicz et al., 2021; Tokarczyk-Dorociak et al., 2016). The products are promoted on the LAG's website, where one can find a description of each product, including its distinguishing features, how friendly it is towards the environment and the customer, as well as information on wholesale and retail sales (including the manufacturer's contact details). The producer can directly apply for a slot in the "Products and services from the Barycz Valley region database", free of charge.

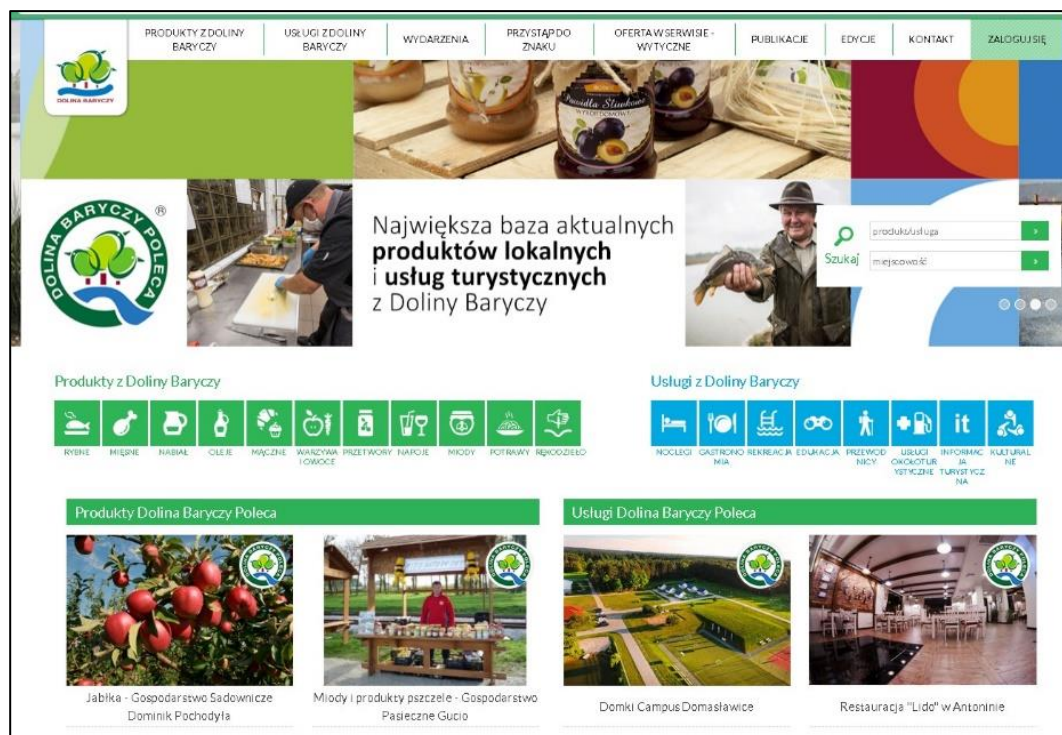


Figure 5. Screenshot of a fragment of the webpage promoting local products with the "Recommended by the Barycz Valley" certificate (accessed 1/12/2022).

In Lesser Poland the highest number of certified local products was offered by the Carp Valley LAG Association and the Raba Valley Association LAG.

Only two LAGs from Lower Silesia have set up an online store with the possibility of direct mail order sales: the "Partnerstwo Duchy Gór (Mountain Spirit Partnership)" LAG and the "Kraina Łęgów Odrzańskich (Land of Odra River Riparian Forests)" LAG. Unfortunately, the first organization offered only four food products (honey and juice), while the second one restricted their offer to several pre-prepared sets of products.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The surveyed LAGs from two Polish provinces, with a few exceptions, have managed the promotion for the local products market on their websites relatively poorly, focusing on their main task of redistributing funds for local activities on the basis of organized grant competitions. One interesting initiative aimed at developing local agricultural markets is the certification of quality local products, which receive a distinctive logo signifying the area of their production and thus providing additional recognition. This increases the chances of small producers (including farmers) of selling this type of products and thus aids them in the earning of their income and improving their quality of life.

It is important to note that the authors of this study evaluated the permanent offers of local products on LAG websites and did not comprehensively analyze the implementation of local projects in the field of short food chain development. The latter issue might actually attract greater interest, but the surveyed websites provide little to no information which would contribute to its analysis.

LAGs are bottom-up initiatives of residents, local organizations and companies, as well as local governments. Their joint involvement in the promotion of local, often traditional products manufactured in non-industrial quantities, can be of great importance for the creation of local cooperation networks that will help to increase the income of people engaged in agricultural activity and small entrepreneurs. The promotion of these products is of great importance for popularizing the idea of short food chains – with food sold on the market to local residents and tourists. These activities can be of great importance in the social dimension, stimulating the activity of the local community (including farmers and owners of farm involved in agritourism). It is also a viable source of local food security in the event of global supply network crises.

Overall, it can be summed up that the analysed LAG websites (with a few exceptions) are generally of limited significance in the process of promoting local agricultural markets. This may result from them being short-staffed (LAGs usually employ at most a few full-time employees) and from the fact that the LAGs themselves have to obtain funds for promotional activities from other grant competitions or from contributions by local food producers and processors. One can also wonder what format of a dedicated website would be most suitable for the promotion of the local products of a given region among different types of users (tourists, residents) and whether LAG websites are the best place for this type of promotion. This is a broader problem that is not considered in this paper. Examples of good practice from the most active LAGs show that these organizations have a certain potential in developing

the sale of local products within short supply chains (Cube Group, 2022), it is just that it is not fully utilized. It is recommended to prepare funds for LAGs and other local stakeholders for projects involving the promotion and development of local product sale within short supply chains, including the employment of additional staff responsible for the organizational dimension of the undertaking.

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