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# **The Prospects for Empowerment through Local Governance for Tourism—the LEADER Approach**

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## **Abstract**

While empowerment and cooperation are essential to achieve these tourism governance goals, few, if any studies, investigated conditions for empowerment in tourism governance in the post-communist setting. Filling the gap, this paper critically examines the prospects for empowerment in tourism governance in Poland. The extensive desk-study was conducted in 2010 to investigate the issues of empowerment in governance for tourism development. It focused on gathering and analyzing information about LEADER, and its transfer into the Polish context. The empirical data collection included guided interviews with 18 key-informants involved in LEADER. The article concludes that in the post-communist reality, the immediate concern is the effectiveness of community-led local development initiatives. New actors in tourism governance must demonstrate their value as legitimate partners and secure funds that develop and sustain empowering mechanisms to increase community capacity in both planning and implementation of local development initiatives

Keywords: tourism governance, empowerment, LEADER, community-led development, Poland

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## **1.0 Introduction**

Over the past two decades, the citizens of post-communist Eastern Europe experienced tremendous economic and political changes (Howard, 2003). A deep socio-economic crisis has pervaded Polish society since seclusion from Western influences lifted at the end of the Soviet era. The negative consequences were strongest in rural communities (Tarkowska & Korzeniewska, 2002). Reforms designed to address this crisis caused rifts and shifts in various facets of Polish life and yet rural residents have successively avoided participation in voluntary local action (Michalska, 2008; Mularska, 2008; Strzelecka & Wicks, 2010; 2015). At the same time the opening of the country's borders allowed for a slow recovery of rural travel. Increased interest in rural tourism caught the attention of multiple acting agents as it created opportunities to diversify the rural economies through the development of regional tourism products (Hegarty & Przezborska, 2005).

Since 1990, the EU has become an active agent of political transition through mechanisms such as aid and loan programs (Steves, 2001). The perspective of EU membership increased pressure to strengthen democratic values and enhance democratic culture in post-socialist localities. Rural governance completes the political transition toward a democracy founded on a “common commitment to a mode of reasoning on matters of public policy” (Hanberger, 2001, p.218). Governance is the act of governing modern democracies (Hall, 2011) that

encompasses the role of public authorities in establishing a favorable environment for economic operations (OECD, 1995). In such regimes, essential are the processes of deliberation among empowered citizens and public participation in local decision-making. Distribution of power to residents and communities through their involvement in governing is the main component of political dynamics, assuring quality of local democratic processes.

In governance for tourism, legitimate actors undertake leadership roles and make required tourism decisions. Both local and regional actors strive to cooperatively manage the growth of the local tourism sector (Bramwell & Lane, 2012). Community empowerment by including the community voice in development decision-making is a relatively new approach that became an indispensable element of the sustainability process (e.g. Saarinen, 2006). Scholars argue that empowerment and cooperation between tourism stakeholders are essential to achieve these tourism governance goals (Anthony, 2004; Erickson, Hamilton, Jones & Ditomassi, 2003). Yet empowerment has not been examined in the context of tourism governance in the post-communist setting, with only few exceptions, (e.g.; Strzelecka & Wicks, 2010; Czernek, 2013; Strzelecka & Wicks, 2015).

This paper proposes a critical investigation of the prospects for empowerment in tourism governance in the post-communist setting based on the example of the LEADER framework (Liaisons Entres Actions de Developpement de l'Economie Rurale) in Pomerania, Poland. This study seeks to increase the understanding of the following issues: (a) How well do institutional arrangements and EU mechanisms facilitate empowerment in tourism governance? (b) What are the individual and institutional constraints to community cooperation and empowerment? (c) How does the past determine the present conditions for empowering governance in Poland? The discussion sheds light on different views of LEADER as a mechanism for tourism governance in post-communist ruralities. The framework of the analysis extracts previously identified individual (Kluska Laschinger-Spence, & Kerr., 2004) as well as structural components (Kanter, 1993) of empowerment in governance for tourism.

The normative ideal that guides this work is that of local democracy where participatory decision-making enables the actors to communicate across limitations of time and space. In this context decision-making processes concerned with local or regional wellbeing should increase the participants' tolerance toward social differences as well as facilitate their self-development and self-determination (Young, 2000). A growing need for structural changes in rural areas and more local tourism initiatives (Butowski, 2004) has resulted in the development of a comprehensive system of organizations that provide a framework for institutional collaboration and community empowerment (Marciszewska, 2006).

This study enriches the understanding of socio-cultural issues in a post-communist setting that are linked to empowerment through local tourism governance. First, the article incorporates individual and structural determinants in one framework for examination of the empowerment phenomenon. Second, the components of empowerment in LEADER governance are explored through the lens of social constructivism (Thayer-Bacon, 1999). Third, it is proposed that *barriers to community cooperation* additionally limit empowerment in the post-communist setting. Lastly, the article contributes to a broader conversation oriented towards diffusion and the applicability of empowerment theories in the context of tourism governance.

## **2.0 Study Background: LEADER in Poland**

The European Union (EU) has been a major contributor to advancing socio-economic change in Poland through the encouragement of new policies and improved funding mechanisms. Following the 2004 enlargement of the EU, rural programs turned out to be a principal force behind pioneering development approaches in rural areas of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Such programs employed local communities in the process of rural socio-economic re-construction (Mularska, 2008; Steves, 2001).

LEADER originated as the EU's response to contemporary problems emerging across rural areas of Europe (Macken-Walsh, 2007). The framework was incorporated into the existing governance structures as the legal basis for cross-sectorial partnerships, while also aiming to facilitate an interaction among local interest groups (European Commission, 2006, *The LEADER approach: A basic guide*).

LEADER is one of the four objectives of the general EU Rural Development Program ((EC) No 1698/2005 art. 52). This framework was designed to induce the formation of partnerships among local leaders (Local Action Groups-LAGs). It promoted sustainable development through stakeholders' empowerment in LAGs, and thereby it facilitated changes in rural development decision-making.

While the LEADER approach was integrated with the Regional Operational Programs, it also nurtured local networks to strengthen cooperation and enhance cohesive decision-making in a given institutional landscape (Budzich-Szukala, 2008). It is important to note that this program was aimed at engaging various local actors in policymaking and economic development on a voluntary basis. In many cases these early activities aimed at building up residents capacity for collaboration (Budzich-Szukala, 2008; Strzelecka & Wicks, 2010; Strzelecka & Wicks, 2015).

LEADER manifests a shift toward more complex decision-making processes based on both delegation of power to local actors as well as their participation in rural development (O'Riordan & Stoll-Kleemann, 2002; Paavola, Gouldson & Kluvánková-Oravská, 2009). From this perspective, LEADER participants represent local interest groups. At the same time, conflicts of interests are better managed with the decision-making being closer to the people. Finally, the realization of LEADER principles signifies the quality of engagement of the aforementioned groups in developmental decision-making as well as demonstrating the soundness of empowering mechanisms employed in rural post-communist areas of CEE.

## **3.0 Synthesis of the Literature On Empowerment Through Governance**

The EU governance operates on a vast multilevel playing field where authorities and political actors follow various competencies (Aalberts, 2004; Macken-Walsh, 2007). The EU Community policies increasingly recognize the abilities of local societies to induce socio-economic change (Macken-Walsh, 2007; Eversole, 2011). By accepting that socio-economic change is a product of cooperation among multiple stakeholders (Eversole, 2011), policymakers look for community creativity to catalyze place-based participatory development (see e.g. OECD, 2006). The call for community participation in local governance through public-private partnership

provides a worthwhile counterpoint to the historically established political invisibility of rural stakeholders in policy making (Attwood 1997).

The theoretical assumption underpinning the importance of stakeholder leadership in setting goals for local development is that a multiplicity of opinions can lead to socially more robust decisions. Giving people power to influence decisions that directly affect them is essential for developing solutions better suited to their needs (Perrons & Skyers, 2003). According to Monaghan (2007) the governance process “brings citizens and institutions closer together” (p.124). Agrawal and Perrin (2009) added that the institutional arrangements inherent in governance facilitate stakeholders’ empowerment. In this regard, extensive outreach and openness of institutions most benefit involved interest groups.

Embracing this line of thinking, the LEADER governance for tourism development equips participants in local action groups (LAGs) with tools to control LAGs actions. Empowering the LEADER process inspires and motivates participants, while simultaneously providing them with the confidence that their contributions are recognized and valued. Rowlands (1997) suggested that such a form of empowerment is also a product of all practices that influence perceived control over the socio-economic setting. Erickson et al. (2003) proposed that empowerment happens when people engage in the organizational framework and gradually express the mutual interest and intention to promote organizational structure. Yet, the unique parts of the locally realized LEADER approach vary due to different contexts and peoples involved (Bailey, 1996).

The framework of empowerment in this paper is based on Kanter’s (1993) Structural Theory of Organizational Empowerment and supported by the concept of individual empowerment in an organization (Kluska et al., 2004). It proposes that empowered individuals are more committed to the organization. Such empowerment encompasses the following components: autonomy of actions; feelings of competence (e.g. self-efficacy); ability to impact activities of an action group; meaningfulness of one’s actions; perception of conflicts (Kluska et al., 2004). In comparison, Kanter (1993) suggested that empowerment is promoted in ‘organizational’ work type environments that offer openness and opportunity to learn and grow with organization, procedural/organizational transparency, technical support and access to information resources (Kanter, 1993). Here empowerment is viewed as a progression that takes place over time with structure being associated with one’s attitude and actions. Kanter (1983) proposed that *formal power* is usually acquired by outstanding performance of activities that attract the attention of organization members, while *informal power* results from political and social alliances within the organization. The view is relevant to LEADER that has become a part of operational framework for Local Action Groups. In LEADER, for example power is about the ability to complete projects by assembling resources to achieve identified goals. Power also relates to coalition building and cooperation (compare with Kanter, 1983). When applied to LEADER, Kanter’s (1993) theory of structural empowerment implies that institutional arrangements that empower individual stakeholders also benefit organization. Whereas, individuals without access to power structures become less committed to organizational goals (Kanter 1977; 1993).

Scholars, who examined the model of the LEADER governance in Poland, found that it could facilitate public participation in the governance process by promoting empowerment and raising the awareness of the program objectives (e.g. Podedworna, 2008; Weryński, 2008; Strzelecka & Wicks, 2010; Strzelecka &

Wicks, 2015). However, due to the insufficient experience of public institutions that were operating within the frame of governance, a number of past programs and policies neglected the unique rural post-communist conditions (Macken-Walsh, 2008; Strzelecka & Wicks, 2015). Accordingly, past attempts to diffuse empowering mechanisms into the post-communist setting failed, contributing to an already low public trust in governmental institutions and officials. In this respect, programs such as LEADER faced additional constraints when attempting to promote greater involvement in tourism decision-making (Strzelecka & Wicks, 2010).

## **4.0 Methods**

The methodology presented in this paper was specifically developed and implemented to address the community perspective. This section is divided into subsections describing the preliminary desk-study, major data collection process and introduction to research setting.

### **4.1 Phase I: Preliminary Study**

The extensive desk-study was conducted in 2010 to investigate the issues of empowerment in governance for tourism development. It focused on gathering and analyzing information about LEADER, and its transfer into the Polish context. Researchers examined the content of documents such as articles about LEADER and LAGs development strategies. The Pomeranian Marshal Office provided a list of all Local Action Groups that at the time operated within Pomerania. In May 2010 an e-invitation was sent to all 16 Local Action Groups. The message included information about the study goals and a request to cooperate. Based on the response rate and the initial interaction with Local Action Groups, the researcher selected groups that would be further examined. Office managers of total six Local Action Groups in Pomerania were contacted to discuss LEADER activities and to answer screening questions. Given the LAG's character and willingness to cooperate, three Local Action Groups were chosen for further examination. This paper focuses on two groups that they appeared to share the least commonalities (different in size and stage of implementation of the LEADER approach). This collection of data informed researchers in developing the context for qualitative interviews with stakeholders in Local Action Groups.

### **4.2. Phase II: Main Study**

The primary method of empirical data collection consisted of guided interviews with key informants from interest groups involved in the LAGs with the purpose of learning about the perceptions of LEADER and cooperations within the program's framework. The LAGs were sourced from the list provided by the Pomeranian Marshal Office. After a detailed overview of activities among LAGs established in Pomerania, LAG-office managers of two groups that focused on tourism were strategically targeted for the interviews. Finally, other LAG participants were contacted on the basis of available membership and contact information.

*Sampling.* The sampling design aimed at selecting relevant individuals in order to explore the meaning, ideas, and to subsequently build understanding as the analysis of information progressed (Rice & Ezzy, 1999). The sampling process consisted of two stages. At first, the interviewees were contacted on the basis of LAGs membership information. During the second stage, a snowball-sampling procedure was adopted in order to guarantee that the complexity of local issues was

recognized. Snowballing is a method of expanding the sample by asking one participant to recommend others for interviewing (Babbie, 1995; Crabtree & Miller, 1992). Bailey (1996) and Holloway (1997) call those who volunteer assistance key actors or key insiders.

An initial set of 26 questions were prepared to guide each interview, which were typically scheduled in people's homes, and lasted between two and six hours. The questions were reviewed by experts in the field, translated into Polish and again reviewed by two more experts in Poland. Readability and relevance of the questions to the rural communities in Poland were then assessed during 'mock' interviews and followed by adjustments.

A total of 18 key-informants from two LAGs (I and II) were interviewed. The respondents included leaders of both organizations, eleven participants from LAG I, and five participants from LAG II. The LAG I respondents included seven owners of an agro-tourism or rural tourism business, a local artist, a tour guide, an owner of a restaurant, and a representative of a local interest group. Four informants from LAG II represented interest of the private sector with two active members of local associations (Local Tourism Organization, Agro-tourism association). One stakeholder actively participated in the LAG II Board of Directors and the other represented a local cycling club. The sampling strategies appeared to be a relevant and effective way of utilizing and understanding networks between key actors in relation to governance for tourism development. This technique serves to illustrate properties of LEADER and conditions for empowerment in a post-communist setting.

Each interview was digitally recorded, transcribed in Polish and analyzed. The qualitative data were handled using thematic coding analysis. Major themes and then sub-themes were identified based on frequency of occurrence in the text. Fragments of text concerned with each theme were grouped and theme codes developed accordingly. The relationship accompanying these different themes were yet another important factor explored.

### ***4.3 Introduction to the Case Setting***

LEADER is a partnership-based development program that strives to increase local capacity to effectively manage tourism resources through engaging residents, business and officials in LAGs. Currently there are more than 300 registered LAGs in Poland, of which many facilitate rural tourism development. In rural areas tourism usually based natural and cultural resources the advantage over other forms of rural development as it appeals to farmers and business owners, who usually understand tourism in terms of its individual economic benefits.

LAG I covers an area of 9 municipalities in what locals call "Kashubian Switzerland", characterized by a unique historical heritage. Regional crafts and folklore include traditional embroidery and ceramics with Kashubian themes, sculpture and painting on glass, as well as folk music. Additional cultural attractions are regional customs and traditions such as pottery. Over the decades after World War II, Kashubs proved their strong attachment to customs of everyday life and Kashubian language. Today various LAG I activities facilitate Kashubian culture through rural tourism.

LAG II covers the area of 19 municipalities with many potential unique rural tourism destinations (Local Development Strategy II, p.26). Visitors can relax on the Baltic Coast or around a large number of small lakes as well as visit protected nature areas

of Slowinski National Park or Slupia River Valley Scenic Park. Local culture is a mix of different traditions that arrived with post World War II immigrants. This immigration inevitably led to a diversification of the culture and less attachment to local rituals. LAG II considers this diversity a tourism asset that will attract visitors to the region.

## **5.0 LEADER in Tourism Governance Through the Lens of the Participants- Findings and Discussion**

Following the proposed framework of the analysis, discussion of the findings is arranged into two interrelated empowerment sections: individual components of the empowerment (inside environment) and structural components of the empowerment (outside environment). The sections present knowledge gathered during in-depth guided interviews with LEADER stakeholders to provide further insights into empowerment and collaboration for tourism within the LEADER governance model.

### **5.1 Individual Empowerment**

*Autonomy of actions.* At the individual level, autonomy within the LEADER framework was identified as the ability to make business choices independently. For instance, two small agro-tourism business owners perceived their action within LAG I as sovereign from external political pressures. While they solely focused on promoting local attractions, LAG I provided them with technical and financial support without conditions. Other respondents appreciated that they were able bring concerns to the attention of LAG I officers. A few informants expressed interest in establishing collaborative relations with local officials to increase their benefits from LEADER.

At the community level, the autonomy of actions was interpreted by respondents as an attribute of a LAG and its ability to self-regulate without interference from local authorities. For LAG II autonomy of actions, EU funding became essential. According to the owner of a tourism accommodation, "LAG II is financially independent and no person could use it for personal goals". Also, the President of the Baltic Agritourism Association described LAG II as an organization that "depends on cooperation with authorities rather than the reliance on local officials". A degree of dependence on cooperation with the municipality was encouraged given the need for public-private partnership (President of Baltic Agritourism Association).

*Competence.* Self-efficacy is the conviction held by an individual that he/she can produce rewarding outcomes (Bandura, 1977). Additionally, self-efficacy is a central cognitive mechanism in behavior change. Correspondingly, repeated experience of accomplishment is expected to lead to the increase in feelings of self-efficacy. Rich, Edelstein, Hallman & Wandersman. (1995) agreed that the feeling of competence in a given situation is a substantial constituent of individual empowerment.

The findings indicate that stakeholders' self-efficacy capitalized greatly on their past and current experience of cooperation with local authorities, and their professional expertise in tourism. Precisely, the positive experiences of past cooperation with officials reinforced optimism about collaboration in LAGs. At large, small business owners, farmers or individuals who were affiliated with various local groups and associations expressed more enthusiasm toward LAG membership. Likewise, these locals felt competent to contribute toward tourism growth through LEADER. For example, the local tour guide reported that his skills were effectively applied and



that LAG I officials welcomed his ideas. He felt that he made important contributions to many LAG I tourism activities.

Other stakeholders reported that their feelings of competence and belief in their value to the local community were reinforced after receiving personal invitations by the president of LAG I to participate in LEADER. A restaurant owner and a self-defined local leader, for instance, maintained that she was invited by LAG officials to become a member because she was considered trustworthy by other residents and appeared to be a solid representative of the business sector: "I work here for 17 years and know business sector very well ...we chose representatives who are somehow respected or liked in society" (a restaurant owner).

In brief, the respondents who perceived their relations with local officials as productive not only appeared to feel more competent, but also confident in responding to the needs of local societies. Conversely, negative experiences of cooperation with municipality officials might have the reverse impact, leading to stakeholders' disengagement or withdrawal from interaction within the LEADER framework.

*Ability to influence LAG activities.* A personal sense of competence to participate and represent local needs in LEADER is a milestone toward personal empowerment, and yet actors need to feel they truly influence LAGs decisions. Therefore a better general understanding of local conditions for tourism and political context is essential.

Usually, the owners of well-established tourism businesses interviewed for this study showed a solid understanding of local conditions for tourism development and simultaneously they expressed confidence in LAG I. They reported to benefit from their established relationships with other local businesses. Such relationships gave them self-assurance to voice their opinions and propose new activities in the LAG I forum.

Other participants were less optimistic about LAG I activities. According to a local artist, for example, LAG I staged the atmosphere of democratic decision-making in order to recruit local residents. According to the respondent, public participation in LAG I creation process was required to compete for LEADER funding. He also noted, that, "After that [residents] were no longer needed and less and less information about meetings was released."

Similarly in LAG II, many projects proposing restructuring of the local tourism sector were overlooked likely because smaller businesses or residents developed them. One farmer criticized that tourism investments happened sporadically with no comprehensive plan developed to implement the goals established in the participatory process. Also, local businesses that sought to change the arrangements felt disregarded by the main LEADER leaders despite formal membership. Whereas LAG II participants had been given some opportunities to influence LAG II development strategy at the beginning of LEADER, none of the interviewed local business sector felt comfortable enough in LEADER to publicly express their concerns about the quality of its implementation. The president of a local tourism organization added some LAG II members expressed concerns about a lack of transparency of decision-making, suggesting that it reduced involvement of the local business sector and they were subsequently labeled as 'difficult' or LAG II provided them with less information about LEADER opportunities.

*Meaningfulness of one's actions in relation to LAGs actions.* Peoples are more likely to engage in activities they find personally meaningful (e.g., Arnstein, 1969; Pretty, 1995). Accordingly, those who engage in LEADER activities are likely to

find LAGs actions relevant to their personal goals. In this respect, stakeholders who felt dissatisfied with the progress made toward the agreed tourism goals withdrew from LEADER. Also a practice of making critical decisions at private meetings was a reason for some tourism stakeholders to disengage. A testimony from a former participant in LAG II illustrates the circumstances well:

When local officials participating in LAG decide to discuss something at a meeting, the project is usually already in the advanced stages of development ... the way the proposals are presented in the LAG's forum indicates that they have been already planned for implementation – even if I disagree it does not count because they have more votes.

Similar circumstances occurred in LAG I, where few representatives of business sector promoted their ideas, while others did not feel that their voices were heard, nor were the projects they proposed taken into consideration. Under these conditions, conflict between the public sector and few local businesses escalated. Moreover, “enthusiasm had faded away and the number of people interested in participating decreased. Even those stakeholders, who remained active, become more and more discouraged” (Father).

Finally, the interviews disclosed that issues related to local identities and trust may affect residents' commitment to LEADER. For example, a weak local identity among residents of the LAG II area complicated interactions among the business sector, residents, and officials. One respondent who was an owner of a small agrotourism business mentioned that, “In villages that were previously designated as part ‘collectives’ people don't want help from associations, they have a negative attitude, and they see only the benefits that others have but not their own benefits from working together.” The respondent highlighted that Pomeranians who had experienced the collective farming system of the communist regime rarely showed trust in neighbors. The president of the Baltic Agrotourism Association added that many people in post-communist rural areas tend to have difficulties in understanding the importance of any issue if they do not see how it impacts them directly. Under these circumstances, good relations with LAG II office staff gives meaning to resident involvement in the LEADER community in both LAG I/LAG II and has power to alleviate minor local conflicts.

*Perception of Conflicts.* A distinct, yet related factor in perceived meaningfulness of one's action is an effective strategy for conflict management. Scholars argued that conflicts are an indispensable element of community dynamics. Conflicts can either empower one to become an agent of local change, or conversely, conflicts can lead to disengagement of various interest groups (Flint & Luloff, 2005). For example in tourism governance through LAG I reoccurring conflicts of interest between two or more LAG I members were transferred onto relationships beyond LAG I, leading to members withdrawal from LEADER. Another LAG I member disengaged from LEADER due to dissimilar goals and values. Despite these differences he remained involved in socio-political issues in his municipality and regularly published critical socio-political commentaries in one of the local newspapers. He expressed remorse that the interests of residents who desired a change of power relationships were underrepresented in LAG decision-making. He suggested that he could cooperate within LEADER if he felt that local officials recognized his interests and values.

On a slightly different note, an interviewed member of LAG II recalled that while local officials usually provoked conflicts, they expected other LAG II members to

take sides. Attempts to extrapolate political conflicts between municipalities onto the LEADER playground usually arose on the occasion of discussions dedicated to projects reflecting different developmental priorities. A related aspect of LAG II operations is the ongoing rivalry for local leadership between local officials and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that overshadows the benefits of collaboration.

Remarkably, according to LAG II officers, sporadic disagreements facilitate creativity in LEADER participants. Likewise, a LAG I member proposed that minor conflicts usually lead to various positive outcomes and therefore, the organization ought to encourage dialogue between different representations. 'Togetherness' of the community and its determination is a critical condition for this process: "I think that cooperation goes well as long as ...Kashubs ... [keep] together. Groups that hold together can achieve something" (a restaurant owner).

In both LAGs, familiarity between business owners and officials helped alleviate some of the clashes between representatives of the private and the public sectors. Such familiarity encouraged residents to engage in LEADER without much critique of LAGs performances. Yet, all interviewees felt that both LAGs still needed to emphasize the value of creative disagreements, and yet employ mechanisms to manage structural conflict and overcome barriers to empowerment.

## 5.2 Structural Aspects of Empowerment

The following paragraphs will discuss structural components of empowerment. The notion of 'structural empowerment' or the 'structural attributes of empowerment' denotes success of its individual components. In other words a healthy structure enables and sustains a high quality individual empowerment.

*Openness* Participation in LEADER was voluntary, in contrast to other EU-initiated programs in Poland. This means that cooperation could not be imposed upon residents and, therefore, LAGs largely attracted LEADER enthusiasts (e.g. Father). Prospective members had multiple opportunities to learn about LEADER, the LAGs, and their visions of the future. In addition to annual or individual meetings with officers from LAG I, and LAG II, both groups organized professional workshops and skill training sessions. Participants then were able to choose whether to stay engaged in the program. The findings suggest that some of the individuals participating in the LEADER planning process simultaneously operated at the regional level, thus linking LAGs to external resources through individual vertical integration ties and accordingly, increasing capacity for organizing the LAG I and LAG II communities.

In the case of LAG I, many participants became involved because they had worked with LAG I leaders in other situations (e.g. tour guide, owner of a small agrotourism business). The interviewed owner of a tourism accommodation highlighted that "*they [in LAG I] have known each other before ... and only people who work for public sector are sometimes new*". Notwithstanding the LAG I intention, the organizational meetings attracted mainly those residents who were already involved in local affairs. The outcome of that process was a fixed group of active participants who continued to pursue their usual agendas within LEADER.

On the other side of the spectrum, LAG II concentrated organizational efforts on coordinating development and the promotion of tourism infrastructure. LAG II sought to bridge differences between individual stakeholders and rival municipalities by creating an empowering framework for local development for all. President of Baltic Agrotourism Association suggested, it strove to involve all

groups interested in the subject. Unfortunately some small business owners suggested that the membership fee might be a barrier to broader participation. In contrast, LAG II officers viewed this particular fee as a filter that selected for stakeholders who were actually interested in the program. Certainly, LAG II officers understood the importance of incentives to facilitate collaboration between municipalities:

It is difficult to coordinate such a large group without incentives and rules must be clear and demanding. Different representatives from different municipalities have their specific interest in LEADER and they often want to belong to the group but they don't want to cooperate (the president of Baltic Agrotourism Association).

*Opportunities to learn and grow in a supporting environment.* Multiple opportunities to engage in learning and growing within the LEADER framework (such as meetings, workshops and tourism micro-funds) were an integral element of the empowering process. Whereas workshops and other events facilitated cooperation and mutual learning, the scope of these efforts embraced mainly the 'usual' participants and neglected potential new contributors. In both groups recently recruited members were recommended to participate in LAG committees responsible for distribution of funds for LEADER rural development projects in order to grow within the LEADER framework. Two respondents noted that joining the aforementioned committees enabled them to better understand the LEADER procedures.

*Procedural transparency.* The term 'transparency' has attained a "quasi-religious significance in the debate over governance and institutional design, being used almost to a saturation point" (Hood, 2006). Transparency offers the promise of enhancing functionality of governments. Thus, it is seen as an enabling factor for good governance (Hood, 2006).

In the rural context, transparency may improve local attitudes towards participation in LAGs and perceptions of fairness in terms of community benefits from LEADER. Nevertheless, several respondents highlighted that LAGs showed tendencies to overlook the importance of transparency in tourism decision-making. In particular, respondents from LAG II expressed concerns about favoritism toward municipalities. In response to these allegations, the Director stressed that neither LAG II nor any other local action group was capable of pursuing goals without support from all municipality governments. He clarified however that the role of officials was misperceived and agreed that only procedural transparency warranted LEADER success.

In contrast, almost all interviewees from LAG I agreed that specific criteria for funding projects were clear and for the most part focused on merit, contribution to overall quality of local development, and cooperation between local stakeholders. One of the respondents stated that: "The process (of evaluating project proposals is relatively fair and some of those who submitted project were disappointed but the evaluation procedures are fair" (farmer). Projects proposals submitted to LAG I were initially reviewed by a three-person committee and then made available to the LAG I Decision Board as well as other LAG I members. After the review process was completed at the local level, proposals were forwarded to the Marshall's Office for additional technical evaluation.

Remarkably, respondents' perceptions of procedures appeared to correspond with self-defined roles in LEADER. For instance, respondents who established themselves within the LEADER network perceived the procedures as reasonable, in contrast to those who did not believe they possessed equivalent social networks within LEADER. However, the latter demonstrated a more critical evaluation of the LAGs.

It is also worth noticing that the LEADER procedures at the regional level (Pomerania Province) challenged the effectiveness of LAGs as they discourage prospective members from getting involved. According to the Managing Director of LAG II, regional procedures recurrently counteracted positive effects of partnerships between the private and public sector, thereby discouraging cooperative efforts of local businesses. In this case procedures at the regional level discontinued many local cooperative projects.

*Support & access to resources.* Knowledge and information are key structural components in empowerment for local tourism governance (Tosun & Timothy, 2003), representing a basic and essential element in participatory processes aimed at promoting informed decisions. In his inclusive literature review on stakeholder participation, Reed (2008) states that: "The need for scientific information and analysis to inform stakeholder deliberation has been identified by many authors as an essential ingredient in any participatory process" (p.2425). Simultaneously, communities demand information about tourism in the context of local development so that they can better understand which decisions need to be made through participatory processes (Cole, 2006 ; Sofield, 2003).

As indicated above, both LAGs supported businesses through technical assistance in the form of skills training or educational workshops. They also provided much needed room for the exchange of information between the public and private sectors. Strzelecka and Wicks (2010) proposed that perspectives shared during local action group meetings helped many LEADER participants better understand the role of economic and political landscapes after the EU accession. Those workshops and training opportunities that both LAG I and LAG II offered served the business community primarily as a source of knowledge and a resource to build its social network.

Noteworthy also, is the role of local church in the distribution of information about LEADER and tourism development among rural societies that turned out to be a significant channel to share information about LAG I activities. Simultaneously, the organization distributed information through other outlets such as the newspaper, the Internet, and phone calls. LAG II was recognized for promoting rural tourism as a solution to many rural problems. According to the president of Baltic Agrotourism Association, LAG II communicated with rural residents primarily via 'the southern' office responsible for information sharing and consulting stakeholders. Other respondents added that 'the southern' unit was more active in adopting relevant solutions to deal with pertinent local issues (e.g., owner of small agrotourism business).

As said by the president of Baltic Agrotourism Association, direct funding from LEADER was the main incentive for participating in LAGs. Other respondents agreed that funding for small individual projects motivated them. Though, they criticized the LAGs for misinforming the general public about LEADER benefits and costs.

A significant barrier to access to financial resources was an application procedure that discriminated against smaller farmers, who were less familiar with the EU

programming for community-led local development. Examples of perceived discrimination included: a requirement of 50% match for any small \$10,000 project (president of local tourism association; farmer); the fact that municipalities were given the funding available for infrastructure without a necessity to compete for it, while social activists were required to compete for funding their small activities.

*Boundaries of community cooperation.* The goals of governance necessitate cooperation between tourism businesses and authorities that operate at local and regional levels. Indeed, past studies demonstrated that community cooperation lasts as long as officials desire to understand the residents' perspective (Knopp & Caldbeck, 1990; Armitage, 2005; Li, 2006; Austin & Eder, 2007). Therefore, in order to effectively collaborate all stakeholders must be engaged in decision-making through various modes of participation and power-sharing (Eversole, 2011; Hall 2011).

In Pomerania, LEADER participants noted that they experienced both advantages and challenges in terms of cooperation within LAGs. Major opportunities for residents to engage in LAGs arose through the development of a local strategic plan. The LAG I officers organized educational meetings for all interested residents, who then elected their own representatives. Consultations were coordinated by discussion moderators. Some participants, however, viewed this process as a 'quick fix' of already existing strategy for local development to meet LEADER criteria. Also, many of those who didn't participate in the action group from the start missed a major opportunity to collaborate on projects due to lack of familiarity with others.

It is worth emphasizing that cooperation among municipalities in LAG I was based on the rule that assumed a certain amount of fixed funding was available for municipal projects in each participating municipality. The amount of funding was agreed upon among municipality officials and was not subject to a competitive process. Several interviewees expressed disagreement with this rule, while others viewed it as the evidence of good community cooperation. On the one hand, these circumstances limited cooperation with small independent businesses. On the other hand, the arrangement enabled the construction of technologically advanced tourism infrastructures such as information centers located in each municipality that would share databases concerning local events, accommodations, and attractions.

It was suggested that LAG I was dominated by a small group of powerful residents who collaborated within their social network. Moreover, LAG I officers were accused of supporting projects from this group while disregarding perspectives of smaller businesses (e.g. local artist). In contrast, President of Baltic Agritourism Association stressed that the LAG II concentrated efforts on empowering smaller businesses and improving the flow of LEADER funds. He noted that LEADER allowed for more independence from municipal governments as it equipped LAGs in non-governmental funding. He, as well as other respondents, suggested however, that in the 'post-collective' farming areas, such as the LAG II region, the desire to change every-day realities often is not an adequate motivation for residents to overcome differences and work together towards a better quality of life. For instance, one of the limitations to community cooperation in LAG II is the interaction between stakeholders focused largely on the exchange of business experiences and discussions of procedures rather than dialogue about joint ventures or the opportunities that LEADER creates for rural areas. Moreover, cooperation within LAG II happened, if it happened, primarily between stakeholders from the same sector (e.g. business-business, municipality-municipality). Local businesses

were not interested in public projects, as they did not see enough benefits from costly endeavors led by municipalities.

## **6.0 Conclusion, Limitations and Avenues for Further Research**

Community-led local development (CLLD) seeks to involve citizens at a local level in developing responses to social, environmental and economic challenges. The place-based LEADER mechanism implemented during 2007-2013 established foundations for CLLD programming by promoting LAG-governance across member states. It was aimed to enhance of a local structural institution that empowered emerging local leaders. Whereas the community-led development is well-integrated with cultural and institutional behavior in some EU countries, it has not been practiced in other parts of EU until recently. Indeed, in Poland the focus on resident representation in local governance through public-private partnership provides a worthwhile counterpoint to the historically established political invisibility of rural stakeholders in rural policy making. Hence, examination of this new approach is needed.

The European Union (EU) recognizes the value of communities and their ability to induce socio-economic change through place-based participatory development (Macken-Walsh, 2007; Eversole, 2011). This direction towards community empowerment is especially visible through mechanisms such as LEADER during 2007-2013, and more recently Community-Led Local Development (CLLD), a priority in 2014-2020 EU cohesion policies.

This paper sought to demonstrate prospects for empowerment in rural governance for tourism in the post-communist setting based on the example of LEADER. The framework for discussing empowerment through local governance for tourism resulted from the integration of Kanter's (1993) Theory of Structural Empowerment and components of individual empowerment as identified by Kluska et al. (2004). Discussions based on narratives provided by individuals involved in LEADER (Prestby, Wandersman, Florin, Rich, & Chavis, 1990) explored perceptions of LAGs as a tool for tourism governance in post-communist ruralities, while recognizing both similarities and differences in the way LAG I and LAG II were organized. As with any approach, the qualitative interview method has its advantages and disadvantages. One of the direct advantages of this approach in exploratory research is the opportunity of direct feedback from respondents to assure that responses are from the person intended. Likewise, interviewees are encouraged to provide more complete and better-explained responses. Additional evaluation of the data is secured by field-notes and passive observation. The limitation of this qualitative approach is the difficulty to obtain exactly the same results in different local context. Hence, the results from the qualitative interviews are highly context sensitive. Consequently, generalizability of the results is limited to the specific setting. In order to improve generalizability of the findings, the follow-up project should be built on this qualitative study and adopt reliable quantitative measures of empowerment. Here, future research could utilize existing scales of intrapersonal empowerment (Zimmerman & Zahniser, 1991), interactional empowerment (Speer & Peterson, 2000) or behavioral empowerment (Speer & Peterson, 2000) (in Christens, Speer, Peterson, 2011).

While these findings should not be generalized, they do offer interesting possibilities for future research concerned with facilitating structures for individual empowerment to effectively address local governance in a post-communist setting and the effectiveness of the CLLD initiatives in the context of the new EU cohesion

policy. The paper brought into focus the effectiveness of provided tools for tourism governance, specific to the socio-political constraints that arise in a post-communist reality which make the project of multilevel collaboration challenging. Such constraints include, among others, feelings of low self-efficacy, perception of limited municipal support for autonomous small business projects, and lacking transparency of LAGs. Moreover, based on the findings from qualitative interviews an additional component of structural empowerment was introduced: *boundaries to cooperation*, which is concerned with the obstacles to cooperation one may experience while pursuing projects through LAGs.

Important in the perception of individual opportunities and barriers, is the influence of social networks that were established before LEADER. As this case study reveals LEADER was built on semi-formal or informal relationships between stakeholders who then took distinctive roles in the organization. Usually those with more interactions in the center of local networks came to perceive themselves as more influential and more competent than individuals located at the network peripheries (Stolte, 1978).

In this light the future process of empowering rural stakeholders necessarily involves the transformation of individual ties between business owners and officials into a more egalitarian form of horizontal community-wide integration that promotes fairness in decision-making processes. This is difficult as the communist regime left a distinctive mark on the peoples of rural Poland with traces of a collective farm mentality and a master – worker relationship between residents and municipality officials. Given the complexity of local relations a deeper reflection is needed concerning the pertinence of implemented mechanisms and relevance of tools applied to induce desired changes in rural Poland.

The case of Pomerania demonstrates that in the post-communist reality, the immediate concern is the effectiveness of community-led local development initiatives. Faced with changing EU politics and an evolving economic environment, LAGs must demonstrate their value as legitimate partners in local tourism governance and secure funds that develop new and sustain current empowering mechanisms to increase community capacity in both planning and implementation of local development initiatives.

Bramwell (2004) suggested that collaborative planning is too often perceived as an unproblematic and one-dimensional process in which resources are spent primarily on operations. Aalberts (2004) added that multi-level governance tends to pull the private sphere into the political sphere. Either way transformation of underlying power structures, such as the promotion of democratic values through participation, is meaningless unless people are in the position to take advantage of the opportunities offered. Tourism development processes create such opportunities. Yet, empowering multiple groups of stakeholders in tourism governance is a challenge as it disrupts established patterns of the local power relationships. Therefore, politically unaffiliated leadership in tourism future governance could reduce the influences of municipality officials.



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