



Marianna Strzelecka • Justyna Gutowska • Małgorzata Grodzińska-Jurczak

THE SUPERFLUOUS OBSTACLE OR THE PREREQUISITE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: EXPOSING PARTICIPATION IN *LEADER* AND *NATURA 2000* IN POLAND

Marianna Strzelecka, dr – University of North Texas

Justyna Gutowska, mgr – Uniwersytet Jagielloński

Małgorzata Grodzińska-Jurczak, dr hab. – Uniwersytet Jagielloński

adres korespondencyjny:

College of Merchandising, Hospitality & Tourism University of North Texas

1155 Union Circle #311100, Denton, TX 76203-5017

e-mail: Marianna.Strzelecka@unt.edu

PARTYCYPACJA SPOŁECZNA NA PRZYKŁADZIE PROGRAMÓW LEADER I NATURA 2000 – ZBĘDNA BARIERA CZY WYTYCZNA ZRÓWNOWAŻONEGO ROZWOJU W POLSCE

STRESZCZENIE: Popularyzacja zagadnienia partycypacji społecznej jako strategicznego podejścia do procesu podejmowania decyzji związanych ze zrównoważonym rozwojem nastąpiła w szczególności po opublikowaniu *Brundtland Report* w 1987 roku. W konsekwencji już na początku polskiej transformacji Unia Europejska pełniła aktywną rolę w przemianach społeczno-ekonomicznych obszarów wiejskich, przede wszystkim poprzez systematyczne wdrażanie nowych kierunków ich rozwoju, poparte stosownymi mechanizmami finansowania.

Po roku 2004 wsparcie Unii Europejskiej dla inicjatyw rozwoju wsi promujących partycypację społeczną uległo znacznej intensyfikacji. Dotyczy to zwłaszcza tych programów, które podkreślają wartość i znaczenie wiedzy oraz społeczności lokalnych w procesie zrównoważonego rozwoju. Dotyczy to m.in. programu Leader, który promuje nowe formy *governance* poprzez rozwój bazy do partnerstwa między sektorami publicznym, prywatnym i społecznym (Lokalne Grupy Działania). Duże znaczenie posiada w tym względzie również Europejska Sieć Ekologiczna Natura 2000 – najnowsza forma ochrony przyrody utworzona dla ochrony bioróżnorodności w krajach UE.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: rozwój zrównoważony, partycypacja społeczna, Natura 2000, Leader

Introduction

Over the past two decades Poland has experienced socio-economic and political changes¹ with the most important stepping stone toward transition from a communist to a democratic political system was the collapse of the Communist Regime in 1989. Since the early 90s, the European Union (EU) has become a primary agent of political transition through different policies and funding mechanisms, having significant impacts on how rural development is implemented². After the country's accession to the EU in 2004, regional and local rural programs promoted participatory mechanisms with communities acting as the legitimate stakeholder to determine conditions for rural development³.

Outcomes of participatory approaches in Poland are still rather difficult to assess primarily due to innovative character of opportunities for participation within formal institutional structure. Also, the implemented mechanisms of public involvement appeared to somewhat contradict traditional political customs in rural areas inducing conflicts between stakeholders. By juxtaposing two programs: *Leader* – rural development framework, and *Natura 2000* – a nature conservation network, this article presents a more comprehensive picture of participation in the post-communist context. Specifically, the task of the paper is to expose: the current participatory mechanisms that are expected to enable residents controlling relevant aspects of local development, as well as obstacles to the effective participation in the EU context. Our examination is based on findings from multiple studies conducted in Poland. We extracted information from the research that primarily focused on local stakeholders' experiences with *Leader* and *Natura 2000*, contrasting the two programs enabled better presentation of the complexity of rural decision-making in Poland.

Theory on foundations of public participation in decision-making

Participatory approaches to development in decision-making emerged in local strategies after the Brundtland Report⁴ highlighted public participation as an

¹ M. M. Howard, *The weakness of post-communist civil society*, „Journal of Democracy” 2002 nr 1(13), s. 157.

² F. Steves, *Poland and the international system: external influences on democratic consolidation*, „Communist and Post-Communist Studies” 2001 nr 3 (34), s. 339; M. McDonald, *European community tourism law and policy*, Blackhall Publishing, Dublin 2003.

³ M. Mularska, *Czy można zmienić wieś bez udziału jej mieszkańców? O znaczeniu podmiotowości dla koncepcji zrównoważonego rozwoju*, w: *Społeczne aspekty zrównoważonego rozwoju wsi w Polsce*, red. H. Podedworna, P. Ruszkowski, Wyd. Naukowe Scholar sp. z o.o., Warszawa 2008, s. 220.

⁴ World Commission on Environment and Development, *Towards Sustainable Development*, in: *Our Common Future*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1987, s. 43.

indispensable component of sustainable development. Earlier, Arnstein⁵ comprehensive illustration of stakeholders' engagement in decision-making was among the first scholarly attempts to discuss a need for public participation. The model illustrates a continuum of residents' involvement from passive dissemination of information (manipulation), to residents' active engagement (citizen control). Two primary goals of public participation were proposed:

- gathering information,
- achieving communication between various groups of stakeholders.

Rowe and Frewer found that a one-way 'consultation' is a popular participation mechanism, concerned with gathering information from participants rather than residents' engagement⁶. On the contrary, to be meaningful, the 'participatory approach' must focus on the following communicating methods:

- exchange of information in dialogue,
- consultation,
- mediation or negotiation⁷.

Scholars suggest that different levels of engagement are relevant in different contexts, depending on local development objectives and the stakeholders' capacity to implement decision-making outcomes⁸. Fiorino⁹ identified three major lines of the argument in support of participatory decision-making:

- a normative argument linking participation with strong democratic cultures¹⁰,
- a substantive argument linking participation with knowledgeable decisions and a wide range of values infused into decision-making¹¹,
- an instrumental argument linking participation with more legitimate decisions¹², increased trust¹³, and mitigating conflicts.

⁵ S. R. Arnstein, *A Ladder of Citizen Participation*, „Journal of the American Planning Association” 1969 nr 35, s. 216.

⁶ G. Rowe, L. Frewer, *Public participation methods: a framework for evaluation in science*, „Technology and Human Values” 2000 nr 25, s. 3.

⁷ J. Cent, M. Grodzińska-Jurczak, N. Nowak, *Ocena efektów małopolskiego programu konsultacji społecznych wokół obszarów Natura 2000 (Public consultation programme Natura 2000 sites in Małopolska – effects' evaluation)*, „Chrońmy Przyrodę Ojczyzną” 2010 nr 4(66), s. 251.

⁸ C. Richards, K. L. Blackstock, C. E. Carter, *Practical Approaches to Participation*, SERG Policy Brief, no 1, Macauley Land Use Research Institute, Aberdeen 2004; J. Tippet, J.F. Handley, J. Ravetz, *Meeting the challenges of sustainable development – A conceptual appraisal of a new methodology for participatory ecological planning*, „Progress in Planning” 2007 nr 67, s. 9.

⁹ D. J. Fiorino, *Citizen Participation and Environmental Risk – a Survey of Institutional Mechanisms*, „Science Technology & Human Values” 1990 nr 2(15), s. 226.

¹⁰ T. Webler, O. Renn, *A brief primer on participation, philosophy and practice*, in: *Fairness and Competence in Citizen Participation. Evaluating New Models for Environmental Discourse*, eds. O. Renn, T. Webler, P. Wiedemann, K. Dordrecht, Boston 1995, s. 17.

¹¹ O. Renn, *Participatory processes for designing environmental policies*, „Land Use Policy” 2006 nr 1(23), s. 34.

¹² H. Svarstad, K. Daugstad, O. I. Vistad, I. Guldvik, *New Protected Areas in Norway: Local Participation without Gender Equality*, „Mountain Research and Development” 2006 nr 26, s. 48.

¹³ R. Munton, *Deliberative democracy and environmental decision making*, in: *Negotiating Change: Advances in Environmental Social Sciences*, eds. F. Berkhout M. L. I. Scoones, Edward

Participatory processes bring together different interests, experience, knowledge and attitudes on a relatively equal ground¹⁴ contributing therefore to local justice and fairness¹⁵ and facilitating cooperation between parties¹⁶. According to Richards and colleagues¹⁷ participatory approaches improve local perceptions of fairness and legitimacy of decisions as they usually lead to more complete information that allows to deal with unexpected negative outcomes¹⁸. Also, fairly recently public participation became a tool for local governance to empower stakeholders by creating opportunities for their interaction and community organizing. Creating spaces for local interactions, information sharing, and the exchange of opinions were found to facilitate participation¹⁹.

On the other site of the spectrum, Tosun²⁰ identified several limitations to public participation in less developed economies. He defined limitations at the operational level, structural and cultural levels. Among operational limitations to community participation Tosun recognized centralization of public administration²¹, lack of co-ordination between parties involved in development and the lack of information available to residents. Next, structural limitations include more negative attitudes, with less expertise to implement participation and domination of local elite, while the non-homogenous character of communities, apathy and low awareness are the major cultural limitations²². Finally, the high cost

Elgar, Camberley 2003, s. 56.

¹⁴ I. R. Eguren, *Moving up and down the ladder: community-based participation in public dialogue and deliberation in Bolivia and Guatemala*, „Community Development Journal” 2008 nr 3(43), s. 312.

¹⁵ J. Saarinen, *Traditions of sustainability in tourism studies*, „Annals of Tourism Research” 2006 nr 4(33), s. 1121; B.A. Zanetell, B. A. Knuth, *Bribing Biodiversity: Corruption, Participation, and Community-Based Management in Venezuela*, „Southern Rural Sociology” 2002 nr 2(18), s. 130; P. A. Banas, *International Ideal and Local Practice – Access to Environmental Information and Local Government in Poland*, „Environmental Policy and Governance” 2010 nr 20, s. 44; A. Jordan, *The governance of sustainable development: taking stock and looking forwards*, „Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy” 2008 nr 26, s. 17.

¹⁶ L.C. Stringer, et al., *Unpacking ‘participation’ in the adaptive management of socio-ecological systems: a critical review*, „Ecology and Society” 2006 nr 11, s. 39; P. Sultana, S. Abeyasekera, *Effectiveness of participatory planning for community management of fisheries in Bangladesh*, „Journal of Environmental Management” 2007 nr 86, s. 201.

¹⁷ C. Richards, K. L. Blackstock, C.E. Carter, *Practical Approaches...*, op. cit.

¹⁸ F. Fischer, *Citizens, experts and the environment. The Politics of Local Knowledge*, Duke University Press, London 2000; T. M. Koontz, C. W. Thomas, *What Do We Know and Need to Know about the Environmental Outcomes of Collaborative Management?*, „Public Administration Review” 2006 nr 66, s. 111.

¹⁹ D. G. Reid, J. Taylor, H. Mair, *Rural Tourism Development: Research Report*, School of Rural Planning and Development, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario 2000.

²⁰ C. Tosun, *Limits to Community participation in the tourism development process in developing countries*, „Tourism Management” 2000 nr 6 (21), s. 613.

²¹ K. Hung, E. Sirakaya-Turk, L. J. Ingram, *Testing the efficacy of an integrative model for community participation*, „Journal of Travel Research” 2011 nr 3(50), s. 276.

²² A. Agrawal, C. C. Gibson, *Enchantment and disenchantment: The role of community in natural resource conservation*, „World Development” 1999 nr 4(2), s. 629; C. Tosun, *Limits to...*, op. cit.;

of community participation associated with the lack of financial resources was listed as the main financial obstacle to participation²³. Given the general framework, one should remember that limits to public participation (especially in the context of tourism development) depend on their unique socio-economic conditions of a country.

In Poland, future benefits from the membership in the European Union rest on effective local and regional mechanisms that deal with social and political disengagement in rural areas as solving problems at the central level proved inadequate. Opportunities to influence decision-making outcomes through participatory mechanisms suitable for the post-communist context must integrate democratic elements through the distribution of decision-making power to local stakeholders²⁴. As a part of a global discussion on participatory approaches under conditions of economic and social changes, this article highlights the gap between normative arguments for participatory approach and participatory practices in Poland, in the context of the EU accession. Due to limitations in acquisition of the data, the authors concentrate primarily on barriers distinguished by the aforementioned scholars that are the most compelling in the contemporary socio-economic context of Poland.

Materials and Methods

Leader and Natura 2000 – the implementation frameworks

The *Leader* framework was at first implemented as the Community's response to contemporary rural problems emerging across Europe²⁵. *Leader* incorporated new forms of local governance by creating the legal basis for formal cross-sectoral partnerships (Local Action Groups) fostering rural stakeholders' interaction²⁶. *Leader* is one of the four general objectives of the general EU Rural Development Program²⁷ specified by the European Council in 2005. It led to the formation of local partnerships (Local Action Groups) – a new local governance organisation facilitating collaborative development projects. The *Leader* frame-

P. A. Walker, P. T. Hurley, *Collaboration derailed: The politics of „community-based” resource management in Nevada County*, „Society and Natural Resources” 2004 nr 17(8), s. 735.

²³ C. Tosun, *Limits to...*, op. cit.

²⁴ A. Bora, H. Hausendorf, *Democratic Transgressions of Law: Governing Technology Through Public Participation*, in: *International Studies in Sociology and Social Anthropology*, eds. A. Bora, H. Hausendorf, No 112, Brill, Leiden & Boston 2010, s. 10.

²⁵ R. Nash, D. Koyabe, P. Stansbie, *Impact of European Union funding on tourism in the Grampian Region*, „International Journal of Tourism Research” 2006 nr 8, s. 247.

²⁶ European Commission: Fact Sheet: *The LEADER Approach. Basic Guide*, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg 2006.

²⁷ Council Regulation from 20 September 2005 on support for rural development by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) (Official Journal L 266 item 1698).

work promoted the integrated and participatory approach to development across the country²⁸.

On the other hand the European Ecological Network – *Natura 2000* – the most recent form of the European nature conservation policy, was established to halt the loss of biodiversity by protecting endangered types of biological habitats and habitats of endangered species. The Network comprises sites designated under two EU directives:

- Bird Directive²⁹ – a comprehensive scheme of protection for all species of naturally occurring birds in the wild state in the EU;
- Habitat Directive³⁰, which led to designation of Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) for conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora in the EU.

The increased emphasis on the nature conservation accompanied by insufficient compensation for the opportunity cost as limits were imposed on rural economic growth in *Natura 2000* sites³¹, led to a number of complaints about the program in the majority of the EU Member States³².

The *Natura 2000* Ecological Network is an example of the decision-making process that legislatively appears to include public participation in nature conservation management as it is believed to succeed only if the peoples who live in and depend upon areas subjected to the program stay engaged³³. However, besides the agreement between scholars and practitioners regarding designation of *Natura 2000* sites suitable to local socio-economic conditions³⁴, sites boundaries in Poland were primarily determined just by biological criteria, with limited input from rural communities, local authorities and no consideration of existing development plans³⁵.

²⁸ European Commission Notice to the Member States of 14 April 2000 laying down guidelines for the Community Initiative for rural development (Leader+)(2000/C 139/05). Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg 2000.

²⁹ Directive of The European Parliament and of The Council from 30 November 2009 on the conservation of wild birds (codified version) (Official Journal No L 20 item 147).

³⁰ Council Directive from 21 May 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora (Official Journal No L 206 item 43).

³¹ K. Henle, et al., *Identifying and managing the conflicts between agriculture and biodiversity conservation in Europe—A review*, „Agriculture, Ecosystems and Environment” 2008 nr 124, s. 60; P. Alphanbéry, A. Fortier, *Can a Territorial Policy be Based on Science Alone? The System for Creating the Natura 2000 Network in France*, „Sociologia Ruralis” 2011 nr 3 (41), s. 311.

³² E. Apostolopoulou, J. D. Pantis, *Conceptual gaps in the national strategy for the implementation of the European Natura 2000 conservation policy in Greece*, „Biological Conservation” 2009 nr 1(142), s. 221.

³³ European Commission, *Managing NATURA 2000 SITES. The provisions of Article 6 of the Habitats Directive 92/43/EEC*, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg 2000.

³⁴ P. G. Dimitrakopoulos, D. Memtsas, A.Y. Troumbis, *Questioning the effectiveness of the 29 Natura 2000 Species Areas of Conservation strategy: the case of Crete*, „Global Ecology 30 and Biogeography” 2004 nr 13, s. 199.

³⁵ S. Bell, M. Marzano, D. Podjed, *Inside Monitoring: A Comparison of Bird Monitoring Groups in Slovenia and the United Kingdom*, in: *Taking Stock of Nature: Participatory Biodiversity Assess-*

Leader

Local Action Groups were selected from the list provided by the Pomeranian Marshal Office (www.pomorskie.eu). After the general overview of established LAGs in Pomerania, two unlike groups were chosen for semi-structured interviews with selected LAG office managers. Many other LAG participants were contacted on the basis of online available membership information. In addition to the direct invitation of several LAG members based on available membership information, this study employed a snowball-sampling procedure to guarantee that respondents well represent local issues. A set of prepared questions guided each interview. The in-depth interviews were usually scheduled in people's homes and lasted between 2 and 6 hours.

A total of 18 stakeholders from two Local Action Group (I and II) were interviewed. In addition to the leaders of LAG I and LAG II, the interviewees included eleven participants from LAG I and five participants from LAG II. Interviewed LAG I stakeholders 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 interviewees from LAG II represented interest of the private sector; two of them were also active members of local associations (Local Tourism Organization, Agro-tourism association). One stakeholder actively participated in LAG II Board of Directors and the other represented a local cycling club. The sampling strategies appeared a relevant way of utilizing and understanding networks between key actors in relation to tourism development in the area. Even though, this technique has its limitations, it served its purpose to illustrate the character of *Leader* participation in rural Pomeranian. The *Leader* data was grouped according to themes and then within themes according to smaller categories. Identification of different categories and relations between them allowed for better interpretation of the interviews.

Natura 2000

In the case of *Natura 2000* Ecological Network, the researchers investigated the content of documents on 151 proposed *Natura 2000* sites during the first stage of *Natura 2000* designation in 2005 and 2006. The Ministry of the Environment requested collective documents from municipal and rural district authorities. These documents comprised local governmental opinions and commentaries on the site boundaries to be designated in their municipalities (Official Written Opinions – OWOs). As a result of both qualitative (open-coding) and quantitative (comparing opinion categories by various variables) content analysis, the findings were organized according to three categories of responses (positive,

ment for Policy Planning and Practice, ed. A. Lawrence, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010, s. 232; J. Cent, H. Kobierska, M. Grodzińska-Jurczak, S. Bell, *Who is responsible for Natura 2000 in Poland? – a potential role of NGOs in establishing the programme*, „International Journal of Environment and Sustainable Development” 2007 nr 4 (6), 4, s. 422.

negative, to be discussed; subsequently meaning: acceptance or declining of proposed sites and a proposal of boundaries alterations) and their determinants in the socio-economic development context³⁶. Qualitative research methods were also utilized to gain a better understanding of the participatory approach employed during „*Natura 2000* – meetings in the regions” – a pilot public consultation project in the Małopolskie province organized in 2008 by Regional Directorate for Environmental Protection (RDEP) as a response to the low social acceptance of the *Natura 2000* program. The project covered all the municipalities in Małopolskie province where *Natura 2000* sites were designated. Researchers participated in a total of 20 project meetings and conducted 22 semi-structured interviews with the state officials, local authorities’ and local community representatives. All interviews were recorded, and transcribed. The analysis of perceived effects of the consultations on individual and local interest in Malopolska province³⁷ was performed using MAXQDA software. Finally, the researchers analysed protocols from the Local Cooperation Groups (LCG) meetings (available from websites of Regional Directorates for Environmental Protection, RDEPs) and the online forum for *Natura 2000* – the Information-Communication Platform (ICP, www.pzo.gdos.gov.pl) facilitating the creation of management plans for *Natura 2000*.

Findings

Leader

The European Union funding for rural development during the years 2004-2006 were distributed through the two main programs:

- Rural Development Plan 2004-2006;
- Sectorial Operational Program (SPO) – focused on restructuring and modernization of the food sector and rural areas 2004-2006 (SPO ROL)³⁸.

Being a part of SPO ROL, *Leader* aimed at involving local stakeholders and mobilizing their individual resources for rural development.

At the regional level the *Leader* approach is incorporated into the Regional Operational Program for the Pomerania Region 2007-2013. At the local level, *Leader* facilitates local networks of social relations that strengthen local cooperation and improve the cohesion of decision-making within a given institutional

³⁶ M. Grodzińska-Jurczak, et al., *Problemy społeczno-ekonomiczne przy wyznaczaniu obszarów Natura 2000 w Polsce. Socio-economic problems during Natura 2000 site selection proces*, „Teka Komisji Ochrony i Kształtowania Środowiska Przyrodniczego Oddziału PAN w Lublinie” 2012 nr 9, s. 64.

³⁷ J. Cent, M. Grodzińska-Jurczak, N. Nowak, *Ocena efektów...*, op. cit.

³⁸ Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, *Rural Development Program 2007-2013*, www.minrol.gov.pl [12-09-2012].

framework³⁹. The program's goals are achieved primarily through Local Action Groups that coordinate implementation of the local strategic plans.

The implementation of *Leader* in Poland happened in two main lines of action. The first scheme aimed at engaging rural stakeholders in the process of developing local plans of action (local development strategies) and increasing overall capacity of rural communities to take the leadership in rural development. The main activities included skill training and promoting public participation in *Leader* decision-making among representatives of local businesses and local officials who were expected to form Local Action Groups (LAGs). Later the *Leader* framework supported only formally established partnerships that obtained the status of a LAG. Usually, rural areas in which conflict dominated local relations weren't able to form a Local Action Group. However, Wilkin and Nurzyńska (2008)⁴⁰ noted that at the time *Leader* was introduced, informal rural partnerships were already a popular form of collaboration. So far, no unconditionally accepted methodology was developed to evaluate the success of *Leader* in Poland.

LAG I was founded in 1996, as a local tourism organisation. The group activities used to focus on promotion of tourism attraction and building local tourism product. Facing changing economic and political conditions (i.e. growing dependence on the European Union, EU aids and loans, focus on local governance and decentralisation of responsibilities for rural development) the organisation requested support from local authorities to promote direct cooperation between rural stakeholders and form the Local Action Group. This LAG, like many others around the country, sought to be responsive to concerns expressed by different local interest groups engaged in *Leader*. Indeed, the members of LAG I reported they felt encouraged to share opinions with others and proud that their individual resources were viewed as a valuable contribution to the success of rural development.

By contrast, in the beginning of *Leader*, LAG II concentrated efforts on gaining more members from participating municipalities. In result it experienced uncontrolled growth in number of participants that jeopardizes the effectiveness of stakeholder direct participation in decision-making and diminishes the positive impact of *Leader*. To compensate for the loss of direct participation in LAG II meetings, the organisation built a database including membership information to better coordinate local workshops and skill training with the primary goal set to increase a number of applications for *Leader* funding.

Nonetheless, the findings suggest that increasing responsibilities of LAGs were not followed by increase of participation and support for *Leader*. Conversely, many residents aren't interested anymore in participation in rural development projects coordinated by LAGs. This is so as stakeholders have problems to identify with benefits from *Leader*. In particular, the idea of participation is not

³⁹ U. Budzich-Szukała, *Program Leader w Polsce – sposób na aktywizację wsi*, in: *Polska Wieś 2008: raport o stanie wsi*, eds. J. Wilkin, I. Nurzyńska, Warszawa 2008, s. 120.

⁴⁰ *Polska Wieś 2008: raport o stanie wsi ...*, op. cit.

appealing to younger generations, despite providing them with funding for their projects.

At first, in addition to facilitating local development plans, *Leader* promoted the participatory decision-making. Several participants in LAG I and LAG II, reported feeling of accomplishment and contribution to the content of the LAG strategic documents. However, they stressed that current strategy implementation mechanisms neglect LAG members from the small business sector and their earlier commitment to *Leader*. In addition business representatives in LAGs expressed concerns about LAGs dependence upon local authorities, whose actions seek to control *Leader* and reduce benefits from cooperation between public and private sectors. The interviewees from LAG I pointed out that the primary difference between current and past conditions for participation is that promotion of local attractions through tourism organization (currently LAG I) used to be a major point of the area's marketing strategy with local tourism sector participating in both domestic and international tourism marketing events. Nowadays, the Internet is replacing face-to-face interactions between stakeholders and it is becoming the main source of knowledge along with still popular 'word of mouth' promotion.

A considerable barrier to participation in *Leader* is the perceived gap between local business needs and LAG goals due to lack of a clear understanding of individual and community benefits from the *Leader* program. The limited access to information and knowledge about *Leader* procedures creates the advantage for these stakeholders who have greater access to these resources due to their relationship with local/regional officials. LAG officers confirmed that many issues are complicated so they need to be consulted with *Leader* experts. Stakeholders, who couldn't afford the external expert consultations, didn't understand *Leader* procedures and they were more likely to withdraw. Finally powerful local businesses were reported to lobby LAGs to pursue actions that maximize their individual economic profit at the expense of other *Leader* stakeholders and overall community benefits.

In summary, perceptions of *Leader* and LAGs vary and one cannot easily conclude whether participatory mechanisms in *Leader* lead to meaningful participation and equally empower all rural stakeholders. Certainly, a broader discussion is needed that focuses on the effectiveness of current participatory mechanisms in rural areas of Poland. The following section focusing on participatory mechanisms in *Natura 2000* in Poland further contributes to such a discussion.

Natura 2000

After Poland's accession to the EU, the *Natura 2000* Ecological Network substantially shaped the political landscape of rural areas. The four major public participatory mechanisms were executed during the designation of *Natura 2000* sites:

- official written opinions (OWO),

- consultation meetings (CM),
- Local Cooperation Groups (LCG),
- Information-Communication Platform (ICP).

The process of implementation proved to be challenging for both national authorities and local communities.

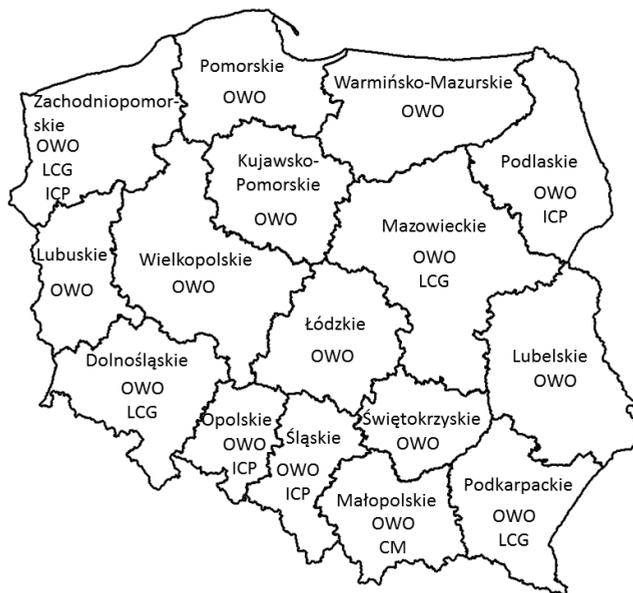
In 2005 and 2006 the Ministry of the Environment requested from local authorities the release of formal opinions (OWOs) about *Natura 2000* sites proposed as a result of decisions made by various experts (municipal, district, provincial)⁴¹. The OWOs and attitudes reflected in the documents pointed out that the major problems with effective implementation of *Natura 2000* are perceived limitations for economic developments in many rural and semi-rural communities. Representatives of rural tourism destinations formed similar views as the implementation of *Natura 2000* created additional barriers to development of new tourism attractions. In summary, the submitted documents (OWOs) revealed conflict of interests existing between different stakeholders: local governments, communities (mainly landowners) and governmental units responsible for *Natura 2000* implementation.

During the following years 2008-2011, only the Małopolskie province (out of the 16 Regional Directorates for Environmental Protection (RDEPs)) organized a few Consultation Meetings (CMs) at different *Natura 2000* sites: *Natura 2000 – meetings in the regions” (Natura 2000 – spotkania w regionach)*. The 2008-2011 CMs series was initiated by the governor of Małopolskie to create a benchmark for good practice facilitating participation, engagement, and inclusion of different local groups of interest (Cent et al., 2010). The RDEP in Kraków employed both independent environmental experts and professional moderators who supported RDEP with hosting officials, representatives of local authorities and residents. These meetings were organised primarily in municipality areas containing sites selected for *Natura 2000*. However, some targeted groups (e.g. private landowners) weren't invited as RDEP didn't specify criteria for participation in CMs. The interviewed participants reported positive views of the CMs, sufficient knowledge to understand the goals and impacts of *Natura 2000* and generally expressed intent to continue working on *Natura 2000* sites' boundaries. On the other hand participation in CMs was low in result of insufficient promotion of the event and organizers' limited experience. Many local interest groups felt neglected due to late arrangement of CMs (after the deadline for final drafts concerning sites' boundaries).

During 2009-2014, the General and Regional Directorates for Environmental Protection (GDEP and RDEPs) coordinate implementation of follow-up participatory mechanisms: (3) Local Cooperation Groups (LCGs) and (4) Information – Communication Platform (ICP, <http://pzo.gdos.gov.pl/>). Both tools are executed under the project: 'Development of management plans for *Natura 2000* sites in

⁴¹ J. Kronenberg, T. Bergier, *Wyzwania zrównoważonego rozwoju w Polsce*, Fundacja Sendzimir, Kraków 2010; M. Makomaska-Juchniewicz, S. Tworek, *Ekologiczna sieć Natura 2000. Problemy czy szansa?*, Instytut Ochrony Przyrody PAN, Kraków 2003.

Figure 1
Participation in *Natura 2000* implementation by province



OWO – Official Written Opinions available on request (2005-2006)

CM – protocols from Consultation Meetings available as the researchers participated in the project (2008-2011)

LCG – protocols from Local Cooperation Groups meetings available online (2009 – till February 2013)

ICP – management plan's draft uploaded on Information-Communication Platform (2009 – till February 2013)

Source: www.maps.geoportal.gov.pl [20-09-2013].

Poland' financed by the EU Operational Programme Infrastructure and Environment (POIS.05.03.00-00-186/09 *Opracowanie planów zadań ochronnych dla obszarów Natura 2000 na obszarze Polski*). This project concerns the development of a management system for *Natura 2000* in Poland and comprises preparation of management plans for 406 *Natura 2000* sites (out of 960 sites in Poland).

Public participation is an essential component in GDEP guidelines for developing management plans⁴². To fulfil requirements of this project GDEP seeks to improve local attitudes to the *Natura 2000*, and to facilitate stakeholder cooperation.

⁴² *Opracowanie planu zadań ochronnych dla obszaru Natura 2000. Wytyczne wydane na podstawie art. 32 ust. 2 pkt 1 ustawy z 16 kwietnia 2004 r. o ochronie przyrody. Projekt, wersja z 5 lutego 2010, GDOŚ, Warszawa 2010, www.kp.org.pl [14-11-2012].*

tion⁴³. Contractors that are responsible for the development of management plans for designated *Natura 2000* sites are required to organize Local Cooperation Groups (LCGs), designed to become spaces for collaboration between contractors, RDEPs, key stakeholders and local communities. Responsibilities of a LCG usually comprise 3 to 4 discussions and/or workshops meetings. Coordinators of local management plans select 'the core stakeholders' and invite them to LCG meetings. However, only the Mazowieckie province (out of the 5 analysed regions) employed a professional moderator and successfully encouraged residents to openly express their concerns.

Cooperation within the LCGs is expected to facilitate communication among RDEPs and regional administrative bodies, local stakeholders and residents. To date, only 5 out of 16 RDEPs' websites secured open access to protocols from the LCGs meetings taking place during 2011-12 in 5 provinces (figure 1). Despite the professional design of the websites, information about past and future meetings is difficult to access (e.g. the path to open the section differs among provinces). The public isn't aware of the LCG progress and journalists didn't attend a LCG meeting.

LCG meetings were primarily attended by: regional (provincial), district and local (municipal/gminas) officials, state forests' and NGOs' representatives, village council representatives, mayors, influential entrepreneurs, as well as rectors of local parishes (dioceses). Regular residents and landowners, only rarely were a part of LCGs, hence it remains unclear whether their views were sufficiently represented and concerns voiced.

Obscure decision-making process, accompanied by limited communication with concerned residents continues to undermine legitimacy of decisions regarding *Natura 2000*. RDEPs reassure participants raising concerns about designation of *Natura 2000* sites that they will have the opportunities to engage in the work on *Natura 2000* management plans which are designated to take into account the local socio-economic conditions. Despite the promises, to date the meetings coordinated by RDEP contractors neglected the local communities' needs. For instance, concerns regarding limited economic development due to *Natura 2000* were presented as irrelevant to discussions during LCG meetings. Also, LCGs meetings were primarily attended by representatives of regional administration, whereas the representatives of local communities were usually smaller, less informed, and thus a weaker group.

Besides the LCGs meetings, the environmental administration strives to engage the public through the Information-Communication Platform (ICP). The ICP is an Internet platform established to consult with general public the management plans discussed beforehand. In spite of LCGs' coordinator assurance of the ICPs' role as a communication tool, no evidence of their significance was found. Even though ICP was primarily established to help to develop the management

⁴³ S. Kiszkurko, *Plan Zadań Ochronnych jako narzędzie zarządzania Naturą 2000*, w: *Natura 2000. Szanse i zagrożenia. Zeszyt seminaryjny*, Instytut Problemów Współczesnej Cywilizacji, Warszawa 2010, s. 47.

plans, drafts of the plans were available on ICP only during the official 21-day consultation period (till February 2013 – plans for 14 sites from only 4 provinces: Opolskie, Podlaskie, Śląskie and Zachodniopomorskie, Figure 1). Also, the only promulgated final draft currently available through the ICP (as of February 2013) covers solely communally owned land, much less conflict-generating than private land. No discussion for this plan took place on ICP forum. The study found no evidence of residents' interest in this project.

Discussion

The ambiguity of participatory approach

The participatory approach to rural development decision-making is a fairly recent social innovation promoted by EU in the post-communist context through programs such as *Leader* and *Natura 2000*. Juxtaposition of the findings from *Natura 2000* and *Leader* is somewhat limited due to different data collection procedures. The researchers collected primary qualitative data for studying CM in *Natura 2000* and LAGs in *Leader*, while the content analysis of secondary data was conducted in order to learn about OWO, LCG and ICP. Comparisons between the findings from *Leader* and *Natura 2000* are confined to primary data collected between 2008-11. However, the analysis of OWO, LCG and ICP significantly adds to the overall picture of the *Natura 2000* implementation process.

Our findings indicate that *Leader* has potential to forge local partnerships responsible for rural development. Important, yet not always appreciated feature of participation in *Leader* is the diversity of stakeholders in Local Action Groups, who usually represent a wide range of local interests. Participants include: farmers, local activists, education, sport and culture, youth organizations, voluntary fire-fighters organizations, women and other organizations for local development⁴⁴ (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2009). In *Leader*, authorities and local businesses together devoted efforts to increase local participation in rural development decision-making by strengthening partnerships between stakeholders (LAGs). However, Budzich-Szukała⁴⁵ highlighted that the lobbying of projects that increase short-term benefits rather than build stable partnerships for sustainable rural development diminishes their efforts as conflicts arising in consequence of these actions undermine legitimacy of LAG decisions.

Concurrently, the implementation of *Natura 2000* proved to trigger the transformation of the environmental administration toward a more decentralized policymaking mechanism. Yet, institutions responsible for the implementation of

⁴⁴ Ministerstwo Rolnictwa i Rozwoju Wsi, *Oś IV PROW 2007 – 2013 – Lokalne Grupy Działania i Lokalne Strategie Rozwoju*, www.minrol.gov.pl [14-06-2013].

⁴⁵ U. Budzich-Szukała, op. cit.

Natura 2000 in Poland did not fully take into consideration a need for public discussion with moderators responsible for facilitating communication between participating parties, which led to conflicts between representatives of local governance and national authorities.

Our findings pointed out two major differences between the participatory features of *Leader* and *Natura 2000*. Namely, focused on building local public-private partnerships, *Leader* creates local 'spaces' for rural interactions and for stakeholders to express their interests and needs. On the other hand, in *Natura 2000*, the authorities primarily apply the participatory approach to validate their decisions regarding the management of protected areas. Hence, in case of *Natura 2000*, we conclude that the participatory approach was applied to mitigate conflicts that arise due to the top-down designation of *Natura 2000* sites boundaries.

The data from the four stages of *Natura 2000* represents different spatial scales limiting therefore the generalization about public participation in *Natura 2000* across Poland. For instance, CM's were only held in Małopolskie province, whereas 5 provinces that made available protocols from LCG meetings did not include Małopolskie. Moreover, the OWOs and ICPs analysis was available at national level, but up to February 2013 discussions for 12 sites in only 4 provinces had a place on the ICP forum. Consequently, coordinators have not used the ICP in the remaining 12 provinces. Lack of consistency in data availability (compare map 1) reflects diversity in the RDEPs' approaches to communication on *Natura 2000* with the citizens across the country, even though LCGs and ICP work under supervisory of GDEP. Different approaches among RDEPs' are the consequence of incoherent understanding of both the concept and the role of participation by RDEPs and low respect of GDEP as a nature conservation policy-making institution in Poland.

Why participation in Poland is difficult?

Participatory efforts within *Natura 2000* and *Leader* appear cumbersome. Based on our evidence we are able to propose a few explanations of public participation in *Leader* and *Natura 2000*. On the one hand, public bodies provided evidence that shows their concern with residents' participation in decision-making. However, implemented participatory approaches seem not suitable for the local socio-economic context, especially in case of *Natura 2000*. Difficulties to engage local stakeholders may occur due to the limited general understanding of the participation as both a normative ideal and a practical model.

Participation in the ICPs forum discussion, for instance requires a membership in one of the groups. As the forum isn't anonymous, sensitive information is less likely to be disclosed. In addition, LCG members constitute the majority of 684 active participants in ICP (information on membership in LCG is displayed next to their posts). Being more knowledgeable about the topics, these members are more likely to participate in ICP consultations. One of the topic, the members brought up a problem of short, 7-day, time period for response to the comprehen-

sive management plan proposals, which appeared to become a significant barrier participatory development of the management plans.

No broader public discussion about the implication of *Natura 2000* on local development took place on ICP. The majority of comments on draft management plans were either concerned with inaccuracies in the documents, the vagueness of management goals, or serving criticism toward specific points in the management plans. Posts from forum moderators (representatives of RDEPs or contractors working on the management plans) repeatedly assure residents that 'their remarks will be taken into consideration cutting off the conversation without real two-way communication. Residents reported to restrain from participation in the ICP forum as it is believed to be a 'difficult to utilize and not very intuitive participatory tool'.

Our findings in *Leader* and *Natura 2000* are supported by Tosun's (1999)⁴⁶ discussion that inconsistent procedures for implementation of participatory approaches along with low residents' interest in public affairs are the major factors significantly reducing participation in decision-making in economically developing areas. Rural communities in Poland require additional time and better knowledge to pursue locally driven social and political changes. Our findings also lead to a conclusion that low awareness of benefits from *Leader* and *Natura 2000* continues to feed unfavourable attitudes towards the programs. Especially in case of *Natura 2000*, persisting negative perceptions are likely to be a result of the historically established emotional bond between rural communities and national park areas in which *Natura 2000* sites were established. Precisely, national park areas were confiscated from the landowners in late 60s, leading to local opposition⁴⁷.

In *Leader*, the interactions between sectors occur mainly during LAGs meetings. *Leader* projects connect tourism stakeholders and encourage the use of embedded local resources. It is possible that many LAGs stakeholders restrained from participation in *Leader* if they believed that their influence was limited and their main task was to support specific enterprises considered important only by local officials. In *Natura 2000* case, interaction between stakeholders from different sectors occurs either in Local Cooperation Group (LCG) meetings or the Information-Communication Platform (ICP). We also found that these tools are only partially utilized by the private sector despite the past local protests against designation of *Natura 2000* sites. Only in Mazowieckie, the level of active citizen-

⁴⁶ C. Tosun, *Towards a typology of community participation in the tourism development process*, „International Journal of Tourism and Hospitality” 1999 nr 10, s. 113.

⁴⁷ J. Kloskowski, *Human-wildlife conflicts at pond fisheries in eastern Poland: perceptions and management of wildlife damage*, „European Journal of Wildlife Research” 2011 nr 2 (57), s. 295; T. Kluvánková-Oravská, V. Chobotová, I. Banaszek, *From Government to Governance for Biodiversity: The Perspective of Central and Eastern European Transition Countries*, „Environmental Planning and Governance” 2009 nr 19, s. 186; A. Pietrzyk, M. Grodzińska-Jurczak, J. Cent, *Potrzeby edukacyjne społeczności lokalnych w wybranych gminach polskich Karpat w związku z wdrażaniem programu Natura 2000*, „Chrońmy Przyrodę Ojczyzn” 2009 nr 6(65), s. 407.

ship was visibly higher, which means that 'ordinary citizens' expressed their concerns during the LCGs meetings.

A few scholars agree that lower levels of public participation in post-communist regions are linked to a persistent lack of social and political trust⁴⁸. For decades rural communities in Poland were 'thought' that they couldn't control their environment; while at the same time no opportunities to participate in decision-making existed. Scholars also suggested that the artifacts of the former socio-political structures significantly influenced the character of contemporary governance⁴⁹. Infrequently organized social interactions along with almost non-existing cooperation between stakeholders, were identified as the major obstacles to meaningful community involvement in decision-making⁵⁰. To allow post-communists society for learning participatory habits, management efforts should be geared towards new incentives. Professional moderators handling residents' participation and interactions between sectors are needed.

Studies argue that only 'a genuine influence on decisions' is defined as a truly participatory process⁵¹. Whereas our analysis focused primarily on the character of a participatory process, the comprehensive assessment of public participation in creating management plans for *Natura 2000* (using LCGs and ICPs) needs to wait until the plans are completed. To date assessment of the OWO and the CM phases leads to the conclusion that the public participation is problematic and depends on the region. Similarly, extensive evaluation of participatory tools utilized in *Leader* should to be performed again after the completion of the 2007-2013 program's scheme.

Meaningful participation in decision-making in contemporary rural Poland is not a common practice as it requires close coordination of activities between authorities and representatives of local interests. Currently stakeholders neither understand the benefits from participation, nor are they given sufficient incentives to engage in decision-making. The greater public participation appears to be primarily the goal of the EU policies, associated programs⁵² and directives. The unique socio-economic context of Poland creates many socio-cultural barriers to implementation of the participatory approaches flourished in the Western

⁴⁸ J. Regulska, *NGOs and their vulnerabilities during the time of transition: The case of Poland*, „Voluntas” 1999 nr 1(10), s. 61; S. Bell, M. Marzano, D. Podjed, *Inside Monitoring...*, op. cit.

⁴⁹ M. Klicperova, I. K. Feierabend, C. R. Hofstetter, *In the Search for a Post-Communist Syndrome: A Theoretical Framework and Empirical Assessment*, „Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology” 1997 nr 7(1), s. 39; S. Michalska, *Aktywność społeczna i postawy obywatelskie mieszkańców wsi a rodzaje ich życiowych orientacji*, in: *Społeczne aspekty zrównoważonego rozwoju wsi w Polsce*, eds. H. Podedworna, P. Ruskowski, Wyd. Naukowe Scholar Sp. z o.o., Warszawa 2008, s. 123; M. Mularska, *Czy można...*, op. cit.

⁵⁰ R. Rose, *Getting things done in an antimodern society: Social capital networks in Russia*, in: *Social capital: A multifaceted perspective*, eds. P. Dasgupta, I. Serageldin, World Bank, Washington, DC 1999, s. 147; M. Paldam, G.T. Svendsen, *An essay on social capital: looking for the fire behind the smoke*, „European Journal of Political Economy” 2000 nr 2(16), s. 339.

⁵¹ M. S. Reed, *Stakeholder participation for environmental management: A literature review*, „Biological Conservation” 2008 nr 141, s. 2417.

⁵² European Commission Notice..., op. cit.

European context. Rural development models implemented in Poland need to take into consideration local socio-economic conditions is innovative decision-making approaches are to be successful. Concurrently Poland is given a chance to develop a relevant framework for legitimate and socially accepted policies.