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## MUNICIPAL COMMUNICATION POLICY REGARDING ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES (ON THE EXAMPLE OF LOWER SILESIA)

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper presents the partial results of research examining Lower Silesia's municipal communication policies regarding environmental issues. This type of research is very rare in Poland. The research was carried out between 2016 and 2022. The research problem concerned the functioning of municipal information policy and the place in it of environmental issues. The formulated hypothesis, according to which the scope and forms of presentation of environmental issues are insufficient at the level of the commune and the local community, was validated and proved right. Indeed, it affected more than two-thirds of the municipalities surveyed. It was also possible to identify some of the most common mistakes in taking and implementing environmental measures in municipal information policies. The research conducted was not financed from external sources but was based on the use of the authors' own resources. None of the surveyed municipalities was interested in financing such research or even in using the results obtained.

**KEYWORDS:** municipal communication policy, environmental issues, Lower Silesia

## Introduction

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Communication policy is at the heart of the smooth and effective functioning of local government, and this is why it is so important. Decisions taken by municipal authorities should be known to and understood by the residents. Communication policy is a set of deliberate and planned activities aimed at making the local policy of the organisation more effective through the dissemination of the expected information and image building. Communication policy is important for both sides of interpersonal and social communication, i.e. for the local community as a whole and its individual members and for the municipal authorities. It conveys appropriate communications and reactions to them and shapes appropriate attitudes to the message (judgements and behaviour). Local authorities use it as a means to convince others to follow their plans, decisions, and projects. Communication policy should also reflect the expectations and needs of individual residents and social groups.

An important aspect of the lives of the residents of each municipality is environmental problems, especially those existing locally. They should, along with economic and social issues, as well as infrastructure and livelihood issues, be the focus of municipal information policy. In what dimension are they such an object? This question became the starting point of the research undertaken by the authors and others involved in the implementation of studies in this area made for Lower Silesia.

## Research Methodology

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The aim of this paper is to present some results of research on the scope and forms of implementation of environmental issues in municipal communication policy. The formulated research hypothesis is as follows: Municipal communication policies implemented in Lower Silesia address environmental issues to an insufficient extent and use inadequate forms of implementation (Chmielewski et al., 2015).

The research hypothesis is supported by the following questions:

1. Do municipal communication policies address environmental issues?
2. What are the forms of implementation of environmental issues in municipal communication policies?
3. What are the reasons for implementing environmental issues in a particular form of municipal communication policies?
4. What mistakes are made most often in this regard?

Another issue worth examining is the effectiveness of municipal communication policies. However, to answer this, further research into the knowledge and environmental awareness of the residents of the individual communes needs to be completed. At present, the authors do not have the capacity to perform such a complete study for Lower Silesian municipalities. They could only use random surveys carried out in some municipalities by other researchers preparing bachelor's, master's and doctoral theses. They did not use limited opinion polls, especially since they have been losing credibility in recent years.

The research was carried out under the research project as part of the departmental research grants. It covered all 173 communes of Lower Silesia, including 4 cities with district rights, 35 urban communes, 57 urban and rural communes, and 77 rural communes.

The research used, among other things: (1) a factual analysis of municipal information policies based on critical observation of the activities undertaken by individual municipalities, especially an examination of the information content of the paper, electronic and verbal materials prepared and disseminated; (2) an analysis of the substantive content presented in these policies with a particular focus on environmental issues, using interviews conducted with municipal employees responsible for information policies; and (3) the level of orientation of residents regarding local information policies, based on a respondent-driven method using a questionnaire technique targeting municipal residents.

The research was carried out according to a specific methodology incorporating the following steps: (1) identification of environmental issues in individual municipal communication policies; (2) identification and generic classification of environmental issues; and (3) identification and evaluation of the reasons and ways in which environmental issues are addressed in individual municipal communication policies (Bogdanov, 2016).

## A brief review of the literature

As the research in this paper examines the communication policy in Polish local government units, the literature review surveys Polish studies on the issue (Szostok & Rajczyk, 2013). It is not factually correct to compare Polish analysis with the experience of municipalities from other countries in Europe, especially Western Europe, both because of different traditions and experiences. The lack of international comparisons in the article is a deliberate research procedure. It is due to taking into account the mentioned different traditions and experiences, as well as the scale of the research carried out (meso scale) and other levels of civil society development (Schimanek, 2015).

A review of the experience of different countries in local information policy would be an interesting study but for a completely separate article.

Unfortunately, there is no extensive and detailed research on municipal communication policies in Poland, except the studies carried out by researchers at the Wrocław University of Economics and the Wrocław University of Technology for the communes of Lower Silesia, Lubusz Land, Opole Silesia, and Greater Poland between 2016 and 2022. Other studies in this area are not known to the authors.

There are two different approaches adopted in Polish literature for communication policy, i.e. (1) model communication policy (communication) between offices, individuals, and human groups and (2) implementation of communication policy of local government units, especially in terms of its effectiveness (Kozłowski, 1997).

In the former case, the research is more general, theoretical and model-based. It identifies and explores the principles, criteria, objectives, and evaluation methods with regard to communication policies and the individual measures carried out under them. This approach is used in both national and international literature (Becla, 2018a). It focuses on general challenges of interpersonal and social communication rather than specific communication policies at the local government level. It produces interesting findings and insights, sometimes useful for municipal communication policies. However, the conclusions drawn have to be adapted and placed in the relevant context concerning local communities and local government. This is because they concern the creation and dissemination of information at a more general level.

In the latter case, there are few studies investigating the communication policy of individual communes in the Polish literature. This is also the case for publications dealing exclusively with the challenges of local communities (interdisciplinary studies on local communities). The few studies on the issue address such topics as:

- prospects of local self-government in the information society (Becla, 2019),
- challenges of local self-government in the information society and in the Internet age (Becla & Czaja, 2016),
- reliability of environmental information sources at the municipal level (Becla, 2018b),
- specific problems in the operation of municipal communication policies (Becla, 2017).

Every form of policy is based on objectives defined *a priori*. The basic objectives of any communication policy include (1) the exercise of the right to information, (2) the creation of an efficient system of social communica-

tion, (3) the creation of interfaces between the local community and its authorities, and (4) the external promotion of the commune.

However, this type of research lacks a deeper research methodology and is based on random surveys using questionnaires. Thus, they are a sociological and political survey of public opinion rather than a scientific study of the actual state of municipal information policy. Thus, they have limited credibility.

### Selected environmental issues in the communes of Lower Silesia

Environmental issues may address various areas falling under two categories, i.e. the protection of the natural environment and the sustainable management of natural resources. They are supplemented by educational activities to raise knowledge and environmental awareness, promote the commune's environmental values, and identify the greatest local threats of an environmental nature among residents.

The goal behind the protection of the natural environment is primarily to limit the negative effects of human activity on individual components of the natural world around us. The limitations can be obligatory or optional and take various forms. They are particularly necessary in areas with extensive exploitation of the environment, production and/or consumption having high environmental impacts, and dense settlement (urbanisation). The risk is also increased as a result of significant deposits of pollutants and the lack of mitigation measures (reclamation) in areas of former exploitation.

In Lower Silesia, such areas include Zagłębie Miedziowe, the former hard coal basins in Wałbrzych and Nowa Ruda, the lignite mining in Turoszów, and quarries scattered throughout the province (Strzegom, Strzelin). In Wałbrzych and Nowa Ruda, there are still unreclaimed post-mining spoil heaps, post-mining areas, and unprotected underground routes. The area also attracts illegal mining practices (the so-called bootleg mining). The Turoszów opencast mine is the subject of a conflict between Poland and the Czech Republic, which generates significant costs (international financial penalties). The total amount of the penalty is EUR 68.5 million. The exploited quarries cannot be reclaimed and leave a permanent trace on the surface of the earth in the Lower Silesia region. The only reclamation is the one that occurs naturally.

Lower Silesia also has areas with very intensive (large-scale) mining activities. This applies in particular to Turoszów and Zagłębie Miedziowe as well as the following communes: Legnica, Lubin, Głogów, Polkowice, and Rudna. Mining and processing activities (mines, ore processing plants, flotation tailings facilities, and smelters) leave visible traces, not only under-

ground but also on the surface: tailings ponds (e.g. Żelazny Most, Gilów), atmospheric air pollution (dust, gases, arsenic, and other heavy metals), and post-industrial effluents.

Strong human impact on the environment also occurs in rural areas of intensive agricultural production (around Świdnica, Wrocław, and Legnica) and, linearly, in the vicinity of traffic-laden transport routes, such as the A4 motorway and international roads and access roads to major cities. The Wrocław Metropolitan Area is a significant multidimensional hot spot in this respect.

Lower Silesia has been subjected to long-term anthropogenic impact for more than a thousand years, which has left many traces in the local natural environment. This includes not only the agricultural and settlement transformation of the land surface and surface waters but also the depletion of mineral resources and groundwater, as well as the disappearance of biodiversity or natural ecosystems and landscapes.

The sustainable management of natural resources and ecosystem services is even more challenging. Local communities lack both the scientific and technical capacity for it and the appropriate resources to initiate projects of this type. Furthermore, there is a lack of an appropriate social climate. This applies to both renewable resources (such as hay, straw, fruit and biomass) and non-renewable resources.

Science does not conduct research into modern, environmentally friendly solutions due to very low levels of financial support. Examples include unused national solutions regarding alternative renewable energy and the lack of comprehensive utilisation of mineral raw materials, such as those associated with copper ore. Moreover, agricultural and river-based raw materials are not used, and the transport capabilities of the Odra River are insufficiently utilised.

Small operators do not have the financial and human capacity, and they do not attempt to seek environmental solutions as they have not done so traditionally. There is also no sufficiently strong system of support for such solutions from state agencies. Note that every commune of Lower Silesia has certain unresolved environmental problems and threats resulting from past actions (incompatible with the legal and institutional regulations in force) and the lack of consideration for the needs of the local natural environment.

Any properly implemented inflationary policy on environmental issues should also be supported by educational and promotional activities aimed at raising the knowledge and environmental awareness of the population as another contribution to informal education and at promoting active, environmentally friendly life attitudes and consumption habits. This is particularly important in light of the looming energy crisis and the unpreparedness of government agencies to face serious crisis-related challenges. This is because

crisis tends to be an excuse to exhibit anti-environmental behaviour. An increase in emissions and emissions of atmospheric air pollutants (urban smog) and the complete ineffectiveness of regional anti-smog policies are examples of such attitudes. Elevated levels of particulate matter are already observed in many communes, including eleven spa communes (Czaja et al., 2018).

The communes of Lower Silesia also have numerous natural assets. However, they require adequate promotion (if not overused) or management (if overused). Examples of overexploited communes include Karpacz, Szklarska Poręba, and some spa resorts. Communes with unused potential include those located in the north and west of the region and Dobromierz (Czaja et al., 2022). However, the promotion requires not only appropriate environmental marketing but also an inventory of natural resources. No commune of Lower Silesia has a properly made professional and comprehensive wildlife inventory in place (Dubel, 2007).

## Environmental challenges in the communication policies of the communes of Lower Silesia

To explore environmental issues in municipal communication policies and assess whether the main hypothesis is valid, the attempt is made to answer three research questions: (1) Do municipal communication policies address environmental issues? (2) How are environmental issues implemented in municipal communication policies? (3) What are the leading reasons for implementing environmental issues in a particular form of municipal communication policies?

Environmental issues are addressed by the communication policies of all analysed communes of Lower Silesia. They differ in topic, scope, level of detail, and the frequency of environmental challenges in the information disseminated in municipal communication policies. However, there are some patterns regarding these criteria. **Firstly**, environmental challenges appear more widely and frequently in communes that rely on the quality of the local natural environment in their operations, i.e. spa resorts and tourist communes. **Secondly**, environmental issues appear more frequently in communes whose residents have higher expectations regarding the quality of the natural environment and a higher level of knowledge and environmental awareness, e.g. in cities such as Wrocław, Legnica, Jelenia Góra, and Świdnica. **Thirdly**, perhaps surprisingly, environmental issues in communication policies are not more frequent in communes with the greatest environmental challenges. There may be two reasons for this: (1) being used to worse environmental conditions in old industrial mining centres, such as Wałbrzych or

Nowa Ruda, and (2) current economic and social benefits from over-exploitation of environmental resources as is the case in Zagłębie Miedziowe and Turosszów. **Fourthly**, environmental issues appear less frequently in the communication policies of rural communes and small towns, which may be due to lower social activity and lower knowledge and environmental awareness. However, this thesis requires further research.

The object of the authors' interest was not the strength of the relationship between the size and inconvenience of an environmental problem and the interest in it in municipal information policy but the quality and frequency of addressing environmental issues in the information activities of municipal authorities. Problems inconvenient to municipal authorities were taken up primarily by political opponents.

Environmental issues take diverse forms in municipal communication policies, including, among others, the following types of information:

- information promoting the commune's natural assets, directed to its residents, people in the surrounding area, and potential visitors (146 of 173 municipalities surveyed),
- information on the state of the commune's environment obtained from relevant institutions, such as the provincial environmental inspectorate or the Local Data Bank (67 of 173 municipalities surveyed),
- information promoting the commune's environmental projects, financed from its own resources and external projects, on an obligatory basis in this case (111 of 173 municipalities surveyed),
- warnings at situations involving dangerous natural phenomena, such as floods, excessive rainfall or temperatures, drought, fire hazard, smog, and gales (98 of 173 municipalities surveyed),
- information on restrictions or prohibitions imposed by the authorities to protect the local environment and the living conditions of residents in an emergency (121 of 173 municipalities surveyed),
- information on the environmental challenges adopted for implementation in the strategic documents of the commune (160 of 173 municipalities surveyed),
- information and data regarding opportunities for economic exploitation of the environmental qualities of the local natural environment (45 of 173 municipalities surveyed),
- educational information (e.g. descriptions of environmental routes, presentations of exceptional natural values, such as national parks, reserves, landscape parks, and nature monuments) (45 of 173 municipalities),
- information on expected environmentally friendly life attitudes and consumption patterns among the commune's residents (22 of 173 municipalities),



- information on new environmental regulations being introduced at national, regional, or municipal level (39 of 173 municipalities surveyed).

Information promoting the commune's natural assets is one of the most common pieces of information conveyed in municipal communication policies. It takes the form of photographs, maps, information folders and, less frequently, films and popular science articles. Some communes also place this information on specially prepared boards and educational paths. Some communes also publish books (guidebooks and photo albums with commentary). However, they are only available in small print runs and are poorly disseminated due to an underdeveloped distribution network. Tourist communes and spa resorts are much more efficient in dealing with these problems than non-tourist communes, especially rural ones. Preparation of publications requires cooperation with scientists, which is inaccessible to communes distant from large cities, such as Wrocław, Wałbrzych, Legnica, Jelenia Góra, and Głogów.

Commune authorities should be interested in providing and explaining information on the state of the local environment in the interests of residents. They should obtain it from external sources and commission appropriate studies. Unfortunately, this requires large financial resources. Studies are rare in small communes, having no statutory obligation to carry them out. In addition, local authorities see the relationship between the information provided and the efficiency of their operations, which means that they perceive the information on a lower-than-expected quality of the natural environment as a threat to their political position. The information about arsenic emissions in Głogów is a good example of this. Local authorities are also worried about the response from potential polluters to the information disseminated about them (court cases). This conformist attitude is common in local government representatives.

Environmental projects initiated and implemented by the commune are promoted by the commune offices. The promotion of EU-funded projects is even obligatory. If activities are carried out by the commune in connection with its duties (e.g. municipal waste management), the information is disseminated in the manner prescribed by law. The greatest involvement comes from the projects initiated by municipal authorities; however, there are few such initiatives. The involvement seems quite justified given that such projects seem to provide further evidence of a positive environmental image of the local authority.

Municipal authorities are also particularly committed to disseminating warnings to residents in the event of dangerous natural phenomena, such as floods, heavy rainfall, high temperatures, threat of prolonged water shortage, elevated fire hazards, excessive emissions of pollutants (smog), and violent weather phenomena, such as storms and gales.

There is a lot of controversy and concern about the restrictions and prohibitions imposed by the authorities to protect the local environment and the living conditions of residents. This would not be the case if the regulations reflected the needs of the residents. However, basically, they do not, and residents perceive new measures as an additional burden and expense. This is confirmed by the willingness-to-pay and ability-to-pay surveys, which show that declarations on environmentally friendly attitudes contrast with the low willingness to incur additional expenditures for the implementation of environmental projects. In fear of local protests and resistance, municipal authorities (1) fail to provide adequate care to control observance of additional restrictions and prohibitions (dead letters) or (2) try to put the responsibility on external actors, such as government agencies and environmental movements. They also tend to hinder activities in this respect and avoid taking the initiative. The potential political consequences, such as loss of power in the next election, also have an impact on the decisions.

Environmental challenges adopted for implementation in the strategic documents of the commune represent another interesting environmental aspect of the municipal communication policy. Each commune of Lower Silesia has its own local development strategy. The strategies often assume sustainable and permanent development involving environmental tasks and objectives. In this respect, the following questions deserve further investigation:

- 1) Are the strategies in line with the aspirations, needs, and expectations of the local community?
- 2) Are they feasible to implement within the specified period?
- 3) Will they be implemented effectively and efficiently?

The activities of municipal authorities regarding municipal communication policy can be properly assessed only in the case of affirmative answers to all of these questions. Surveys conducted in the communes of Lower Silesia indicate a relatively low level of awareness of local strategic documents among residents. This is primarily due to two factors, i.e. a low level of interest in the commune's documents and an ineffective communication and promotion policy concerning strategic papers of the commune. Counteracting this is one of the biggest challenges for municipal communication policies. The activities can also focus on building a civil society, according to which communication activity and involvement are natural elements of human behaviour (Becla, 2019). Features of a civil society would significantly facilitate the process to overcome the reluctance to obtain information on the development directions in the local community.

The other information that deserves special attention is empirical and statistical data on the possible economic use of the environmental values of the local natural environment. This data provides guidance on profitable use

of the natural assets of the commune (including beautiful landscapes, biodiversity, ecosystem services, local mineral resources, and renewable resources) in accordance with the principles of sustainable and balanced development, promoting the growth of tourism, health care, leisure, and recreation services as well as environmentally friendly production. However, this requires the nature inventory, the raw material balance, and strategic development plans in place. The vast majority of the communes of Lower Silesia do not meet these criteria.

Another area of information that is relevant to municipal communication policies is educational information. This includes descriptions of ecological routes and presentations of exceptional natural values (national parks, reserves, landscape parks, and nature monuments). The popularisation of such materials takes place with the help of institutions that distribute them and are involved in educational projects defined in the charters. The promotional activities are undertaken by the directorates of national parks and the environmental protection departments of province offices. Lower Silesia has two national parks (Karkonosze and Stołowe Mountains) and 13 landscape parks (Bystrzyca Valley, Bóbr Valley, Jeżerzyca Valley, Chełmy, Owl Mountains, Książ, Przemków, Rudawy, Stołowe Mountains, Sudety Wałbrzyskie, Ślęza, and Śnieżnik). Their activities are supported by environmental NGOs. Communes lacking such forms of nature conservation are in a more difficult situation. Their information activities are mainly based on the involvement of local enthusiasts.

Yet another important element of municipal communication policies is the dissemination of information on new environmental regulations imposed by national or EU authorities. This information obligation results from the subordination of local government units to the central state authority. It is perceived as an obligatory commissioned task and does not place any burdens on the commune (there are no consequences and no need to provide justification in this respect).

In summary, the answers to the questions posed with the hypothesis can be determined. Municipal information policies address environmental issues, but most often, they are piecemeal and quite simply put. Most often, municipal authorities try to boast about their achievements and hide the shortcomings of pro-environmental activities. Municipalities are most likely to emphasise the inclusion of environmental problems in local strategic documents (93% of surveyed municipalities) and to highlight their natural assets (84% of surveyed municipalities). However, there is a lack of major activities in expanding environmental knowledge and deepening environmental awareness among residents. There is also no exposure to many local, difficult-to-solve ecological problems, especially regarding the location of installations from which the municipality receives funding. Addressing environ-

mental issues in municipal information policies is most often due to the following motives: (1) the obligation to present information, especially legal and institutional information related to relevant regulations, (2) the desire to boast about their environmental successes, and (3) environmental “fashion”. What is lacking, however, are motives related to deepening the knowledge, awareness and consolidation of residents’ pro-environmental attitudes.

Another interesting problem remains – what mistakes are made most often in this regard? The research carried out for the Lower Silesia region made it possible to notice the following mistakes, among others:

- failure to address environmental issues noticed in 17 municipalities,
- superficial presentation of local environmental challenges and threats in 110 municipal information policies,
- lack of activities aimed at raising environmental awareness and deepening ecological knowledge among residents, which occurred in 162 surveyed municipalities,
- the presentation of global environmental challenges without their reference to local conditions, spotted in 97 municipalities,
- and the most common error, that is, the lack of monitoring of the effectiveness of municipal information policy, spotted in almost all surveyed municipalities.

The mistakes made testify to the specific understanding of municipal information policy by local authorities. It is primarily intended to maintain an appropriate positive image of those in power in order to maintain it in the next elections. Hence, the tendency to expose information favourable to those in power and to avoid existing imperfections and failures of those in charge.

## Conclusion

The research carried out in 173 communes of Lower Silesia shows that environmental issues are present in their communication policies. The formulated hypothesis proved positive. However, a complete discussion is beyond the scope of this study.

All communes of Lower Silesia have local communication policies in place. Virtually all of them deal with different environmental issues (of which there are many in Lower Silesia), with different scope and using different forms of implementation.

Local information policies address environmental challenges primarily in a popular manner, which is an advantage from the point of view of a diverse audience and a disadvantage from the point of view of substantive qualities.

There is a lack of comprehensive programs to influence residents' environmental knowledge, awareness and attitudes. Municipal employees most often do not identify such needs.

Municipalities are also not interested in identifying the ecological expectations, preferences and needs of residents. They do not formulate such questions for them.

Virtually no municipality in Lower Silesia monitors the effectiveness of its information policy.

The increasingly widespread use of the Internet, even official sites and community forums, results in the more frequent appearance of false information in the form of rumours and assessments by incompetent people or false information, especially from political opponents. This is fostered by anonymity and weak legal or social accountability for such information, as well as the ease of posting it.

Municipal communication policies make use of multiple sources of information and address different forms of environmental challenges. Detailed research results are very interesting but would exceed the scope of this paper. An in-depth study would be required to provide further insight into the actual effectiveness of municipal communication policies and what activities need to be done to make them credible and useful to local communities.

Based on the research carried out, the following recommendations can be made:

- 1) in the theoretical dimension, develop a model to assess the effectiveness of municipal information policy,
- 2) in the practical dimension, the model should be tested and then disseminated in municipalities.

The model should cover both environmental and other problems; that is, it should address a comprehensive municipal information policy. This requires the commitment of adequate resources, as well as a research team. However, the development of such a model seems to be a necessary activity in the conditions of the information society and civic participation.

## The contribution of the authors

The authors did not divide the different parts. Their contribution to the article and its components was half each.

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