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SOCIAL ECONOMY IN BAŁTÓW AS SOCIAL INNOVATION

Abstract

The article discusses problems of joining of social economy and social innovation, illustrated by the example of activities undertaken in the last decade in the rural commune of Bałtów (Świętokrzyskie voivodship). In the theoretical section, I present the context of emergence of social innovations in Europe and some of their definitions. In the empirical section, I depict the development of social entrepreneurship initiatives in Bałtów commune based on the case study conducted in 2013 and analyse them in the context of social innovation.

Key words

Social innovations, social economy, local community, social change, clusters.

Introduction

Both the concept of social economy and social innovation emerged in the public discourse in the context of searching for solutions that would effectively cope with the challenge of the consequences of global processes, especially the crisis of the welfare state or, more broadly, the global economic crisis [1]. While both issues are rooted in the 19th century, they gained particular importance in the 1990s, mostly due to the promise they held for the growing social problems. They were perceived as an alternative to market solutions, which failed to give a remedy to the challenge of growing social inequality, and the social exclusion of individuals and entire regions. In the case of social economy, the values discussed included reciprocity, responsibility and economic sovereignty. In the case of social innovation, there was a broad inclusion of stakeholders and a focus on grass-root, experimental, and network-based initiatives.

Social economy as a specific form of social activity is based mainly on trust. When people get involved in joint undertakings, they are able to cooperate and trust each other, which allows them to take risks together [2]. This approach is of key significance in coping with the effects of economic crisis, when it becomes necessary to launch social mechanisms, such as social trust or openness to innovative solutions [3]. Cooperatives, as well as development of network-based relations popularized in the 1990s in social organizations and enterprises, stimulated interest in the issues of social innovation in Europe [3].

The European Union played a quite significant role in the popularization of both issues, which stimulated interest in the field through its programmes and initiatives. In 2006, community initiatives aimed at solving problems common to all member states were launched. In the context of social innovation, the most important one was the EQUAL initiative, providing the space for testing of innovative approaches to labour market policies and programs. There was also the LEADER programme, launched as a part of the rural development scheme, which promoted a grass-roots, partnership-based approach to social development in which local community representatives were to come up with development strategies and innovative projects, combining human, natural, cultural and historical resources [3]. On the other hand, within the framework of structural funds in the financial perspective of 2007 – 2013, emphasis was put on supporting innovation and mainstream into the social policy of each operational programme [4].

This meeting of social innovation and social economy is the significant context for this study. Its aim is to analyse the phenomenon of social entrepreneurship in Bałtów commune as a pioneering example of social innovation in the rural areas in Poland.

The concept and the context of social innovation

Social innovation remains one of the key issues in EU policy. In the Europe 2020 strategy, they are the instruments that may contribute to solving of the most important social problems of Europe. The European

Commission (EC) has undertaken to “design and implement programs to promote social innovation for the most vulnerable, in particular by providing innovative education, training and employment opportunities for deprived communities to fight discrimination [5]. Social innovations are also present in many political initiatives of the EC, such as the "European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion", the "Innovation Union", the "Social Business Initiative", the “Social Investment for Growth and Cohesion, including implementation of the European Social Fund for the years 2014–2020”.

The meaning of social innovation has changed over time. Initially, it was perceived as the effect of technological innovation. However, as the industrial society shifted to the society of knowledge and services, the paradigm of the system of innovations changed [6], leading to a substantial transformation of the relationship between technological and social innovations. According to the new approach to innovation, the significance of institutional and social networks is growing. The correlated representatives of institutions and social actors interact with each other develop, test and popularize the new modes of action [7]. Moreover, according to the new approach, society is becoming the focus of innovation, unlike in the past when political programmes for social development were based on scientific diagnoses and recommendations. At present, innovations have become the tools for improving the well-being of our society [8].

Social innovations, however, do not share a common definition [1]. Howalt and Schwarz describe social innovations as component of the processes of social change, which are the most important general cause of social change [6]. Participants of the implementation process are various social groups, including professionals and community activists. The change usually takes place as a process and rarely as a single-time action. Social innovations include experiments aimed at improving the quality of life of individuals, communities or entire nations [9]. On the other hand, the EC puts emphasis on the fact of creation of new relations and cooperation. Social innovations can be defined as the development and implementation of new ideas (products, services and models) to meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations [10].

It would not be possible to discuss all definitions of social innovations that are present in the discourse. On the other hand, it does not seem necessary. It is enough to conclude that it would be difficult to find an approach that could be described as entirely inconsistent with Bałtów initiatives. Their hallmarks are development and change. The case of Bałtów has been discussed in several press articles and brochures, but these have already become outdated. The conditions change every 2 to 3 years, and innovations are being introduced at various levels and in different areas. In the further part of the study, I will discuss individual solutions, which fit into various approaches to social innovations.

Methodology

This study was prepared based on a report for the Institute for Public Affairs of 2013, dedicated to social entrepreneurship in Bałtów [11]. It was one of the case studies selected for analysis of social enterprises in Poland. The case studies differed in terms of their size, geographical location, legal status, structure of income, marketing tools and the image building strategy. The objective of this undertaking was to identify the factors of sustainability of social enterprises that impact the duration and development of such entities in Poland. Their ability to achieve the established social and economic goals and to maintain the potential for development was also of interest [12]. This research objective required an in-depth analysis of the complexity and diversity of the enterprises. It also examined their history, objectives, social and economic dimensions of the tasks undertaken, rooted in the local community, the social capital and the legal environment.

Obtaining such a holistic view was possible through the use of a case study research strategy, which conducts an analysis of processes within their context. No social phenomenon may be fully understood if analysed in isolation from its context, "but is of interest precisely because the aim is to understand how behaviour and/or processes are influenced by, and influence context" [13]. Moreover, case study is a research strategy focusing on understanding the dynamics of a single arrangement [14].

Within the framework of such a research procedure, interviews were conducted with many stakeholders of Bałtów initiatives in July 2013, including the management of the complex (the director of the association and the vice president of the association), 3 employees of these institutions who were responsible for marketing, investments and project coordination, the head of Bałtów commune, and two inhabitants who run an agritourism farm and cooperate with the above associations. Moreover, various documents of the enterprise

were analysed, including the strategic documentation of the entities under study and the commune, working documents and Web pages, statistical data, studies and press articles discussing the Bałtów initiatives.

Development of social entrepreneurship in Bałtów

Presenting the phenomenon of social entrepreneurship in Bałtów, it is necessary to mention that we are dealing not with a single entity, but a conglomeration of many entities and initiatives, characterized by a complex structure in terms of organization, legal status and ownership. Some are aimed mainly at economic, while others are aimed at social objectives, maintaining a relatively good balance between the two (Fig. 1). In this study, I will refer to these shortly as the "Bałtów conglomeration", referring to the network of entities, aiming to achieve a shared goal, which is sustainable development of Bałtów commune.

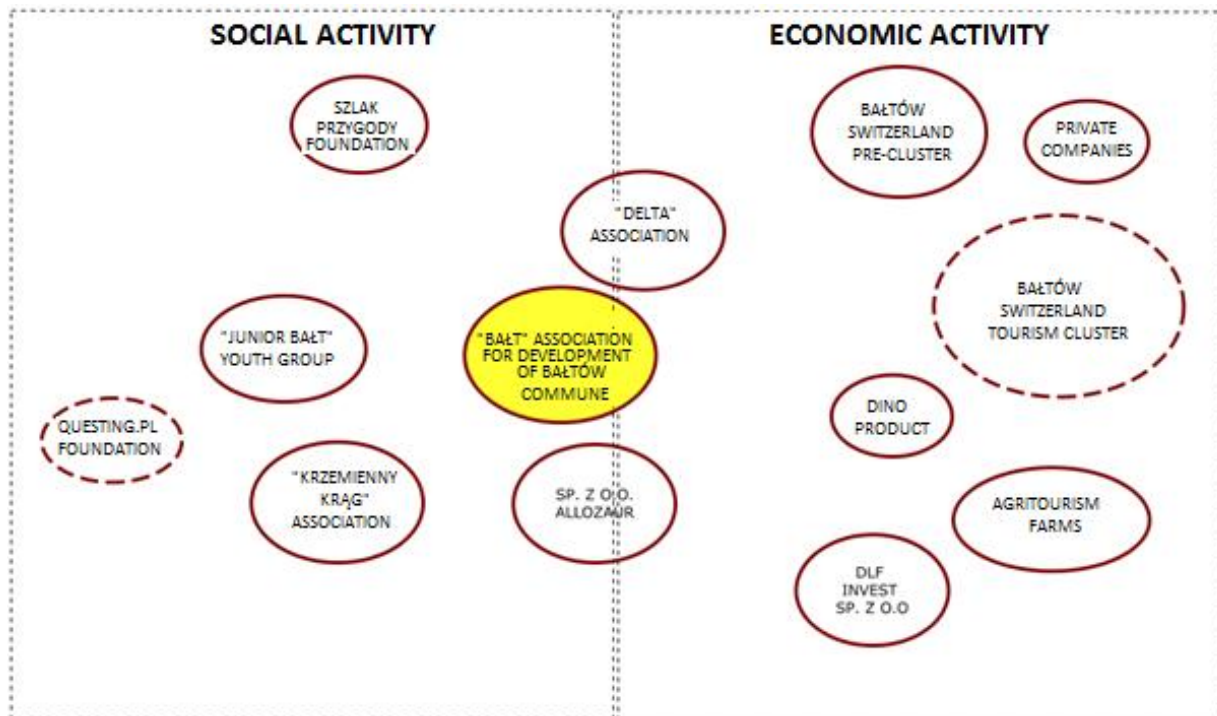


Fig. 1 The organisational structure of the Bałtów complex (2013)

Source: Author's.

The history of social entrepreneurship in Bałtów starts in 2001, when it was a backward commune¹, lacking a vision of development, with many weaknesses in terms of the so-called "hard" infrastructure like roads, sewage and water supply systems, telecommunication or computer networks, as well as the "soft" infrastructure", consisting of human and social capital, weak-developed civic society (including non-governmental organizations). At the time, the "Bałt" Association for Development of Bałtów Commune was established ("Bałt"). The initiator was a local entrepreneur who was a co-owner of the meat processing plants and one of the major employers of the region. He was dedicated to his region and a social activist. According to the founding myth, he was deeply concerned about the village, set in a beautiful landscape, but untended, forgotten and godforsaken.

The association was established to support the local folk group, organize trainings and give advice to farmers, craftsmen and agritourism farms, and to contribute to development of local folk craftsmanship. The organization was to be involved in social, educational and economic activity. It was agreed that the driving

¹ The commune of Bałtów consists of 16 villages. In 2016, it was inhabited by over 3.5 thousand people (since 2002 the number of inhabitants decreased by over 10 percent). The unemployment rate is approximately 19%, compared to 30% in 2004 (at the beginning of the processes of change). 16% of inhabitants have a university degree, 1/3 - upper secondary education, 1/4 - vocational education and 1/4 - together elementary and lower secondary.

force behind the development of Bałtów village and commune would be tourism, and the underlying objective is the sustainable development of the commune.

It is worth noting that Bałtów commune is located in a region for which economic transformation was shock therapy. Since the 1970s, the largest production plant in the region was Ostrowiec Foundry, located in Ostrowiec Świętokrzyski, approximately 12 km from Bałtów, which employed more than 17 thousand people at the time. It is not an overstatement to say that in almost every household in Bałtów, there was at least one foundry employee. After restructuring of the plant in the early 1990s, certain divisions were separated and a new enterprise was established. Employment in the foundry was reduced dramatically to about 1.5 thousand. In 2012, the foundry had 1335 employees². Thus, both in Ostrowiec Świętokrzyski and in the nearby Bałtów, the unemployment rate reached 20% or even 30% in the first years of the new millennium.

According to the interviews conducted, the local authorities believed at the time that further development should be aimed at mining, although no research has confirmed existence of any natural resources, or even heavy industry. Plans were made to construct cement works or a concrete batching plant in the former quarry in Bałtów.

In 2001, people related to the "Bałt" Association proposed an entirely new vision based on sustainable development. It was decided that unemployment, marginalization and discrimination should be eliminated through economic development, but not in fields that may threaten the natural environment. The focus was on activity that would contribute to environmental protection or the enhancement of its quality. The commune was to focus on tourism.

In 2002, "Bałt" Association organized the first tourist attraction, including raft rides on the Kamienna river that flows through Bałtów. The enterprise combined many features that became typical for further activities of Bałtów conglomeration. Those included activity on behalf of the local community, such as caring about the aesthetic characteristics, "discovering" the river for the inhabitants, and building links with the local area. Environmental activities focused on water treatment, addressing those inhabitants who discharged wastewater directly to the river to build septic tanks. Plans to counteract unemployment focused on several persons were employed in the raft ride organization. The profitability of the undertaking was to become self-sufficient, without needing constant financing from public funds. Finally, there was an effort to build a strong product to attract tourists.

A breakthrough event for the association and for the village was the discovery of dinosaur traces in Bałtów commune in 2003. Based on drawings from literature, a large model of the dinosaur was constructed and placed in front of the commune office. As it attracted much interest, more models were built. This is how the idea of the first Jurassic park in Poland was born in Bałtów.

The first JuraPark in Poland, established in 2004, became the most recognizable tourism product in Bałtów. It is an open-air museum occupying 3.5 hectares. The showpieces are realistically reconstructed life-sized models of dinosaurs. It was developed as a learning trail, where the visitors could get to know the world of dinosaurs according to the chronology of the Earth's history, and every showpiece was described in detail.

The establishment of a new, large-scale tourism product required professional management. Therefore, a new entity was separated from the "Bałt" Association called the "Delta" Association (known as Delta). Its main task was the development and management of the JuraPark. Delta gave employment to another group of people, many of whom were the unemployed of Bałtów commune, according to those interviewed.

At the same time, various forms of activity on behalf of the commune were separated. Social activity became the domain of "Bałt", while tasks associated with development of the new tourism product, creation of workplaces on a greater scale and educational activity in palaeontology were entrusted to Delta. The difference between the two entities was also noticeable in terms of language. Respondents from Delta spoke strictly in terms of economy, characterizing their activity or development plans, using such terms as "value chains", "competitiveness" and "investment". On the other hand, representatives of Bałt always referred to the social

² www.lista500.polityka.pl/companies/show/75 (access 5.02.2017).

dimension of their activity, speaking of "clusters", but always in the context of "social economy" and "counteracting social exclusion".

In the subsequent years, more tourist attractions were added, new initiatives and entities emerged, and the community joined local and supra-local projects and initiatives, such as Equal and Leader+ (Fig. 2). On the one hand, it was a way to provide stable employment for the inhabitants during the off-season, but mostly it was a way to attract tourists and develop the products offered.

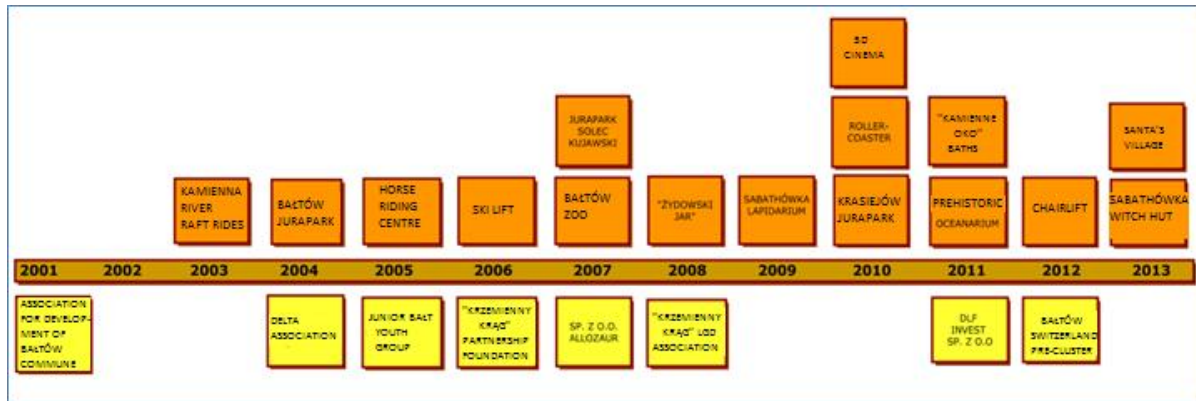


Fig. 2: The entities and tourist attractions in the Bałtów complex 2001 - 2013.

Source: Author's.

In 2013, there was a network of related entities of different legal status in Bałtów. A pre-cluster in tourism was established, which allowed for the construction of a second ski lift in Bałtów. It was an important experience, which was to be used for the development of the "Bałtów Switzerland" cluster.

Although research was concluded in 2013, a review of Web pages of Bałtów entities indicates that the initiative was carried out as planned. The cluster was established in 2014 and joined by 8 entities, while the Bałt Association became the coordinator and the core of the cluster. Its objective was defined as the "establishment and support of cooperative links in Bałtów commune through organization of a tourist cluster... The initiative to establish a cluster of social economy entities results from the need to join forces of the existing entities, and thus it is another stage in a natural process. It is a continuation of the idea of three-sector partnership, functioning in the commune, which emerged from the real need to strengthen cooperation and competitiveness of the local entities" [15].

The change that has taken place in Bałtów in recent years can be seen in statistical data, which shows a reduction in the unemployment rate by more than 10 percent in 2015 in comparison with 2004. Change is also visible at a glance. It becomes even more obvious, when we compare the image of Bałtów in 2003 and in 2013. In the past, Bałtów was a village in which public institutions like the commune office, schools, the local healthcare centre, and the post office were the major employers. There was only one store in the village. By 2013, apart from the Bałtów complex, many new workplaces linked to tourism emerged, such as shops, a pizzeria, a restaurant, an inn and a bank branch. Some initiatives that have emerged are not strictly associated with Bałtów complex, although they take advantage of the tourism infrastructure of the commune to some extent. Let us examine the Bałtów initiatives from the perspective of social innovation.

Social innovation in the Bałtowan style

What has happened in the small rural commune of świętokrzyskie voivodship has led to change in various areas. There has mostly been a change in the quality of life and perspectives of the inhabitants. Thanks to the initiatives undertaken, unemployment was reduced, the space for local integration increased, the inhabitants have been empowered, they have got an example to follow, they started to care about their farmyards, and new economic and social entities emerged, bringing along new opportunities for development and making profits. Moreover, it should be underlined that activity of the Bałtów conglomeration entities, since the beginning, has been undertaken on behalf of the local inhabitants, in cooperation with them and in the context of the local needs. The respondents, including leaders, employees, the local authorities and the inhabitants, asked about what has been going on in Bałtów in the recent years. They obviously referred to the local aspects

of these activities: This is a primary impact, a social impact, associated with the origin, and connected personally, because this was very important, it is an activity, which has some social components – there is work, there are jobs, a beautiful landscape, but this is related to the specific nature [of the project]. There is no closed zone, no gate and cars in front of it, where you hardly know what is going on inside the factory – it is a tourist attraction, and it is open, like anywhere else in the world [the commune head].

A great part of activity of the Bałt Association is focused on supporting the local community, including the agritourism farms, youth and senior groups, folk groups, craftsmen and artists, sports clubs and NGOs. Since the beginning of their activity, the entities of the conglomeration have been cooperating with the local authorities. In 2007, inhabitants dismissed the commune head, and the new leader of the commune is a representative of the community linked to the local associations.

Many definitions of innovations focus on the fact that social innovations contribute to new solutions offered to social problems that are more productive, fair, effective or durable than the existing solutions, and the benefits are enjoyed by the society as a whole, not by individuals [16]. The activity of social economy entities in Bałtów fit into this definition. The change was based on shifting development of the commune from an unclear vision of development based on heavy industry and mining towards sustainable development. It started by showing the inhabitants that the Kamienna river, previously treated as a waste dump, can become an important natural, economic, and symbolic resource. Palaeontological discoveries in the commune led to opening of the JuraPark, which has been growing every year to become a large tourist complex and offers employment to the local inhabitants. The search for new attractions (particularly for the winter) was motivated by problems of seasonality, which resulted in the lack of stable earnings for employees. The "Allozaur" social enterprise, another entity of the conglomeration, was established, among other things, to support those inhabitants who were unable to find a place for themselves on the labour market. Finally, many inhabitants, thanks to support offered by Bałt, opened their own agritourism farms, thus finding a new source of earnings. Thanks to communication, trainings, and study visits they gained a wholly new perspective, focused on partnership, and they were able to leave behind the mode of reasoning, focused only on individual profit .

In some cases, we can even speak of social reintegration through work. The Bałtów conglomeration has given employment to socially excluded persons such as those addicted to alcohol: Personally, I know more than ten people, who were able to combat social exclusion, thanks to support of the local AA groups, direct cooperation with psychiatrists, treatment – now they serve as excellent role models for others, because they returned to work, to their social and family life, and that is a very positive phenomenon. This opportunity for getting employment, because the decision-makers know them personally, they know their families, and these people are given a chance – if there was no such opportunity, no job offers, they would have never come back from the dark side. Thanks to these investments, to this structure, there are many simple jobs to be done, which do not require special qualifications, and this allows these people to sort out their lives [Delta Association].

Also worth mentioning in the context of this analysis is the fact that social innovations go beyond the mode of action and thinking within sectors, they do not emerge in a single place and they may constitute a result of actions of several organizations or persons representing various sectors. They may emerge in between different sectors [17]. The social and economic initiatives of Bałtów are of such an inter-sector nature. They include entities focused on social objectives, as well as others, which operate in the context of the economy. Each of them emerged to achieve specific objectives, defined by the leaders of Bałtów. These were always aimed at adapting to the changes as much as possible, taking place in the environment.

The concept of cooperation of sectors has been present here since the beginning. As early as in 2003, various entities of opatowski, ostrowiecki and lipski districts communicated to integrate the dispersed activities of various institutions, organizations and enterprises for the development of the region, to attract investors, improve the standard of living of the local population and establish a joint programme for sustainable development as an Informal Partnership Group. As a result of various transformations, the Group was finally established as the "Krzemienny Krąg" Local Action Group Association in 2008 (hereafter referred to as the "LAG"). The strategic document developed, entitled the Local Development Strategy for Years 2009-2015, included the following definition of the LAG: "the way of solving economic, social and environmental problems of the region based on partnership, aimed at joining resources, competences and capabilities of the local self-government, economic and social entities to develop integrated and coordinated activities, aimed at effective implementation of the shared vision" [18].

Further activities of entities of the Bałtów conglomeration, first as a pre-cluster of social economy, then as a cluster, are also an implementation of the broad, inter-sector formula of activity based a chain of values.

Has Bałtów experienced popularization of social innovations? In other words, has the process of diffusion of innovations occurred? According to Rogers, it is a process in time, in which innovation is transferred through specific communication channels by members of a social system [19]. Diffusion of innovations is not a single decision, but a complex, gradual social process, in which the social environment influences the speed of dispersion of innovation from the stage of persuasion, through decision and implementation, until confirmation [20]. Research conducted by Rogers shows that the validity of the innovative idea may be of secondary importance if it clashes with the functioning social norms and behaviours. At the same time, the decision to accept innovation is burdened with risk, and individuals tend to rely upon behaviours of their close friends and relatives.

Giza-Poleszczuk and Włoch [21] have noticed that to speak of acceptance of innovation, the existing practices must change at the level of individual behaviours and a broader system of activities: "It can, in fact, be stated that if a novelty changes nothing in the practices of a given group, it is not an innovation, but only a substitute". In fact, it is virtually impossible to enforce innovation, as it is associated with high costs. The inhabitants of Bałtów commune initially did not believe that the undertaking could succeed, and they distrusted the intentions of its originators. However, when early changes started to emerge in the community along with new entities and attractions of the Bałtów conglomeration, their scepticism gradually turned into interest and hope: The first year was full of doubts –<hey, they came up with dragons, who's going to come here to see the dragons?> And then they saw the coaches, and more and more people were getting jobs, and this changed... At first, there was discouragement, but only at first: they would take everything, monopolize the market, and this will be the end of it. But then they saw it was not just them earning money, but everyone who worked there [the inhabitants].

A change in the practices of inhabitants of Bałtów is surely associated with improvement in their living conditions, associated with stable employment opportunities, the emergence of a large market for the sale of local products of entrepreneurs and farmers. One example is the purchase of hay as fodder for animals from the "Bałtów Zoological Garden". On the other hand, we are dealing here with modelling of behaviours, promotion of sustainable development, caring for the environment and the landscape. Activity of entities of the Bałtów conglomeration has contributed to building and strengthening of identity of the inhabitants and their pride of belonging to the region through the following activities:

- revitalisation of space, and renovation of historic buildings of the commune such as the old mill, which now serves as a museum and exhibition, as well as a souvenir shop with crafts of the local artists,
- activation of the youth and support for civic education through the activity of Junior Bałt,
- stimulation of entrepreneurship in the commune by supporting the agritourism farms,
- referring to history and tradition of the region through the establishment of the witch hut or the JuraPark as a result of palaeontological discoveries in Bałtów.

Conclusions

Analysis conducted in this article concludes that it is possible to refer to social innovation of Bałtów initiatives and state that they have been implemented and confirmed at the institutional and individual level. To a great extent, this has been possible thanks to a successful combination of business and social objectives, which is the core of the social economy. It is a result of good relations with the local and the broader social environment, rooted in the local community, illustrated how the concept fit into the environment and capitalized the local resources. More broadly, the analysis illustrates how networking helped residents take advantage of resources made available thanks to participation in various partnerships. Another important factor was, undoubtedly, the flexibility of action, including the ability to adapt activities to financial resources, and leadership, understood as the ability to last over a long period of time, being involved in the activity of the enterprise, and having a certain amount of social authority.

It remains an open question whether Bałtów has become an example for other local communities and whether the innovation diffusion process may go beyond the boundaries of the commune. Although the research project did not include this question, it is nevertheless known that the activities in this commune have been

greatly popularized. Bałtów has been mentioned in various guidelines of best practices in social economy during conferences and seminars. On the other hand, the activities of Bałt Association have included the organization of study visits for other organizations to share knowledge and experience in the implementation of local changes, and to analyse the factors of success. Bałtów has been visited by journalists and researchers. Thus, information has been made available to those interested. Whether such changes have been implemented elsewhere is another question. Factors that may hinder the diffusion of innovations include improper communication, addressed to the wrong recipients, as well as diffusion taking place too early and in a manner that is not adapted to the developmental capabilities of the society [22]. Another specifically Polish barrier is the standard of distrust [20]. This would be activated if there are no proper measures in the environment to protect the local community against the effects of a reduced sense of responsibility for mutual assistance, the use of resources belonging to other persons, and having less social control.

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