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## **NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS' COLLABORATION WITH LOCAL ENTITIES AND THEIR POTENTIAL FOR IMPLEMENTING SOCIAL INNOVATIONS**

### **Abstract**

Non-governmental organizations encounter some barriers when trying to implement social innovations, such as having limited ability to collaborate with other entities designed to solve social problems or limiting that collaboration to entities which are not interested in implementing such innovations. The aim of this article is to characterize the collaboration between non-governmental organizations from Lubelskie Province and local entities, as well as to evaluate the collaboration in terms of the possibility of implementing social innovations. The study was carried out between October and December 2016 and was based on the following research questions: 1. What kind of social problems do the investigated non-governmental organizations from the rural communes of Lubelskie Province try to solve? 2. What entities are involved in solving those problems? 3. Do the investigated organizations often collaborate with them? 4. Should the collaboration be modified or changed? 5. What entities should increase their participation in the cooperation network? The study involved 108 chairpersons of non-governmental organizations from the rural communes of Lubelskie Province, with whom in-depth interviews with a standardized list of targeted information were carried out. The article presents part of the collected empirical material. Although non-governmental organizations are willing to engage in non-standard, unconventional or atypical projects, they limit their activity to problems regarded as "easier to solve" or to activities that are not likely to solve those problems. In this context, extending non-governmental organizations' cooperation networks by new local non-governmental organizations (out of the social welfare field) does not seem as desirable as their further collaboration with public sector organizations based on the principle of partnership and oriented at implementing social innovations.

### **Key words**

rural non-governmental organizations, collaboration, social innovations, Lubelskie Province

### **Introduction**

Although social innovations do not have a single, commonly recognized definition, different theoretical approaches include elements such as solving social problems or satisfying social needs, conducting activity that is atypical and unconventional in comparison with activities commonly carried out in the area, availability, and having a non-commercial character [1: 5, 19; 2:12-17]. These properties point to the attributes of organizations which might be interested in implementing social innovations, including actively solving social problems (or satisfying social needs) and being ready to implement unconventional, atypical or alternative activities that are different from those that have been performed locally before. Those attributes can be found in organizations that represent the public or the social sector (much less likely, the economic one). We may suppose non-governmental organizations are particularly interested in implementing such innovations. First, they mostly concentrate on solving social problems and satisfying social needs. Second, they approve of novel and atypical activities more than do public (governmental, regional, and local) institutions. Third, since those organizations are assumed to be less profit-oriented, they do not estimate their activities with consideration of maximizing profits and minimizing costs like economic sector organizations do. In other words, they do not reject in advance any atypical, unconventional or alternative activities because they do not give financial profit. Fourth, non-governmental organizations may be more inclined than public or economic sector organizations to engage in activities dedicated to the problems of minorities [see 1: 27-32].

However, the non-governmental organizations sector has its weak points, which may be a barrier to implementing social innovations. The aims of the article are:

1. To characterize the collaboration between non-governmental organizations from rural communes of Lubelskie Province and other local entities.

Therefore, the following questions will be answered: 1. What kind of social problems do the investigated non-governmental organizations from rural communes of Lubelskie Province try to solve? 2. What entities are involved in solving those problems? 3. Do the investigated organizations often collaborate with them? 4. Should the collaboration be modified or changed? 5. What entities should increase their participation in the cooperation network?

2. To evaluate the collaboration between the studied non-governmental organizations and other entities in terms of the possibility of implementing social innovations.

### **Non-governmental organizations' collaboration with other local entities and the implementation of social innovations in rural areas.**

Non-governmental organizations encounter some barriers when trying to implement social innovations, such as their limited ability to collaborate with other entities designed to solve social problems or to satisfy the residents' needs. In addition, they tend to limit collaboration to entities that are not interested in implementing such innovations [see 3]. It is argued in source literature on innovations that their implementation is more probable in collective structures, such as different social networks that allow the accumulation of human, social and financial capital [4; 5; 6; 7;8]. According to Agnieszka Rymsza, participation in social networks counteracts the fragmentation of activities taken by non-governmental organizations, promotes their coordination, and improves their effectiveness [9: 31]. Heterogeneous networks may also counteract the barriers to implementing social innovations that result from differences in the organizational culture of entities from public, social and economic sectors [cf. 1:30-32]<sup>1</sup>. In other words, belonging to a network of social sector organizations may increase the interest of public sector organizations in implementing non-standard, atypical and unconventional solutions. On the other hand, public sector organizations may motivate social organizations to engage in long-term activities. The role of the public sector in implementing social innovations is changing because of cooperation with social organizations being perceived as the unending source of inspiration for the public sector, which may initiate the implementation of social innovations [10:11].

Non-governmental organizations that operate in Polish rural areas can establish collaboration with many local entities engaged in solving social problems or satisfying social needs. These are local authorities and institutions related to them, such as communal social welfare centers, schools, communal culture centers, other non-governmental organizations (including traditional ones, such as farmers' wives' associations), local entrepreneurs, and social economy entities such as social enterprises.

As shown by the results of research carried out by KLON/JAWOR Association, Polish non-governmental organizations (both from urban and rural areas) most often contact with local authorities (in 2015, this was declared by 92% of the studied non-governmental organizations) and other non-governmental organizations (also declared by 92%) [11: 85]. Collaboration between local authorities and non-governmental organizations (pursuant to the Act of 24 April 2003 on Public Benefit Activity and Volunteerism, Article 5, item 1) [12] may have the form of delegating public services to non-governmental organizations, informing each other of the planned directions of activity, consulting with non-governmental organizations regarding the drafts of normative acts connected with the organizations' statutory activity or public services, forming common

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<sup>1</sup> Other barriers to implementing social innovations are: 1. Low human capital resources of organization members (e.g., low level of education, competencies and social skills, low creativity and knowledge of the needs or problems of the community), 2. Low social capital resources (e.g., reluctance to join associations, preference for individualistic values) [13; see 14], 3. Commercialization of organizations, defined by Agnieszka Rymsza as *a process in which non-governmental organizations become more and more dependent on activity typical of the for-profit sector, as a result of which they adopt market priorities and methods of operation, thus becoming quasi-market institutions, in fact leading to functional expansion of the market* [9: 63]. According to that author, commercialization results in competition between organizations themselves and between organizations and companies, which is reflected in a focus on receiving profit and obtaining funds for the activity, standardization/certification of services and products, offering them mainly to the beneficiaries that can pay for them, aiming to prove their effectiveness, or the use of professional assistance in organization management [9: 63-64].

<sup>2</sup> Further, the organizations contact local communities, public schools, kindergartens, sports centers, and companies [11: 15].

advisory and initiative-taking teams, local initiative performance agreements, partnership agreements specified in Article 28a section 1 of the Act of 6 December 2006 on the principles of development policy, or partnership agreements specified in Article 33 section 1 of the Act of 11 July 2014 on the principles of implementing coherence policy programmes financed as part of the 2014–2020 financial framework.

In the light of recent research carried out by KLON/ JAWOR Association, the most frequent form of knowledge-based collaboration between local authorities and non-governmental organizations is consultation of various types (in 2014, 39% of Polish non-governmental organizations declared participation in consultations), and rural non-governmental organizations are especially satisfied with this form of collaboration [11: 88, 90]. This is somewhat puzzling, especially in the context of perceiving them as highly dependent on local authorities, or even referring to them as “symbionts of local administration” [15: 55]. According to scholars, these organizations are sometimes the reflection of local authorities [16:15-16], which seem to collaborate with them but actually control them in full<sup>3</sup>. These organizations are considered to have a high level of governmentalization, understood as dependence on local authorities and other public institutions. Agnieszka Rymśa argues that the governmentalization of non-governmental organizations is manifested in adopting the priorities imposed by local authorities or public institutions regarding the choice of beneficiaries of support or the type of services offered, lowering the cost of services in response to requirements formulated in tender proceedings concerning the performance of public services, subsidizing to the pressure to achieve quick, visible and measurable results, closely observing bureaucratic requirements and project budgets, and failure to engage in risky activities (such as social innovations) [9:91-92].

As Katarzyna Górniak argues, problems of Polish non-governmental organizations concerning the collaboration with the public sector are the consequence of problems concerning collaboration within the third sector. In her opinion, those organizations are not willing to join larger structures (which is called federalization) that could more strongly influence the public sector in terms of the forms of collaboration and its actual content [17:26]. Yet, the potential of intrasectoral collaboration of non-governmental organizations is clearly increasing. Recent research by KLON/JAWOR Association, involving a representative sample of Polish non-governmental organizations shows that in 2014, 92% organizations had contacts with other foundations and associations (for 33% of them, such contacts were lasting and regular), whereas ten years before, such contacts were declared by 66% of the entities [11:96].

Non-governmental organizations' engagement in collaboration with other local entities is caused by many factors, including the objective of each non-governmental organization. Believing that different local entities can help achieve that objective, the organization will choose the ones that in its opinion can contribute more to the collaboration than the others can. What kind of social problems do the investigated non-governmental organizations from rural communes of Lubelskie Province try to solve? What entities are involved in solving those problems? Do the investigated organizations often collaborate with them? Should the collaboration be modified or changed? What entities should increase their participation in the cooperation network? How can we evaluate the existing cooperation networks in terms of the possibility of non-governmental organizations implementing social innovations? Answers to these questions were sought in the research project “Social innovation systems in rural areas. Perspectives of public sector and non-governmental sector entities from Lubelskie Province”<sup>4</sup>. The goal of the project was to identify the role of the public and NGO sector in implementing social innovations and to characterize potential determinants of the implementation of social innovations in Lubelskie Province. This article presents part of the collected empirical material<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, even this superficial collaboration may cause mutual benefits. According to Lester Salamon, for the public sector it may mean a kind of assistance in satisfying local needs, and for non-governmental organizations it means the elimination of problems connected with “amateurishness” [18: 30-33, see 19: 134].

<sup>4</sup> The project was financed with a specific subsidy for activity involving research and development and related projects promoting the development of young scholars employed at the University of Lodz and doctoral students in 2016.

The original definition of social innovations adopted in the study was: intentional changes in the area of solving social problems, involving the development of social practices different from the typical ones.

<sup>5</sup> The study was also the basis for the article: “Current vs. Preferred Collaboration Network of Communal Social Welfare Centers from Lubelskie Province as a Determinant of Implementing Social Innovations”, submitted for printing in “Polityka Społeczna” journal in March 2017.

**Methodology of original study and characteristics of the research area and study sample**

The study whose results will be presented in the article was carried out between October and December 2016. The study sample was 108 chairpersons of non-governmental organizations from rural communes of Lubelskie Province included in the database of non-governmental organizations purchased from the Statistical Office in Lublin. When preparing the study sample, we only took into consideration the organizations that had published their phone numbers. An active phone number was necessary to perform in-depth interviews with the chairpersons using the standardized list of targeted information. This technique asks the respondents individualized questions, adjusted to the specificity of the conversation and their cognitive capabilities, at the same time ensuring the standardization of the scope of information to find [20]. The technique was chosen because the respondent group was quite varied, made up of representatives of different non-governmental organizations and managers of communal social welfare centers. We present part of the collected empirical material in the article.

The initial sample was 580 organizations. Interviewers made attempts to contact all the organizations to arrange and perform the interviews (at least three attempts on three different days of the week and at different times, including evening). However, 303 phone numbers from the database were wrong. The interviewers either reached other people unrelated with non-governmental organizations, or the phone numbers did not work at all. Therefore, the sample was reduced to 277 organizations. During the study, the three interviewers managed to contact 200 organizations, and 108 of the respondents agreed to participate.

The choice of the province in which the study was carried out was motivated by its specificity. It has the highest proportion of people employed in agriculture, and 96.2% of its surface area is rural. The inhabitants of the province face many social problems. In the Social Policy Strategy of Lubelskie Province for the Years 2014 – 2020 poverty was identified as one of the most acute problems. The Lublin region has a poverty risk index of 30.7%, which is the highest in Poland. It is here that the highest proportion of families benefit from social welfare [21:9-12]. Another problem is the aging population of Lubelskie Province and the low participation of elderly people in social and professional life. It was emphasized that it is a region with the highest proportion of people of post-productive age in the whole population, and 55% of the elderly live in rural areas [21:18]. The province has the highest population of disabled people in Poland. Those people experience different aspects of social exclusion, especially if they live in small towns or villages [21:30]. The low level of social and civic activity of province residents was also pointed out. In this context, it was observed that *non-governmental organizations, especially in rural areas, are not strong and competent enough to inspire, initiate and carry out social activities to engage local residents* [21:44]. The strategy also points to the issue of weaknesses of the social economy sector [21:49] and the highest level of emigration from Poland.

The second factor that motivated the choice of the province was the author's analysis based on data for the year 2014, available from Central Statistical Office database, concerning its characteristics that demonstrate its marginalization. The indicators used were the total unemployment rate, the net migration rate per 1,000 people, the proportion of people who were granted social benefits due to poverty per 100 beneficiaries, and dependency ratios (the proportion of all people of non-working age per 100 persons of working age and the proportion of people of post-working-age per 100 persons of working age). The analysis provided the basis for a ranking of marginalization of Polish provinces. Lubelskie Province had the lowest rank, determined by the values of three out of the five analyzed indicators, such as the net migration rate per 1,000 people, the total unemployment rate, and the proportion of all people of non-working age per 100 persons of working age.

In the study presented in this article, we assumed that the variety of social problems of rural residents may be a catalyst for implementing social innovations.

In the studied population, there were no persons under 24, and 9% were aged 25-34. Besides, few people over 65 were the chairpersons of non-governmental organizations in the Lublin region. The majority of the respondents were in the age groups of 35-44 (36.7%) and 45-54 (31.2%). Most respondents had higher or secondary education. More than 8 out of 10 (84%) were professionally active. Most of the others were retired / pensioners.

The respondents were members of organizations targeted at different social problems (further discussed in the next section). The organizations had quite a high level of professionalization, as indicated by participation of

organization members/workers in training sessions connected with their activities. Three-quarters of the respondents declared that in 2015 some members/workers of their organizations took part in such training. A second indicator of professionalization was planning investment in training of members/workers in the following year. 70% of the respondents declared that such investments would also take place in 2017. A third indicator was employing workers. Almost 1/3 of the respondents declared that their organizations had employed workers in the previous year (2015). In addition, more than half of the respondents declared that the organization's statutory activity was continuous.

Despite an effort put into the formation of the “real” sample, we did not manage to carry out the study using a representative sample of non-governmental organizations located in rural communes of the Lubelskie Province, which makes it impossible to generalize the conclusions from the sample to the whole population. Many organizations included in databases of the Statistical Office in Lublin and other similar offices had simply discontinued their activity without informing the office, or suspended their activity until they could obtain financial resources, or postponed the decision about discontinuing the activity. Most chairpersons of those inactive organizations did not agree to participate in the interview, explaining it with the fact that the organization was “dormant”, as they called it. Interviews were carried out with the chairpersons of organizations that were active, which meant at least that the chairperson who represented it answered the organizations' phone.

#### **Cooperation between Lublin non-governmental organizations and other local entities**

In the light of respondents' opinions, the greatest social problem faced by the residents of the communes they represented was unemployment. This view was shared by 66% of all the participants. In their opinion, other social problems were less important. Every third respondent mentioned alcoholism and other addictions, as well as limited opportunities for children and adolescents to spend time out of school in an organized way. One fifth of the respondents also mentioned poverty and little interest among residents in matters concerning the commune. Very few people considered domestic violence, disability, family disintegration, migration, children's undernourishment or the educational exclusion of children and adolescents as the most important problems faced by the commune residents.

The hierarchy of the most serious problems of commune residents mentioned by the respondents in the communes where the organizations operated was only partially reflected in the profile of their activity. In other words, the hierarchy of the most serious local social problems might suggest that the organizations will take actions to activate the unemployed, to counteract alcoholism and other addictions, to help the addicted persons and their families, and to improve opportunities for children and adolescents to take part in organized extra-curricular activities. However, half of the non-governmental organizations studied declared that the main profile of their organizations' activity was to solve the problem of children and adolescents having insufficient opportunities to spend free time in an organized way, which was considered as one of the vital problems of the commune residents. Almost 35% of the studied organizations attempted to counteract educational exclusion of children and adolescents, though it had not been identified as one of the most important problems of commune residents. The studied organizations also provided assistance to elderly people (this profile of activity was declared by 14% of the participants), and few organizations tried to solve the problem of alcoholism and other addictions or reduce the effects of poverty, unemployment and disability. The fact that the respondents relatively rarely identified alcoholism, poverty and unemployment as problems targeted by their organizations resulted from the view that solving those problems was not the responsibility of non-governmental organizations, but primarily of professionalized institutions administered by local authorities (e.g., communal social welfare centers). The respondents pointed out that it was easier for non-governmental organizations – with their activists and volunteers – to organize spending free time for children and adolescents than to offer services dedicated to alcoholics such as therapeutic workshops that require professional knowledge. The discrepancy between declarations concerning the most important social problems and the profile of activity of non-governmental organizations seems to result from the specificity of the organizations, determined by the qualifications and competencies of people engaged in their activity.

Local organizations in the same commune as the participating organization that attempt to solve the most serious social problems were communal social welfare centers (mentioned by 83% of the respondents) and local authorities represented by the commune head and the council (mentioned by 80%). The third position in the ranking of entities assisting residents in solving their problems was taken by entities administered by local

authorities, such as schools and communal culture centers (mentioned by 62% of the participants). These were followed by local non-governmental organizations (mentioned by 56% participants). Other entities were the Church (mentioned by 31%) or local action groups (20%). Only 8.5% of respondents stated that social enterprises made attempts to solve local social problems, which is related to the low number of those entities in the communes where the non-governmental organizations represented by the respondents operated.

Collaboration with all those organizations was declared by as many as 90% of the participants, and the collaboration potential of other local entities in terms of solving social problems was regarded as lower than that of the organizations they represented. Three-quarters of the respondents believed other local entities collaborated with each other to solve social problems. Regardless of the form of collaboration, nearly half the respondents wanted some changes in the relations between the entities engaged in them. First, the changes would involve the introduction of the partnership principle (43.8% of the respondents who declared the need for change expressed this view) and the formalization of collaboration (this was the view of 31.3%). Thus, as the respondents declared collaboration with different local entities in solving social problems, perhaps because of the pursuit of social approval or the interviewer effect. They could see the need for change in relationships between the collaborating entities. The lack of such changes may generate conflicts in the future, which may lead to a change concerning the number and kind of entities collaborating to solve local social problems, especially that non-governmental organizations and local authority-based institutions often have completely different organizational cultures, which may make it difficult to understand each other's needs<sup>6</sup>.

Slightly more than a half of the respondents declared that some new entities should join the group of social problems-solving entities, such as non-governmental organizations (mentioned by 51% of the respondents who declared the need of activation of new entities), entrepreneurs (mentioned by 33%), public institutions, such as schools, communal culture centers (mentioned by 31%) and social enterprises (mentioned by 10%). The lack of interest in collaboration with social enterprises was due to their tendency to concentrate solely on activity connected with market survival and ensuring a source of income for their members. This makes them similar to market organizations, only working for profit, which are hard to engage in networks of cooperation aimed at solving social problems. Second, the respondents often lack knowledge of their functioning and ignore the social dimension of those cooperatives. Cooperative members, experiencing the risk of social exclusion in the past, may share their knowledge, skills and competence with people who are experiencing social problems and work as models in the network of entities that try to solve local social problems.

It is interesting that the respondents emphasize the role of non-governmental organizations in solving local social problems, especially considering that almost all of them share the opinion that NGOs should be willing to take up non-standard, unconventional activities different from the ones taken before if they feel those activities may help reduce a certain local problem. In the interviews, some of them provided examples of such locally non-standard activities taken in the past by the organizations they represented. One of those was a scholarship programme for children raised in foster families. This is how one of the respondents related the activity: "It is the only programme in Poland for adolescents, mainly from foster families. The rules of this scholarship programme allow us to help adolescents regardless of their school performance. It covers junior high school students and older teenagers who make an effort to achieve the grade average over 4.5. We initiated the programme in collaboration with the Stefan Batory Foundation. We presented our idea, and they invited us to collaborate with them, claiming that they had never encountered such a scholarship. They saw it as something that may have measurable effects. And it does. This is one of such obvious activities. It's our original idea. And as far as I know, at the moment it is the only one." In other words, the respondents attributed great importance in implementing social innovations to the non-governmental sector.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of the article was to characterize the collaboration of non-governmental organizations from Lubelskie Province and to evaluate it in terms of the possibility of implementing social innovations in rural communes.

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<sup>6</sup> The word "often" is motivated by the fact that non-governmental organizations are also varied in terms of organizational culture. Some of them, especially those that have undergone the governmentalization process, become similar to public institutions, and the ones that have undergone the professionalization process become similar to market organizations working for profit [23].

Based on source literature, it was expected that the barriers encountered by non-governmental organizations when trying to implement social innovations may be their limited ability to collaborate with other entities designed to solve social problems or satisfy the residents' needs, and second, limiting that collaboration to entities that are not interested in implementing such innovations.

One third of the organizations studied are professionalized, meaning that they had employed workers in the previous year (2015). Three-quarters indicated that in 2015 some members/workers of their organizations had taken part in training sessions connected with their activity, and 70% declared that such investments would also take place in 2017. The responses suggest that the organizations collaborated with many local entities, both from public and social sectors.

It is important that nearly half the respondents proposed changes in the collaboration, involving the introduction of the partnership principle and the formalization of the collaboration. The fact that the need for partnership principle was reported shows that one of the entities always has a privileged position in the relationship. Usually, this is the entity connected with the public sector described in the literature as not very inclined to implement social innovations. This sector is also perceived by the respondents as predestined to solve the most serious social problems of commune residents. Respondents' statements show that although non-governmental organizations are willing to take up non-standard, unconventional or atypical projects, they limit their activity to problems regarded as "easier to solve" or to activities that are not likely to solve those problems. In this context, extending non-governmental organizations' cooperation networks by new local non-governmental organizations (out of the social welfare field) does not seem as desirable as their further collaboration with public sector organizations based on the principle of partnership and oriented at implementing social innovations. In other words, the factor that may help implement social innovations in rural communes where the non-governmental organizations studied operate is strengthening their real cooperation with the entities of the public sector and persuading them to implement those measures. The strong point of non-governmental organizations is likely their openness to social innovations understood this way and a quite high potential of collaboration with other local entities. The weak point, on the other hand, is ignoring the most important social problems, which can be completely justified in the context of available human resources. Collaboration with the public sector could contribute to seeking solutions to the most acute social problems in rural communes and implementing them based on the experience, competence and skills of persons working in organizations, such as communal social welfare centers.

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