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### **The role of rural civil society in the governance reforms. Example of the LEADER approach in Poland**

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## Abstract

In recent decades European rural populations have had to undergo a fundamental transformation, forsaking their traditional role as food providers and assuming a modern multi-functional role in agriculture. Answering to increasing processes of globalization and changing social priorities, they need to adjust to new modes of policy-making that are strengthening the role of civil society. The emphasis has thus far been put on the shift from agricultural to rural development, and one of the tools to achieve this is the LEADER, an EU-funded approach that aims to boost economic and community development in rural areas. To this end, the method also attempts to integrate the various sectors and vertical policy levels into a common perspective on development. Different institutional actors take part in decision-making, especially newly established community-level Local Action Groups, which are assuming more responsibility and self-reliance in solving their own problems. In Poland, LEADER is significantly contributing to the system transformation that began in the late 1980s. Obviously, this is not an easy or quick way to implement reforms, but some positive changes have been already noticed, especially the systematically increasing involvement of multi-level stakeholders in decision-making processes. Reflecting on the initial accomplishments of the LEADER approach, this early stage research will provide general information on the role of rural civil society in the governance reforms in Poland. The primary data were collected on the basis of observation (the author was previously involved in the LEADER implementation in Poland) and in-depth interviews with the key stakeholders of the Rural Development Programme 2007–2013.<sup>1</sup> The secondary data came from textual analysis.

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades the rural economy has been changing shape, and as a result, urban-rural relations have been transformed as well. In addition, significant changes are visible in the political and institutional arenas that govern the rural areas.<sup>2</sup> The traditional mode of top-down decision-making has become outdated and has been strongly criticized for its ineffective approach to problem solving. Political forces associated with parties and the government have been struggling to respond to public frustration vis-à-vis unsatisfied demands and the lack of social security. New dilemmas are continually shaking up European rural society, which is currently trying to cope with competition from international agricultural products, climate change, population ageing, unemployment, migrations, etc. These dynamic processes call for new political approaches that will shift the responsibility from political parties and governments to multi-level stakeholders.

The process of globalization is changing both the perception and role of European rural areas. Traditionally, these areas have been associated with agricultural production. The union of European countries established in the post-war era repeatedly exploited agricultural issues to serve political ends. Not surprisingly, the interests of farmers strongly influence political discussions. In its early stages, the Community strove to increase agricultural production and supported European farming. The result was better than expected: the associated countries produced more than they could even consume. The surplus was exported with the support of financial mechanisms that boosted European farmers' competitiveness

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<sup>1</sup> Particular information was outsourced from the case studies done by the author for the RuDI project. Impact Assessment of Rural Development Policies incl. LEADER, 2009, EU 7th Framework Programme, Knowledge Based Economy.

<sup>2</sup> Penker, Marianne (in press): Landscape governance for or by the local population? A property rights analysis in Austria, in: Land Use Policy.

against cheaper agricultural products from developing countries. However, these export policies and other support mechanisms ultimately wreaked havoc in agricultural markets around the world. Recently, such practices have been strongly criticized, especially by the World Trade Organization, which has been pushing for the liberalization of agricultural markets. The increasing public awareness about development issues as well as the rapid growth of certain economies (especially Brazil, China and India) calls for a change in European policies. It is supposed that reducing the barriers to the international market would make trade fairer and offset developmental disadvantages overseas. However, this is likely to decrease European food quality as well as endanger social security and the farmers' standard of living.

Bearing in mind such opportunities and threats, the European Union is advocating a shift in emphasis from agriculture to rural development. The corresponding new policies are based on multi-functional agriculture, which should generate new employment opportunities besides farming. Civil society is being strongly encouraged to participate in policy discussions and to assume more responsibility for decision-making.

## 2. Civil society and governance reforms

In the late period of Communism and at the beginning of the 'new era', the first steps to reform the governing system in Poland were mainly undertaken on the central level and directed from Warsaw, the capital city. In the early 1990s civil society evolved dynamically in major Polish cities, receiving support from foreign donors and adopting 'Western' approaches to solving social problems. This process was fairly centralized and primarily supported the development of organizations and projects related to the large cities and general democratic issues. In turn, a variety of umbrella or re-granting organizations emerged that provided services for other NGOs, such as training them to use capacity-building tools. The development of rural areas seemed to be lower on the agenda, since they had been a ticklish problem in Poland for years and could not provide fast and visible 'proof' of the impact of the reforms that had been initiated by the decision-makers. Additionally, there was a need to reform the centralized administrative structures, so that they could better support their local communities. At that time civil society was barely present in rural areas, and even then only in the form of informal networks rather than professionally organized groups ready to push their agendas. Obviously, some organizational structures existed, but they did not really resonate with the third sector.<sup>3</sup> We can thus now observe a very large distance (developmental gap) between the 'urban bias' and the rural peripheries of Poland in many fields due to their unequal speeds of development.

Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004 launched a new discussion on the urban-rural divide. The resulting terms of convergence and cohesion have focused on the betterment of marginalized social groups and are aimed at shrinking the gap between rural and urban areas as well as regions within the EU. However, the agricultural sector is strategically important for Poland (38% of Polish citizens live in rural areas and rural areas cover more than 90% of Polish territory) and its reform process. Polish agriculture, which is characterized by highly diffused and semi-subsistence farming, is seen as an unproductive sector that should be revamped. The EU has acknowledged this, granting more financial support to Poland for rural development than to any other Member State.

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<sup>3</sup> These kinds of networks are highly present in e.g. Poland farmers' wives' associations or volunteer fire brigades.

Rural development is additionally being influenced by the ongoing reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) within the WTO framework; these measures are helping to liberalize international agricultural trade.<sup>4</sup> For European rural areas in general, the reforms represent a shift of focus from agricultural to rural development, which could generate a variety of new employment opportunities for rural citizens. Many of these opportunities would be in the non-governmental sector, within NGOs helping rural populations to adjust to working in other sectors, i.e. in new technologies or tourism. Rural development therefore entails coming up with new solutions to diversify the income sources of rural citizens. Based on the concept of multifunctional agriculture, rural development policies propose that overall farm production and subsidies be systematically reduced and recommends that new kinds of jobs be created in rural areas to compensate for the ongoing decline in agricultural work. Nevertheless, agriculture will remain an essential backdrop to the other activities and the identity of rural citizens. This will result in the diversification of the rural populations' income sources, which should be generated e.g. from agri-tourism, new technologies, and other services for rural and urban populations. Moreover, special attention should be paid to preserving natural and cultural heritage. In this process, the role of civil society is also increasing dramatically and citizens are being encouraged to embrace information society. In the years leading up to the EU accession and during its first period, rural, local and regional development became highly popular causes in Poland and spurred the creation of several non-governmental organizations. Besides the less formalized movements embedded in local communities, numerous NGOs, public and semi-public institutions located in both cities and towns have launched projects aimed at supporting rural citizens. Their first efforts have mainly concentrated on capacity-building and publicizing the possibilities for rural areas as a result of joining the EU.

### 3. LEADER approach and governance

One of the tools to develop rural civil society and to improve bottom-up decision-making is the LEADER<sup>5</sup> approach. It offers mechanisms that integrate representatives of the three sectors that make up rural territories: the social sector, the market sector and the local government. These sectors then form Local Action Groups (LAG), which organize a structured debate on the development goals of a particular community (usually a cluster of neighbouring rural communes) and take part in wider discussions concerned with shaping rural development policies. The LAGs also perform the important function of designing and implementing what are called Local Development Plans. These plans are structured so as to respect different points of view, seek consensus and be executed in a bottom-up way. This in turn implies a new requirement for government structures on various levels: to respect their social and economic partners in decision-making. LAG membership is predicated on partnership and cooperation and also furnishes networking opportunities.

One of the horizontal aims of the EU policies dealing with rural development is to change the character of governance in rural areas. The LEADER approach incorporates such policies as well, including solutions inspired by the modes of multi-level and good governance. Concerning the works of authors like Bache and Flinders<sup>6</sup>, Nemes and High<sup>7</sup>, Hooghe and Marks<sup>8</sup>, two main dimensions of multi-level govern-

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<sup>4</sup> Eisenhamerova, Lenka: Development Policy vs. Common Agricultural Policy of the EU, DRC Summer School Papers, 2005, pp. 193–204.

<sup>5</sup> LEADER is the acronym of the French 'Liaisons Entre Actions de Développement de l'Economie Rurale'; the English translation is 'Links Between Actions for the Development of the Rural Economy'.

<sup>6</sup> Bache, Ian / Flinders, Matthew (eds): Multi-Level Governance, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

ance seem to be relevant for analysing the rural development policies from the perspective of the LEADER approach:

- *Horizontal* – meaning the interactions between three sectors: *public* (central/regional/local government and its agencies), *private* (market enterprises) and *social* (NGOs);
- *Vertical* – describing two opposites – *centres* and *peripheries*, which include further dimensions: *political* (e.g. central vs. local government), *geographic* (e.g. urban vs. rural areas) and *economic* (e.g. large vs. small enterprises).

Multi-level governance is a dynamic process entailing the interplay between various actors, which can be put in a certain order within the horizontal and vertical levels. Due to their particular features and interests, they tend to be in opposition. But there are obviously some mechanisms aimed at coordinating the actors, whereby their non-similar visions are appraised and common ground is established. These mechanisms are visible within the CAP and its LEADER approach, which promotes the idea of cross-sectoral and centre-periphery interactions. This type of synergy is expected to foster cooperation and help the parties to define common development goals and undertake concrete decisions.

All EU Member States are required to take part in the CAP, which is set of rules influencing the decision-making process. Participation entails drawing up a rural development programme (RDP) (applicable to either a single country or single region) that needs to be formulated in accordance with the programming period (currently 2007–2013). Formal written regulations define the shape of this process, which is largely driven by the consultations concerning the design of the RDP. In keeping with the subsidiarity principle of the European Union, this calls for the involvement of actors other than the central public in decision-making; this ensures multi-level variety. The process should also encourage more active citizenship and give the impression of policy decentralization, which means getting closer to citizens. Thus, the process should strengthen the mechanisms of bureaucracy and shift the responsibility for decision-making from politicians (associated with parties) to civil servants as well as actors from the private and NGO sectors.

In recent years LEADER has drawn considerable attention and its role in rural policy-making appears to be increasing. Moreover, it is being used as a tool in development cooperation, which also focuses on the empowerment of local communities and civil society. In the previous programming periods of the CAP, it was a fairly specific initiative and more of a pilot programme rather than a widely spread tool. But even in its early stages, LEADER proved to be very useful for problem solving in rural areas in both the EU-15 and NMSs. It also led to changes in policy-making from governing to governance. Furthermore, LEADER seems to have improved the CAP's long-standing bad reputation for overloading the Community's budget and negatively influencing the economies of developing countries.

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<sup>7</sup> Nemes, Gustav / High, Chris: Social Learning in LEADER. Exogenous, Endogenous and Hybrid Evaluation in Rural Development, in: *Sociologia Ruralis*, 2007 (Vol. 47), No. 2, pp. 103–119.

<sup>8</sup> Hoodge, Lisbeth / Marks, Gary: Unravelling the Central State, but How? Types of Multi-Level Governance, in: *American Political Science Review*, 2003 (Vol. 97), No. 2, pp. 233–243.

## 4. The LEADER approach in Poland

Poland, which joined the EU in 2004, decided to adopt the LEADER approach in the form of the Pilot Programme LEADER+ within the framework of the Sectoral Operational Programme 'Restructuring and Modernization of the Food Sector and Rural Development' 2004–2006 (SOP 2004–2006). At first, the idea of implementing this programme in Poland – a New Member State – was greeted with scepticism by both the European Commission and the country's public officials. Without the engagement of certain independent policy actors and their successful lobbying efforts, LEADER probably would not have been implemented in the first short-term period of the programming, but would have been started in 2007 at the earliest.<sup>9</sup> Significant contributions came from rural civil society, which had been systematically strengthened in advance with the help of foreign financial support.<sup>10</sup> Earmarked to rebuild the rural institutional infrastructure and prepare for Poland's accession to the EU, this support began to arrive in the 1990s. Non-governmental movements made especially great efforts to revamp the regional and local administrative structures and strove to boost the capacity-building of rural leaders. One of the most significant products of this process is the Polish Rural Forum (PRF), which is the Poland-wide platform of rural NGOs.

The PRF is one of the key non-governmental players in Polish rural development policy-making. It was not formally legalized until 2005, but had begun to function as an informal platform a few years before that.<sup>11</sup> Although it encompassed a significant number of rural organizations, its informal character hindered its participation in the consultation process of the SOP 2004–2006. However, it still managed to support rural civil society, especially in helping it to prepare for the LEADER. For example, the Forum trained a group of partnership animators made up of citizens active at the regional or local level and launched an information campaign in the communities. It also established an Internet forum providing information on important current issues and enabling those interested in rural development matters to exchange their points of view and obtain detailed answers on questions concerning the implementation of the LEADER.

These actions demonstrated an increasing awareness of rural citizens and made them aware of opportunities to use European funding to develop their communities. In fact, the Forum's efforts to educate the citizenry were so successful that the number of applications for support under the LEADER+ initiative exceeded the managing authorities' expectations. And due to pressure from non-governmental stakeholders, including LAGs, there was a shift in funding priorities: the financing for the less popular SOP measures was transferred to the Pilot Programme LEADER+. LAGs were selected for funding in two steps (schemas). In the first step, the managing authorities received 245 applications and gave grants to 157 applicants. The purpose of the second schema was to choose the final forty LAGs, but the beneficiaries' demands were higher and in fact resulted in 150 contracts. These amounts illustrate the impact that has been made by the LEADER, which seems to be the right tool to mobilize Polish rural civil society. Nevertheless, a number of LAGs that did not receive grants under the LEADER+ found support from other sources and have applied for funding under the next LEADER programming period (2007–2013).

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<sup>9</sup> Hałasiewicz, Andrzej: *Leader w Polsce. Wykorzystana szansa i nowe możliwości*, National Network of LEADER+, Poland, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. donors like the World Bank, European Commission, C.S. Mott Foundation, etc.

<sup>11</sup> Actually, the activities of the PRF began in 2002, when a group of organizations signed a declaration on cooperation.

In the current programming period, the European Union has expanded an area of LEADER's influence by making it an axis of the RDPs, which in addition to meeting its own specific goals should help other groups to achieve their objectives.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, LEADER's financial capacities and importance in policy-making have been visibly enlarged. This is also the case in Poland, which decided to implement rural development policies, including LEADER, in a more decentralized way in comparison with the previous programming period. The main change here is the increasing involvement of non-ministerial actors in decision-making and managing tasks, i.e. public and semi-public institutions as well as branches of the Voivodship Self-Government. This new logic stemmed from the conviction that the Polish central public authorities were incapable of managing all of the tasks aimed at the development of rural areas and that some of the problems required a more bottom-up approach. Poland is, after all, one of the largest countries in Europe, and the policy centres were simply too distant from individual citizens and their problems. Specialized, mediating structures therefore appeared far better positioned to meet the rural populations' needs.<sup>13</sup> Another argument in favour of this arrangement is Poland's general development paradigm, which supports efforts to further the decentralization process. This includes the ongoing reform of the administrative system, which entails delegating power to institutions building horizontal and vertical hierarchies with varying degrees of independence from the public central authorities. Despite concrete steps towards reform, the Polish administrative system gives the impression of being ineffectively, even chaotically organized and seems bent on preserving outdated Communist logic concerning work, with no apparent desire to provide good, multi-level governance. This 'system' is also perceived as Poland's most pressing development problem within the EU integration context.<sup>14</sup>

One of the underlying principles of the Rural Development Programme 2007–2013 consultation process is providing equal opportunities for diverse stakeholder involvement; however, there are no clear rules stated in any concrete document describing the shape of the social dialogue between the different institutional partners.<sup>15</sup> In theory, Poland claims that good, multi-level governance is part of the political mainstream. This means that negotiations should be inclusive and enable all interested citizens – even ordinary rural folk – to participate in discussions and decision-making. In the case of the RDP 2007–2013, negotiations were conducted rather less openly. NGOs have criticized the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, which is the main programme-managing authority and the dominant actor in the whole process, for doing a poor job of informing the public about its activities and for favouring selected groups of potential beneficiaries, primarily farmers, trade unions, the food industry and public administration. The Ministry sent invitations to participate in negotiations to carefully selected institutions, and the programme proposals were posted on its homepage in a place that was difficult to find. Moreover, there were no officially cleared feedback rules. Nevertheless, certain efforts were made by the PRF, which sent the documents to consultations among its own networks and finally presented their opinions during negotiations with the Ministry. The managing authority reacted by paying attention to them, but

<sup>12</sup> Axis 1: Improving the competitiveness of agricultural and forestry sector; Axis 2: Improving the environment and the countryside; Axis 3: Quality of life in rural areas and diversification of rural economy.

<sup>13</sup> Berger, Peter L. / Neuhaus, Richard J. / Novak, Michael (eds): *To Empower People. From State to Civil Society*, Washington D. C.: American Enterprise Institute Press, 1995.

<sup>14</sup> National Strategic Reference Framework 2007–2013 (National Cohesion Strategy), Republic of Poland, Ministry for Regional Development, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Pietrasik, Joanna: *Proces konsultacji społecznych Programu Rozwoju Obszarów Wiejskich 2007–2013*, in: Makowski, Grzegorz / Schimanek, Tomasz: *Organizacje pozarządowe i władza publiczna. Drogi do partnerstwa*, Warsaw: Institute of Public Affairs, 2008, pp. 209–222, here p. 213.

a number of the suggestions were not considered in the final documents that were drawn up by public officials. Although a significant number of NGOs participated in the negotiations (22), this did not result in the amounts granted to them as potential beneficiaries and the balance achieved between the axes and measures of the RDP. Furthermore, the NGOs were marginalized within the Monitoring Committee<sup>16</sup> – only two of the Committee's thirty members are representatives of the NGO sector. More than half of the members belong to central public and decentralized public administrative structures.

The involvement of certain groups in the discussions resulted in a balance of instruments for rural development that seemed to espouse the logic of giving a fish rather than a rod, thus preserving outdated farming methods that produce little or nothing for the market (semi-subsistence farming, farm diffusion). Supposedly, in favouring farmers, the largest group of rural citizens, the managing authority made use of certain measures under the RDP as social assistance instruments. These measures were used to cover the farmers' basic needs, but failed to take into account global policies, longstanding perspectives of European agriculture and diversification of employment opportunities in rural areas. This resulted in most of the RDP's financial resources being committed to beneficiaries (farmers) in the form of payments to farmers in less favoured areas, agri-environmental payments, early retirement schemes and money to help modernize agricultural holdings. One reason the farmers received the lion's share of the RDP's resources is because they form a powerful voting bloc, which is something politicians are well aware of. Both in the current and past programming period, populist parties were present in government coalitions. One of the most populist parties, Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland (Samobrona), was strongly influential at key moments of the RDP consultations.

Within the framework of the negotiations, the Ministry established working groups dealing with single measures or issues related to the RDP. The most inclusive group was devoted to the LEADER Axis. This approach requires strong involvement of actors other than the central public authorities. In the 2007–2013 period, the groups with the strongest presence included the Polish Rural Forum (this time officially), the Foundation of Assistance for Polish Agriculture (a semi-public advisory organization located in the Ministry building that also implements one of the RDP measures), ecological NGOs and scientific institutions. A crucial role is also played by the Voivodship Self-Government, the regional administrative structure, which immediately implemented some of the measures, including the LEADER Axis. The role of this actor has increased significantly in comparison with the previous programming period – it is currently dealing with the collection and assessment of applications for funding as well as informing potential beneficiaries about opportunities for support. This happens via closer contacts with individual citizens and their representatives. However, some of the potential beneficiaries find the institutional actors ineffective with respect to providing information.<sup>17</sup>

The representatives of the regional authorities find the shift of responsibility for the implementation of programmes to be a good idea because they are better able to recognize and react to the concrete needs of a given region's inhabitants, in many cases through personal face-to-face contact. Although it is still too early to evaluate the changes in the regions so far, some results of the policy measures can already be observed, i.e. increasing interest in LEADER, which will cover the entire territory of some

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<sup>16</sup> A group of officials representing different sectors and administration levels that monitors the implementation of the RDP 2007–2013.

<sup>17</sup> For instance, a number of potential beneficiaries used to call the Ministry to inquire about the details of application procedures. This information should be available in the regional offices.

voivodships. An intensive information campaign and the large amount of available financial resources have made it attractive to build Local Action Groups and to promote partnerships between different sectors. LAGs also possess a re-granting fund to support other organizations, social groups, entrepreneurs or individuals by funding small projects conforming to the strategies stated in the Local Development Plans. The use of this funding tool stimulates the development of local economies, instils self-reliance in decision-making and promotes strategic thinking. Because Poland lacks experience with EU programming and project management skills, LEADER is not only acquainting local communities with problem-solving skills, but is also introducing new concepts to the central public decision-makers, who are accustomed to hierarchical domination. Additionally, it is leading to further formalization and professionalization of the non-governmental sector via capacity-building. For instance, informal movements such as farmers' wives' associations and volunteer fire brigades are finding new ways to implement projects and are starting to re-organize their formal statuses. Doing so can help them to receive future donations, which requires a legal personality and a bank account.

Despite the advancement of decentralized implementation, the Ministry still maintains overall control of the process. This is because the Ministry holds the most responsibility for the general impacts of the RDP and has to prove their compliance with the requirements of the EU regulatory documents. The Ministry also has to contend with pressure from political forces affiliated with the parties and strongest lobbies. Especially in Poland, a country with a specific Communist legacy expressed in frequent political upheaval and a weak culture of trust, the dominant public actors tend to preserve their power and strongly intervene in particular 'decentralized' policy fields. Therefore, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development is in firm control of the whole process of consultations and implementation of the RDP 2007–2013. Obviously, the institution knows that it wields absolute authority, but proclaims the openness and transparency of the process. In the eyes of its officials, everything works 'in line with the EU regulations', whereas the opponents (primarily NGOs) accuse it of conducting a poor information campaign, disregarding the lessons learned from past programming and ignoring the feedback of its social partners.<sup>18</sup> On the surface, the process looks perfectly in order. But if one takes a deeper look, one sees that the ideas of the social dialogue are not really being put into practice. The decision-makers are not likely to obey the principles of the social dialogue unless forced to do so by external regulations. Another feature of the process is hypertrophy: in order to achieve a decentralized system, new structures have been created that supposedly deal with specialized tasks. However, these structures do not really serve the beneficiaries, who sense the organizational chaos and sometimes do not know where to turn for answers to concrete questions. For example, beneficiaries of the LEADER Axis end up calling the Ministry's officials to obtain information on grant application procedures, but the responsibility for providing this information rests with the regional authorities. Furthermore, an extra structure has been created, the National Network of Rural Areas, which aims at incorporating all of the multi-level stakeholders and information services. Thus far its practical function is unclear.

This situation could be explained by the fact that the main driver of this process is the boom caused by the absorption of EU funding. In order to receive this attractive financial aid, Polish actors need to adjust their standards to the degree required by EU donors. This primarily means adopting new modes of governance that up to now were not highly present in Polish political culture. In fact, non-governmental

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<sup>18</sup> Augustyn, Anna: Rural Development Policy Design, Report within the Project RuDI – Impact Assessment of Rural Development Policies incl. LEADER, University of Ljubljana, 2009.

initiatives and organizations have strong roots in the opposition movements that developed in the last years of Communist rule. At the beginning of the transformation, most of the financial aid came from American donor agencies, which placed less emphasis on promoting the idea of partnership between different sectors than the EU mechanisms. In recent years, however, there has been significant change; since Poland's accession to the EU, new modes of governance have been promoted and cooperation among the different sectors has increased. Even so, it sometimes seems that the partners are simply coexisting rather than cooperating.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Poland's shift from Communist collectivism to capitalism has come with a strong tendency towards liberalization of the previously nationalized market, and the pressure to become financially independent has triggered a loss of solidarity that makes defining the common public interest more difficult.

The social dialogue is being treated like a requirement that has to be fulfilled in order to receive a new kind of funding. For instance, with respect to the RDP 2007–2013, the Ministry concentrated on submitting the programme proposal as quickly as possible to ensure the maximum amount of funding for rural development in Poland as quickly as possible. This was in fact achieved: the country was one of the first to successfully finish negotiations with the European Commission. This breakneck tempo meant that the programme's deeper reforms were not implemented and little attention was paid to the details. Although Poland has a large and internally strongly diversified territory, it was not possible to design customized RDPs for every one of the sixteen voivodships so quickly. There was simply too little time for discussion and a more careful analysis of the situation. Moreover, the details of the rural development policies seem to be uncoordinated with the structural and regional development policies. The government's chief concern is demonstrating a measurable impact, which is expressed in the number of applications and beneficiaries. From the perspective of the NGOs, the available funding opportunities look very attractive. To attain them, they adroitly play the role of the system criticizer, a talent honed in the oppositional movements from the Communist period.

The processes observed on the macro policy level are mirrored in the Local Action Groups, which consist of various forces, and in the case of Poland, have the status of non-governmental organizations. LAGs are arenas for local decision-making and community empowerment. But first, they have to define common goals and find a way to develop their territory. A large amount of financial support is therefore spent on public relations and capacity-building aimed at increasing awareness of development issues among the members of the community. In addition, efforts are being made to integrate the LAGs with similar institutional bodies. In fact, there are ongoing debates between the representatives of the various sectors; there are frequently tensions between those forces and sometimes they lead to the domination of one sector. However, the dominating force is usually the public or a non-governmental sector, because entrepreneurs are rather less interested in LEADER.<sup>20</sup> At a later stage, this research proposal is going to examine their perception of the governance process in an empirical way.

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<sup>19</sup> Makowski, Grzegorz / Schimanek, Tomasz (eds): *Organizacje pozarządowe i władza publiczna. Drogi do partnerstwa*, Warsaw: Institute of Public Affairs, 2008, p. 25.

<sup>20</sup> The scope of immediate financial support for entrepreneurs is rather weak in comparison with sources available under the other RDP measures and structural funds.

## **5. Conclusions**

Although Poland has had little experience with EU programming, the first changes in rural areas seem to be positive and hopeful. In this process civil society actors play a critical role in ensuring the success of the reforms. Nevertheless, the old paradigms of governing still dominate decision-making, as the central public actors do not wish to lose their previous power. Changing this situation will require promoting a shift from governing to governance and the civic dialogue as the way to solve social problems.