

NEO-ENDOGENOUS DEVELOPMENT POLICY IN THEORY AND PRACTICE: THE STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES OF AREA-BASED PARTNERSHIPS IN POLAND

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Abstract

This article presents an analysis of the influences of European Union (EU) policy and associated national programmes in shaping the objectives of territorial development strategies at sub-regional levels. Our analysis focuses on area-based cross-sectoral partnerships (Local Action Groups – LAGs) in Poland, which received EU funding from 2014-2020 for Community-Led Local Development (CLLD). A range of LAG types are included in the analysis: rural, rural-fisheries, fisheries, and urban. The specific EU policies that support the territorial types of LAG are identified. We use content analysis of the LAGs' local development strategies (LDSs) to assess and profile the range of objectives described and pursued within them. We found that there are significant differences in the objectives represented across the LDSs, which can be explained by both the type of LAG and their alignment with different EU funding mechanisms. We examine these differences through the lens of the concept of neo-endogenous development, understood as a hybrid of endogenous and exogenous development. We conclude that the concept of neo-endogenous development is an appropriate explanatory tool in understanding the evolution of LAGs, and we highlight appropriate policy responses are required to manage the neo-endogenous nature of how locally-led development is being charted and supported in practice.

Keywords

European Union policy • neo-endogenous development • Community-Led Local Development • area-based partnerships • Local Action Groups • development priorities • Poland

Introduction

The idea of territorial cross-sectoral cooperation of entities and people for the management of local resources and, more generally, local development, following processes that are independent of the systems of classical public administration, has a long history. However, only from the end of the twentieth century was territorial cross-sectoral cooperation coherently promoted and supported on a large scale by rural development policy (OECD, 1990). Its support at a larger scale reflected broader efforts to increase social participation in the management of public resources and spatial planning, both in urban and in rural areas (Oedl-Wieser et al., 2017; Sisto et al., 2018; Castro et al., 2020). Various types of territorial cross-sectoral cooperation for local development, deliberately organised and often referred to as ‘partnerships’, were commonplace especially in Anglo-Saxon democratic countries (Baker, 1993; Hutchinson, 1994; Lawless, 1994; Kachniarz & Piepiora, 2019). Area-based, cross-sectoral partnerships represent one form of cooperation among local stakeholders (Storey, 1999; Hemphill et al., 2006), and one type of partnership arrangement common in Europe is the Local Action Group (LAG) (Konečný, 2019). LAGs were initiated and specifically supported in rural areas in 1991 as part of the LEADER Community Initiative in the European Community covering 12 countries initially, mainly in Western and Southern Europe (Barke & Newton, 1997; Moseley, 2003). Subsequently, with the expansion of the European Union (EU) from 1993, LAGs spread throughout Europe (Macken-Walsh & Curtin, 2013; Konečný, 2019) and even to other continents (Jiménez Aliaga et al., 2022).

Since 2014, LAGs have operated in the EU within the organisational framework defined by the Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) approach (European Commission, 2014). The concept of CLLD assumes that territorial strategies, supported by four main EU public investment funds, focus on geographically defined areas and are community-led

by LAGs composed of representatives of public and private (both economic and social) interests (Thuesen, 2011; Zajda et al., 2017). Reflecting these interests, LAGs produce territorial development strategies (action plans) and allocate public funds to support the projects and activities of local organisations, entrepreneurs and public institutions conducive to the implementation of the strategies (Volk & Bojnec, 2014; Sisto et al., 2018; Konečný et al., 2020).

Area-based partnerships were initially aligned with what was conceptualised as endogenous (grassroots) rural development (Shortall & Shucksmith, 1998; Lacquement & Raynal, 2013), due to their emphasis on local knowledge, institutions and resources in the development of local strategies for development (Barke & Newton, 1997; Szajnowska-Wysocka, 2009). However, the widespread use of top-down (policy, funding) support for bottom-up initiatives provoked over time a discussion in the literature on the links between endogenous and exogenous factors impacting local actions and investments (Boukalova et al., 2016; Linke & Siegrist, 2023). Conceptualising this, ‘neo-endogenous’ development emerged and gained popularity in the literature, to capture the hybridity of the endogenous model in practice, where supra-local (top-down) and local (bottom-up) goals interplay (Ray, 2006; Shucksmith, 2010; Atterton et al., 2011; Bosworth & Atterton, 2012; Li & Liang, 2024). The influence of EU policy on member states and subnational actors, such as LAGs, is also often considered as a ‘Europeanisation’ process (Furmankiewicz et al., 2020; Gonçalves et al., 2024).

There is a wealth of literature on social and political relationships within LAGs and how they shape rural development processes and outcomes (Moseley, 2003; Kull, 2014; Pawłowska, 2017; Cejudo & Navarro, 2020). However, rural, fisheries and urban LAGs are often discussed separately (Phillipson & Symes, 2015; Miret-Pastor et al., 2020). Fewer studies have explored the emergence of variations in goals between these types of LAGs (Servillo, 2019; Kola-Bezka, 2020; Konečný

et al., 2020). Research on the tasks carried out by LAGs is usually based on official data derived from reporting of EU programme budget spending (Lošťák & Hudečková, 2010; Biczkowski, 2020). Content analyses of the objectives identified by LAGs strategies are relatively rare, notwithstanding examples such as Furmankiewicz and Campbell (2019) and Florescu and Turek Rahoveanu (2021). There are also relatively few studies discussing the impacts of support programmes' goals on objectives identified by local communities in their territorial development strategies (Olar & Jitea, 2020).

This article addresses some of these gaps in the literature, using a content analysis of the 'Local Development Strategies' (LDSs) of Polish LAGs, prepared for the 2014-2020 EU programming period. Through an analysis of the priority objectives of LDSs, the aim of the paper is to consider the influences that arise from the main sources of their financing policy instruments (EU funds). In this way, we also study the impact of EU policy on the shaping of LAG goals. The main hypothesis to be tested is whether the objectives of LDSs differ depending on the type of LAG and the policy aims of funding sources, i.e., the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF); the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF); and European Social Fund (ESF). The results suggest that LDS objectives are related not only to local endogenous needs, but also to the exogenous policy decisions of the authorities organising the spending of EU funds and the objectives of these EU funds. The results are discussed and contextualised with reference to the concept of neo-endogenous development (Ray, 2006; Atterton et al., 2011; Bosworth & Atterton, 2012; Bosworth et al., 2016).

In the following section we present a discussion of the evolution of LEADER-type programmes supporting LAGs in the EU, and of what is known in the literature regarding how top-down and bottom-up factors shape their goals and activities. Next, we describe the methodology used for the research and

the results of the analyses. Our findings are then discussed in the context of the existing literature, focusing on Poland and the EU. Finally, we present conclusions and suggestions for further research.

Area-based partnership support policy as a result of the evolution of the theory of socio-economic development

In the twentieth century, the exogenous (top-down) model of economic development was dominant in most countries of the world. Its assumptions were based on neoclassical economic theory and the classical Weberian model of ideal bureaucracy (Willis, 2011). According to such a model, the leading role is held by the central state and public administration, which acts as a regulator and a stimulator of growth using large-scale public investments and concentration of production, relying on benefits arising from economies of scale (Lowe et al., 1995). Urban centres were assumed to play the key roles in development, often based on the urban growth pole concept (Pacione, 2009). A typical development policy in rural areas in this period was to maximise production based on a high level of mechanisation and the use of modern, intensive methods of cultivation and breeding. In Europe, food security was a priority obtained by centrally subsidising agricultural producers on the basis of production efficiency. These activities strengthened sectoral specialisation in agricultural activity and resulted in some negative phenomena such as overproduction, poor economic returns from agriculture, unsustainable demographic disruptions, under- and unemployment in (newly) peripheral areas, and increased environmental pollution (van Depoele, 2003; Adamski & Gorlach, 2007). These, among other wide-ranging phenomena, led to an increasing recognition that the top-down approach focusing on economic growth was ineffective in supporting sustainable development and in raising the level

of quality of life (Wagar, 1970; Raftowicz, 2023) and was in some instances damaging to local resources, cultures, and traditions (Lowe et al., 1995; Ward et al., 2005).

The idea of endogenous development (bottom-up, grassroots) became popularised, where a more territorially-oriented approach is taken to defining locally appropriate development (Slee, 1994; Willis, 2011). The endogenous development concept focuses on the potential of bottom-up community initiatives (to include the role of Non-Government Organisations – NGOs) and local entrepreneurship (Small and Medium Enterprises – SMEs) in using local resources to achieve more sustainable development (Longhi, 2002; Willis, 2011). Such a focus inevitably implicated a new emphasis on human capital (individual knowledge and skills), social capital (relationships of exchange and cooperation) and valuing local traditions and culture in development (Putnam et al., 1993; Lowe et al., 1995; Casieri et al., 2010). Similarly, endogenous development required a focus on non-hierarchical (horizontal) social networks and the dynamics of group cooperation in managing local environmental resources (Lowe et al., 1995; Oyster, 2000).

To respond to these features of how endogenous development is operationalised in an organisational and practical sense, efforts have been made in liberal democracies to establish area-based local partnerships based on principles of local cooperation, innovation creation, and the networking of organisations in territorially defined geographical regions (Baker, 1993; Hutchinson, 1994; Geddes, 2001; OECD, 2001). In the EU, a key feature of local development policy was the creation of area-based, cross-sectoral rural partnerships (called Local Action Groups – LAGs) supported by LEADER Community Initiatives (support programmes), first implemented from 1991-2006 (Barke & Newton, 1997; Moseley, 2003). LAGs included local representatives from across the social, economic and public sectors. They were to coordinate their different interests by preparing a common, bottom-up strategy

(plan of action) for the development of their territorially defined area, using both external EU funds and their own local resources to fund local actions and investments. Similar approaches were promoted through the URBAN and EQUAL Community Initiatives in urban areas (European Commission, 2014). A multi-person project selection committee (decision-making body, with members selected by the LAG association) would allocate funding to selected projects submitted by local entities (local governments, farmers, entrepreneurs, social organisations). The projects should be consistent with the LDS and the rules of the financing programmes that supported them (Zajda et al., 2017; Furmankiewicz et al., 2021b).

It was not required that a LAG corresponded to administrative divisions or borders, but it could be oriented to common territorial features (Ray, 2006). LAGs were intended to be based on the voluntary cooperation of smaller units in geographically defined regions that had socio-economic or environmental (culture, economy, nature) coherence, for instance, within the context of an environmental feature such as a river valley or mountain range; or a socio-cultural or socio-economic feature, such as a particular ethnicity or socio-economic function (Furmankiewicz, 2012; Ruszkai & Kovács, 2012; Zajda et al., 2017). LAGs' activities were identified as one of the first, policy-supported forms of place-based development activity in the EU (Hämäläinen & Németh, 2022; Mustakangas, 2024; Slee, 2024).

Research on the operation of LAGs within the LEADER type programmes has drawn attention to various phenomena, including the relationships between local actors' objectives and the objectives and bureaucratic limitations of the external policy mechanisms that support their grassroots initiatives. In LEADER I (1991-1993) in Spain, it was found that LAGs could not freely identify and pursue bottom-up priorities, but, rather, were required to choose areas of focus within the programme framework (Barke & Newton, 1997). Similar issues arose in Ireland, where

the actions supported by LAGs were oriented to programme objectives focusing on supporting training and assistance for employment, rural tourism, small firms, craft enterprises, local services, and agri-marketing (Curtin & Varley, 1997; Shortall & Shucksmith, 1998). According to Bruckmeier (2000), in LEADER II 1994-1999 in Germany, LAGs were rather short-sighted and conventional in the scope of their work, which tended to relate to agriculture, local handicrafts and local service institutions. Similarly, in other countries, LAGs focused on objectives identified by higher level policy – tourism, SMEs, agriculture production, the environment and living conditions – rather than needs articulated at the local level (Osti, 2000; Scott, 2002). In the opinion of Moseley et al. (2001: 179), reports and research related to LAGs also revealed a ‘top-down’ focus by emphasising bureaucratic measures for policy reporting, such as the ‘numbers of jobs created’, ‘small firms started’, and ‘unemployed people placed on training courses’. In analyses of the implementation of the LEADER approach in the new EU Member States, which had no prior experience with EU programmes, the influence of top-down rules of support programmes was even more evident (Macken-Walsh, 2010; Furmankiewicz et al., 2015). For instance, in research on the LEADER+ Pilot Programme in Poland (2004-2006) and LEADER Axis (2007-2013) it was found that the strategic goals of some LAGs were almost an exact copy of the objectives specified in the support programmes (Furmankiewicz, 2018: 161). In practice, this type of development policy means that LAGs operate according to the ‘rules of the game’ of extra-local policy (e.g. bureaucratic rules pertaining to the spending of EU funds) while, within these rules, focusing on what is possible to achieve (considering local political structures, socio-cultural norms, and economic conditions etc.) where local development is concerned.

It became clear that LAGs and their strategies were not fully independent and bottom-up, but were consciously influenced by the programmes that supported them.

This led to the proposition of the concept of neo-endogenous (Ray, 2006; Bosworth et al., 2016) or networked development (Lowe et al., 1995; Shucksmith, 2012; Atterton et al., 2020), used often interchangeably (Li & Liang, 2024). Neo-endogenous development is used as a concept to capture a realistic, hybrid model of exogenous and endogenous development (Ward et al., 2005; Shucksmith, 2010; Bosworth & Atterton, 2012; Chatzichristos et al., 2021). As a result, subsequent editions of EU programmes supporting the activities of LAGs, such as LEADER Axis (2007-2013) and Community Led Local Development (CLLD, 2014-2020), were mainly interpreted in the literature using the neo-endogenous development concept (Bosworth et al., 2016; Cañete et al., 2018; Biczkowski, 2020; Dax, 2020). As summarised in Table 1, neo-endogenous development focuses on maximising local resource utilisation while incorporating external support to enhance competitiveness. It relies on networks of local stakeholders linked to external influences, fostering a dynamic and interconnected approach. It is envisaged that rural areas serve multifunctional roles, balancing diverse economic activities and the interdependence between urban and rural demands. The neo-endogenous approach integrates bottom-up initiatives with top-down strategies, ensuring alignment with broader goals. It emphasises local empowerment, capacity building, social inclusion, value addition, connectivity, and innovation. The core implementation mechanism is cross-sectoral partnerships in the form of quasi-NGOs. Challenges in how they operate are known to include the limited participation capacity of certain actors, social exclusion, tokenism, power imbalances, and bureaucratic constraints in support programmes (Lowe et al., 1998; Ward et al., 2005; Willis, 2011; Bosworth et al., 2016; Gkartzios & Lowe, 2019).

Until 2006, LAGs were financed exclusively in rural areas. However, in the EU programming period 2007-2013, specialised Fisheries LAGs (F-LAGs) financed by the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF)

Table 1. Main assumptions of neo-endogenous development as an intermediate (hybrid) concept between top-down exogenous and bottom-up endogenous development

Type of development concept/ Feature	Fully exogenous development (top-down)	Neo-endogenous development (networked, hybrid exo/ endo-genous)	Fully endogenous development (grassroots, bottom-up)
Key principle	Economies of scale and concentration of production	Maximising the utility of local resources with external support; Competitiveness based on local assets	Using local resources (natural and human) for sustainable development
Dynamic force	Urban growth poles (drivers exogenous to rural areas)	Networks (groups) of local stakeholders connected to external influences	Mainly local social initiative and enterprise
Functions of rural areas	Intensive production of food and primary products for urban development centres	Diverse production and service economy (multifunctionality); Interdependence of urban and rural demand	Diverse service economies, more extensive agriculture; dominance of locally-owned SMEs
Organisation	Hierarchy, top-down steering of economy and actions, only goals set from above	External support for bottom-up initiatives in line with top-down themes / scopes / goals	Full deconcentrating – free bottom-up initiatives based on local resources, priority of local needs and aims
Focus of rural development	Agricultural modernisation, intensification of agriculture to maximize the production volume	Holistic approach to include local empowerment, capacity building, overcoming exclusion, adding value to local resources, enhancing connectivity and promoting innovation	Capacity-building (skills, institutions, infrastructure); overcoming exclusion; diversifying economies based on valuing local resources
Key actors	Central government and state agencies	Cross-sectoral partnerships (Quasi Non-Governmental Organisations)	Local communities, local non-governmental organisations
Major rural development problems	Negative impact on the social and demographic features of rural communities; environmental damage; underdevelopment and low productivity of some peripheral areas (thereby creating dependent development relations); limited focus on the agriculture sector; overproduction (European Community); disregarding local needs	Problems of capacity for participation in networks and partnerships (social exclusion); tokenism (authorities pretend to delegate powers to non-state actors); power relations; limitations and bureaucracy of support programmes	Limited capacity of some areas/groups to participate in economic activity creating more uneven landscapes of development; detachment from extra-local (national, regional) aims; isolation and traditions can limit the implementation of external innovations

Source: Modified by authors from: Slee, 1994; Lowe et al., 1998; Ward et al., 2005; Willis, 2011; Bosworth et al., 2016; Gkartzios & Lowe, 2019.

were also separately supported to encourage sustainable development and quality of life in coastal and inland fishing regions (Kurowska et al., 2014; Phillipson & Symes, 2015; Kyvelou & Ierapetritis, 2020). The traditional rural LAGs were funded through the ‘LEADER Axis’ in national Rural Development Programmes 2007-2013, which themselves were financed from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). The implemented

activities were similar to those in previous periods and focused on the development of tourism based on local heritage, small business development, agriculture modernisation, social services and local public infrastructure (Marquardt et al., 2010; Kisiel & Gierwiatowska, 2013; Cañete et al., 2018; Nieto Masot & Cárdenas Alonso, 2018; Krasniqi, 2020). However, such activities were influenced by top-down budget lines, which, for example,

in Poland included: non-agricultural activities, setting up and development of micro-enterprises, rural renewal and development, small projects (most commonly local actions by local organisations) and the implementation of cooperation projects (Hoffmann & Hoffmann, 2018). Comparisons of LAGs from Poland and Italy indicate that the diversification of the scope of implemented tasks depended on the budget categories (measures) set from the top-down in the national programmes financing LAGs (Chmieliński et al., 2018).

Further changes in partnership support policy occurred during the EU 2014-2020 programming period. First of all, it was possible to create multi-fund LAGs, financed from the main EU investment funds: the EAFRD and EMFF, and additionally or solely from the European Social Fund (ESF) and European Fund for Regional Development (EFRD). In addition, it was possible to establish LAGs in urban areas (Kola-Bezka, 2020; Puścaś & Beleiu, 2020). The principles of operation and financing of LAGs began to be referred to as the multi-fund Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) approach, to distinguish it from the single-fund LEADER approach (Zajda et al., 2017; Servillo & De Bruijn, 2018). However, the old problems of the thematic and bureaucratic limitations of the LEADER approach remained. For instance, in Portugal, LAGs were standardised for the entire country and had pre-defined topics for fund allocation, leading to frustrations about their limited capacities to respond to other local needs (Gonçalves et al., 2024).

This section of the paper has reviewed key aspects of the relevant literature on the relationships between bottom-up and top-down influences in shaping LEADER and CLLD activities in EU countries. While in many countries, the formation of area-based local partnerships suggests an emphasis on an endogenous development approach, the evidence suggests that the activities of these partnerships were (often significantly) influenced by the programmes that supported them. Our research expands this evidence base by exploring the varying goals of the

different LAGs operating in Poland through a content analysis of their LDSs.

In the following sections of this paper, we report the method adopted in this research and the results obtained from the analysis of the main development goals of various types of LAGs in Poland. We identify the key differences between the main types of LAGs that are financed from different EU funds and assess the possible impact of the objectives of these funds on the objectives of the studied LDSs.

Materials and Methods

In this paper, the main subject of the analysis are Polish LAGs supported in the 2014-2020 EU programming period (as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the timeframe was extended to 2025). In order to understand the principles of establishing LAGs described below, it should be explained that in Poland there are three basic types of local government units called *gmina* (translated into English as municipalities or, less often, communes): urban (town or city), urban-rural (small town with neighbouring rural areas) and rural municipalities (rural areas with villages, without towns or cities) (Zajda et al., 2017; Stacherzak & Heldak, 2019). The territorial range of LAGs is determined by the borders of member municipalities, with the exception of urban LAGs, which can be established in city districts (i.e. they can include part of the territory of a urban municipality).

First, we collected data on the procedures for implementing the CLLD approach in the EU and in Poland, taking into account the relationships between pan-European, national, regional policies; and local strategies prepared by LAGs. Then, we identified the entire range of 324 LAGs from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Warsaw (Figure 1) and their source of financing. As a result, we distinguished four types of LAGs (rural, rural-fisheries, fisheries and urban – as the subjects of our comparative analysis) operating in the research period:

- Rural (acronym in analysis: R-LAGs), financed most commonly by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), in two regions additionally by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and/or European Social Fund (ESF). These LAGs cover a minimum of two municipalities (with the exclusion of towns and cities above 20,000 inhabitants), with a minimum of 30,000 and a maximum of 150,000 inhabitants. R-LAGs must have separate territories (i.e., no member municipality can belong to two EAFRD-funded LAGs) (Zajda et al., 2017);
- Rural-fisheries (RF-LAGs), financed both from the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) and the EAFRD. They are subject to the same rules as R-LAGs (Kurowska et al., 2014; Zajda et al., 2017);
- Fisheries (F-LAGs), financed only from EMFF. They are subject to similar rules as R-LAGs, but can be organised independently, even on the same area as other R-LAGs, but separately from RF-LAGs (no member municipality can belong to two EMFF-funded LAGs) (Kurowska et al., 2014);
- Urban (U-LAGs), financed in Poland only from the ESF through Regional Operation Programmes (ROP). They can be organised only in urban municipalities covering a whole municipality, several adjacent districts within a municipality, or one district within a municipality, having a minimum of 20,000 and a maximum

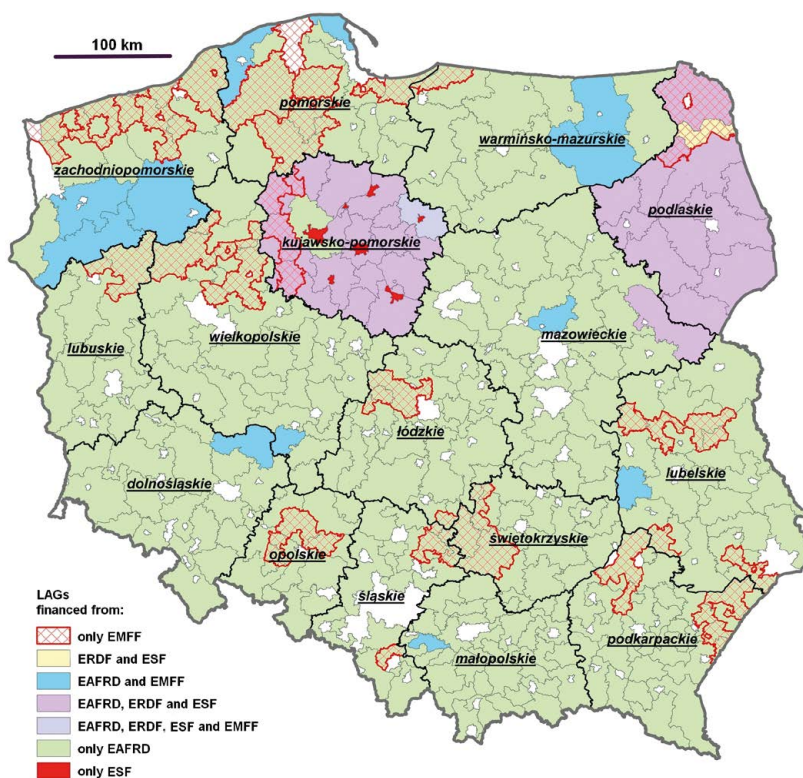


Figure 1. Polish LAGs and their associated financing programmes (2014-2020)

Acronyms: EMFF—European Maritime and Fisheries Fund; ERDF—European Regional Development Fund; ESF—European Social Fund; EAFRD—European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development; Source: Courtesy of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Warsaw, Poland. Data from 23 December 2019.

of 150,000 inhabitants (Zajda et al., 2017; Kola-Bezka, 2020).

This division of LAG types presented above is partially consistent with the existing literature on rural, fisheries and urban LAGs¹ (Thuesen & Nielsen, 2014; Zajda et al., 2017; Panciszko, 2020; Puşcaş & Beleiu, 2020;).

The next step involved obtaining copies of the applicable LAG Local Development Strategies (LDSs) in electronic format for analysis. The LDSs were initially prepared in years 2014-2015 (however, one LAG did not ultimately implement the strategy). We analysed the content of the LDSs, examining information on LAGs' organisational features, their development objectives and how they plan to achieve them. The main objectives formulated in different, individual ways in the strategy documents were analysed and assigned by the Polish native-speaker author to seven main thematic types (related to pre-defined scopes of action and investments), following a process similar to Furmankiewicz and Campbell (2019):

1. Technical infrastructure or roads including car parks and roads, water supply systems, gas and electricity networks, internet networks;
2. Social infrastructure and public services including redecoration of public buildings such as community centres, village clubs, voluntary fire brigade buildings, schools or kindergartens, neighbourhood playgrounds;
3. Ecological infrastructure and environmental protection including ecological waste management, sewage systems, sewage treatment plants, nature conservation;
4. Entrepreneurship or employment development, including support for local manufacturing activities and services (including agricultural production and local products), support for increasing employment; in this type we also incorporated social enterprises, which focus on social impact alongside profits for co-owners;
5. Tourist or recreational infrastructure development, including sport infrastructure and financial support for agritourism;
6. Social or human capital development including education and training, support for local voluntary organisations and cultural affairs;
7. Representation of common interests, including common tourist or investment promotion and common lobbying of higher public authorities.

For the content analysis, we evaluated and coded their representation in LDSs, as: "1" – yes, these types of aims are reflected in objectives; or "0" – no (Table 2). The analysis focused on the LDSs' priority and main objectives, and not on all possible activities listed in these documents. Therefore, the '0' code does not mean that a given type of action was completely excluded, but rather that, according to the researchers' opinions, a specific type of task was not considered as important in the document. Finally we counted what the share of R-LAGs, RF-LAGs, F-LAGs and U-LAGs is, considering the given type of objectives as important. Results were presented in a radar chart, which is a graphical method of displaying the values of multi-dimensional data using two-dimensional graphics (Liu et al., 2008).

Public document content analysis by assigning codes (coding) is a common and recognised practice in political science and also in research on local partnerships (Svobodová, 2015; Boukalova et al., 2016; Zajda et al., 2017; Konečný et al., 2020; Navarro-Valverde et al., 2021; Popa et al., 2022; Průša et al., 2022). LDSs, prepared with the participation of LAG members and resulting from the contributions of inhabitants within LAG areas, can be considered as 'social artefacts', which express local problems, needs and goals and the processes that lead to local expression (Babbie, 2011; Zajda et al., 2017).

It is important to note that the research did not seek to analyse how the projects

¹ Trans-border CLLD LAGs financed by the INTER-REG Cross-Border Cooperation Fund 2014-2020 operated only on the Italian-Austrian border (Servillo, 2019) and did not exist in Poland.

Table 2. Case of coding procedures used in content analysis (types 1-7 explained in text). Some key phrases were deliberately highlighted in response to the question: ‘Does a given LAG goal qualify for the goal category designated by the authors?’ If “yes” – coded “1”, if “no” – coded “0”. Such a coding allowed for a simple calculation of the number of LAGs (and their percentage share) that considered the goal categories as important in their strategies. This procedure is in line with the principles of content analysis (Babbie, 2011).

LAG no and type	Goals in LAG strategy:	Coding: assigning the goal to pre-defined types Yes-1; No – 0						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
KP-002 (U-LAG)	1) Creation of conditions for <u>social inclusion and socio-professional activation of inhabitants</u> (socio-professional activation of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion in the LDS area; organisation and animation of local community in the LDS area; support of social potential for development of social economy in the LDS area)	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
PK-024 (F-LAG)	1) Development of fisheries economic activities and adding value to their products, including the promotion of innovation and diversification of activities within and outside <u>commercial fishing</u> based on the use of the resources and potential of fisheries holdings in the FLAG area (...); 2) Development of socio-economic activities based on the natural and environmental potential of the FLAG area, taking into account sustainable development and <u>measures against climate change</u> (...); 3) Increase in the importance of the <u>natural resources</u> used for the socio-economic development of the FLAG area <u>while preserving and protecting them</u> (...); 4) Creation and support of the existing <u>social and economic capital</u> in the FLAG area using the local aquaculture resources and cultural heritage of the fishery (...);	0	0	1	1	0	1	0
SL-012 (R-LAG)	1) Strengthening the competitiveness of the LDS area (use of potential for development and <u>promotion of the LDS area</u> ; broadening of the cultural offer; <u>development of tourist and recreation infrastructure</u> ; <u>development of Renewable Energy Sources</u>) 2) Creating conditions for <u>development of entrepreneurship and creation of jobs</u> (creation of jobs in the LDS area; support for actions to increase the level of innovativeness of enterprises) 3) <u>Strengthening social capital</u> in the LDS area (counteracting various forms of exclusion in the LDS area; <u>improvement of road infrastructure</u> for social inclusion)	1	0	0	1	1	1	1
PM-019 (RF-LAG)	1) A high quality of life integrating residents with their place of residence and fostering the <u>development of tourism</u> (improvement of internal communications and <u>accessibility of social services</u> ; <u>protection of the natural environment</u> and making available and sustainable use of natural assets; improvement of the attractiveness of the area for residents and tourists through the development of a leisure offer and the development of an <u>innovative tourist offer</u> based on the cultural wealth of the area; <u>development of social capital</u> and the professionalisation of NGOs; development of grassroots initiatives by residents for innovative solutions to social problems – education and integration of the local community) 2) Competitive economy offering the inhabitants attractive and varied jobs (building the area's image and increasing its recognisability; <u>development of entrepreneurship and creation of jobs</u> corresponding to the specific development potentials; maximising and diversifying income from fishing and promotion of fishery products; effective cooperation and <u>promotion</u> to extend the tourist season and <u>increased income from tourism</u>)	0	1	1	1	1	1	1

funded in the context of LDSs operated on the ground and the objectives they addressed in practice (limited in-depth data is available on completed projects). Rather, we aimed to understand the connections between the structure of the objectives in the four types of LAGs highlighted, and the goals of the programmes that supported them financially.

Results

LAGs operating in the context of top-down rules

In Poland, LAGs are financed by a variety of national programmes that operate under various EU level policies, such as the Rural Development Programme (RDP) financed by the EAFRD, the Operational Programme 'Fisheries and Sea' financed by the EMFF, and 16 Regional Operational Programmes (ROPs) financed by both the ERDF and ESF. LAGs in Poland are subject to administrative control by the 16 free-elected regional authorities (formally by the "Voivodeship Marshal" – head of regional self-government administration). The location of the headquarters of the LAG determines whether it belongs to a particular voivodeship (the LAG territory may cover more than one voivodeship). Regional governments independently decided whether to support LAGs in their region through ERDF and/or ESF (Kola-Bezka, 2020; Panciszko, 2020). As a result, spatial differences in the use of ERDF and ESF in the support of LAGs are partially the result of political decisions by regional governments, as well as the establishment of LAGs from the 'ground-up' in processes of local mobilisation (according to shared features, objectives etc.). Furthermore, once LAGs were established, they were guided by the development aims of the policy instrument specifically supporting their LAG. In fact, in all LDSs, there is a dedicated section that details how the objectives contained therein align with the aims of the funding policy instrument/s that sponsor them (Table 3).

An overview of the policy instruments that were used to support LAGs is presented in Table 4. The majority of LAGs in Poland

(251) in the period under analysis were single-fund, financed only by the EAFRD under the RDP. These LAGs were focused on rural development, and many of them had long experience of using EU funds under previous LEADER programmes. Twenty-four LAGs in fisheries regions were financed solely by EMFF, and 12 LAGs were financed by both EAFRD and EMFF funds. Only two regional governments decided to support LAGs additionally or solely by ERDF or/and ESF funds (Kuyavian-Pomeranian and Podlaskie). As a result there were 29 LAGs financed simultaneously by EAFRD, ERDF and ESF and only one LAG financed by the ERDF and ESF. Only the Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeship supported the creation of seven urban LAGs financed exclusively by the ESF.

The main organisational features and strategic priorities of LAGs in Poland

LAGs differed according to the areas in which they were located, their population sizes, and their membership compositions (Table 5). U-LAGs were always located in one urban municipality (town or city). Six of them covered the entire administrative area of the town, and one U-LAG (in Bydgoszcz) only covered selected adjacent districts. Other type of LAGs were much larger organisations, covering eight to ten municipalities. Contrary to U-LAGs, there was a requirement for other types of LAGs to represent a minimum of two municipalities. We found that F-LAGs had the largest average size both in terms of the number of cooperating municipalities and the number of inhabitants within them. However, on average, the highest number of LAG members (in the LAG partnerships) was found in RF-LAGs. We also found differences in the share of LAG members affiliated to the economic, social and public sectors. The largest number of entities and persons representing the social sector participated in U-LAGs (most commonly individuals followed by NGOs). In R-LAGs, partnership members from the social sector were dominant,

Table 3. Relationship between EU funding programmes and LAGs in Poland in the 2014-2020 EU programming period (operational programmes and funds not available to LAGs were omitted). Goals have been reworded and shortened to fit in the table

Pan-European aims	Europe 2020 Strategy (for all EU area) Main targets: increase employment rate, investment in Research & Development, energy transformation to limit greenhouse emissions, to decrease early school leavers and to limit poverty ▼			
	Common Strategic Framework (CSF) covers EAFRD, EMFF ERDF, ESF, reflect the Europe 2020 objectives through common thematic objectives to be addressed by key actions for each of the funds ▼			
	EAFRD	EMFF	ESF	ERDF
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">improving the competitiveness of agriculture;encouraging sustainable management of natural resources and climate action;achieving a balanced territorial development of rural economies and communities ▼	<ul style="list-style-type: none">helping fishermen (both in coastal and inland areas) in the transition to sustainable fishing;supporting coastal communities in diversifying their economies;creating new jobs and improving quality of life along European coasts ▼	<ul style="list-style-type: none">boosting the adaptability of workers and enterprises;improving access to employment;enabling vocational training and lifelong learning opportunities;helping people from disadvantaged groups to get jobs (social inclusion) ▼	<ul style="list-style-type: none">strengthening economic, social and territorial cohesion in the EU by correcting imbalances between its regions ▼
National aims	Partnership Agreement – national document outlining the intended use of EU funds in the pursuit of Europe 2020 objectives			
	National Strategies and Operational Programmes (OP)			
	Rural Development Programme (for Poland)	Polish OP ‘Fisheries and Sea’	OP Knowledge Education Development	(No national programme for ERDF)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">facilitating knowledge transfer and innovation;improving the competitiveness and profitability of the agricultural economy;improving the organisation of the food chain and risk management in agriculture;support for ecosystems dependent on agriculture and forestry;more resource-efficient, low-carbon and climate-resilient economy;social inclusion and poverty reduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">promoting sustainable, innovative and competitive fisheries and aquaculture;supporting the Common Fisheries Policy;employment and territorial cohesion in fisheries areas;marketing and processing of fishery products;Integrated Maritime Policy and Technical Assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">LAGs can use ESF only through Regional Operational Programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Objectives are set separately by each self-government region in Regional Operational Programmes (ROPs). LAGs can use ERDF only through ROPs
	No regional programme financed from RDP ▼	No regional programme financed from OP Fisheries and Sea ▼	Regional Operational Programmes The regional authorities set the ROP objectives and decide whether ESF and ERDF funds under the ROP will be available to LAGs ▼	
Mixed aims	LAG Local Development Strategy (LDS) The co-financed bottom-up projects must be in line with the LDS objectives and the procedures (scope of financed actions) of the programmes that directly finance them			
Local aims	▲ Local public sector aims	▲ Local economic sector aims	▲ Local third sector aims	▲ Local inhabitants needs and aims

Source: Own elaboration based on European Commission (European Commission, 2014, 2018) and rules published by the Polish Central Government.

Table 4. Numbers of LAGs in Poland by source of funding (2014-2020)

The source of financing	Number	Type in analysis
Only EAFRD	251*	RURAL (R-LAGs)
EAFRD, ERDF and ESF	29	RURAL (R-LAGs)
Only EMFF	24	FISHERIES (F-LAGs)
EAFRD and EMFF	11	INTEGRATED RURAL-FISHERIES (RF-LAGs)
Only ESF	7	URBAN (U-LAGs)
EAFRD, EMFF, ERDF and ESF	1	INTEGRATED RURAL-FISHERIES (RF-LAGs)
ERDF and ESF	1	RURAL (R-LAGs)
Sum	324	LAGs

*Ultimately, one LAG did not use the funds.

Source: Based on data from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Warsaw, Poland.

Table 5. Basic characteristic of Rural (R-LAGs), Rural-Fisheries (RF-LAGs), Fisheries (F-LAGs) and Urban (U-LAGs) CLLD partnerships in Poland

	R-LAGs	RF-LAGs	F-LAGS	U-LAGs
Number of LAGs	281	12	24	7
Area [mean in square km]	974	1,548	1,603	52
Number of Inhabitants [mean sum]	67,868	79,556	89,964	85,960
Number of Municipalities [mean]	8	9	10	1
Number of LAG members [mean]	94	144	128	77
Percentage of members representing the public sector [mean]	13.5	10.0	10.1	8.0
Percentage of members representing the social sector [mean]	66.2	54.6	48.7	68.8
Percentage of members representing the economic sector [mean]	20.1	35.5	41.2	23.1

Source: Authors elaboration based on data from LAG LDSs and offices.

although they had the highest proportions of members from the public sector. By contrast, F-LAGs had the highest share of members representing the economic sector (entrepreneurs, fishermen etc.).

The LAGs showed differences in their specific development priorities (Figure 2). U-LAGs, funded exclusively by the ESF, were the most mono-functional and focused exclusively on issues of social and human capital

and employment. Both issues were strongly related to the challenge of social inclusion. U-LAGs were not involved in the development of any infrastructure or support to small business investments, because of programme restrictions. They were involved only in the implementation of so-called 'soft' projects, such as training and educational events, related to the social and professional activities of LAG inhabitants.

R-LAGs and RF-LAGs show the greatest similarities. The objectives of their LDSs covered a broader range of issues compared to F-LAGs and U-LAGs. Their development objectives related to entrepreneurship and employment as well as social and human capital (including the preservation of cultural heritage), followed by tourism and recreation, social infrastructure and services, and common interest representation and promotion. On average, RF-LAGs covered the largest number of issues.

Mono-fund LAGs (F-LAGs and U-LAGs) are clearly different from their rural counterparts. F-LAGs are distinguished by a greater interest in environmental protection issues. At the same time, their LDSs are less focused on the development of local social and technical infrastructure. U-LAGs are particularly monothematic, with their objectives relating

only to human and social capital development and support for small enterprises and employment.

Discussion

This article presents differences between four adopted *a priori* types of LAGs in terms of their funding sources, and their seven scopes of objectives contained in their LDSs (2014-2020). RF-LAGs and R-LAGs typically had a range of development objectives covering social issues, local entrepreneurship, and tourism based on local cultural heritage. Such relatively broad activities, including also development of the local social and technical infrastructure of rural areas, are supported in the RDP (financed by the EAFRD). The use of the EMFF to support RF-LAGs and F-LAGs in fisheries regions (both coastal and inland) was

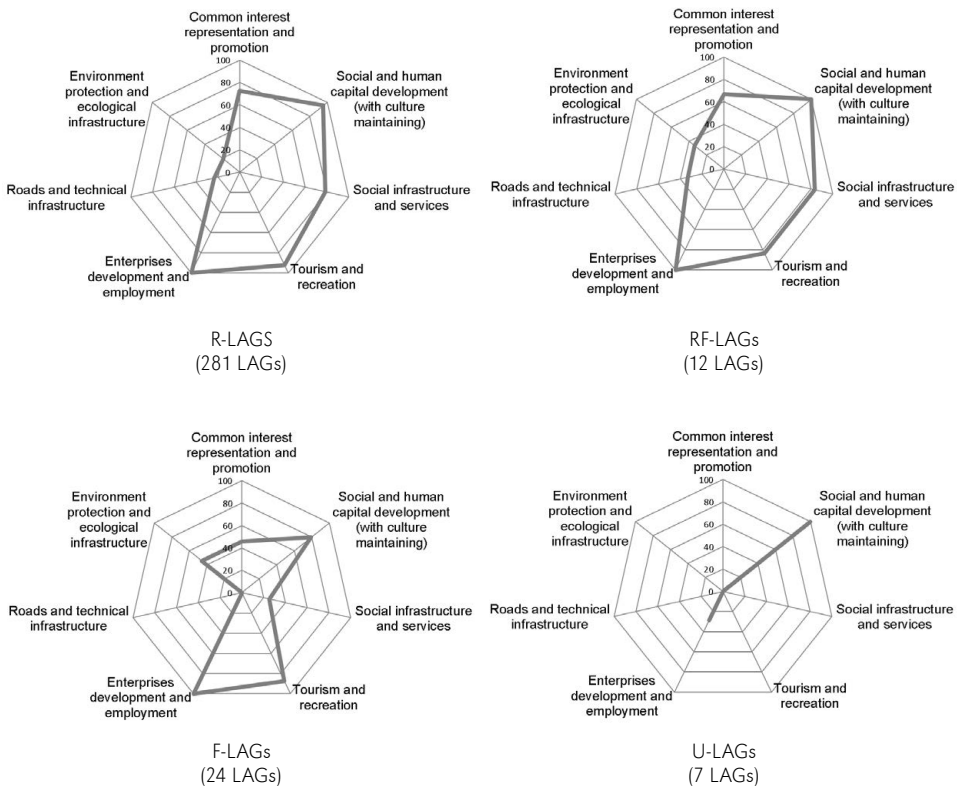


Figure 2. The representation of objective research types on LDSs (in percentage of LDSs)

evident from an increased focus on environmental issues in the objectives of LDSs. Extensive opportunities to support both the fishing economy, agriculture and social activities have resulted in RF-LAGs having the largest number of members.

The analysis showed that single-fund F-LAGs and U-LAGs are distinctly different. F-LAGs focused on the development of the fisheries economy and related entrepreneurship, neglecting social infrastructure and services. However, more than other types of LAGs, their objectives were centred on environmental and ecological issues related to natural resources. Their objectives were likely influenced in this regard by their sponsorship by the EMFF (focusing on the fisheries economy). As a result, in F-LAGs there was the highest share of members from the economic sector (including fishermen and owners of fish ponds), for whom environmental issues related to water ecosystems would likely be more important than the development of social infrastructure and public services. However, interest in environmental protection (including climate change mitigation and adaptation) is still considered relatively low in rural and fisheries regions in Poland with residents and authorities more often focusing on economic development and social issues (Pawlewicz et al., 2014; Furmankiewicz et al., 2021a). Specialised F-LAGs, financed only by the EMFF, usually included communes within their operational territories in which R-LAGs, with a high representation of social and NGO members, operated simultaneously. In this context, F-LAGs could justifiably focus on fishing issues with social issues focused on by R-LAGs. The specialised focus of F-LAGs has also been noted in the UK, where emphasis in development activities was found to be oriented to the fisheries sector rather than wider territorial development (Phillipson & Symes, 2015).

U-LAGs, which had slightly different protocols for their organisation and operation, are of a completely different nature to the other types of LAGs studied (Kola-Bezka, 2020; Panciszko, 2020). The range of objectives they can pursue in their LDSs was found

to be significantly curtailed by the scope of the ESF, which focuses on supporting employment, and human and social capital development. The constraining nature of the ESF on the LDSs is particularly visible here, as it is difficult to assume that other types of development objectives are unimportant for city dwellers. Also, the geographical concentration of U-LAGs in one region is not the result of a ground-up mobilisation of development interests, but the result of regional authority level decision-making. Furthermore, there is an absence of a tradition of local development partnerships in urban areas, with the focus of previous EU LEADER type programmes operating exclusively in rural areas (Moseley, 2003).

The above results indicate the significant impacts of financial programmes on the scope of LAGs' activities, with implications arising for how they represent features of 'neo-endogenous' development in practice. In this context, however, the notion that LAGs should have complete independence from outside influences is contested (Gonçalves et al., 2024) from the point of view that combining local goals with the goals of extra-local funders is entirely justifiable. Complete freedom in financing local activities could lead to completely 'dis-integrated development' (Shucksmith, 2010), which would not be conducive to cohesion policy and could lead to unfavourable effects in the long term. However, it remains pertinent that research maintains a 'pulse' on the interplay between local and extra-local development goals, strategies and visions; and the implications arising within broader contexts and systems challenges to which policies must respond in an increasingly dynamic way. The outcomes and impacts of (attempted) neo-endogenous development must be monitored in that context, providing clarity on how local and extra-local perspectives, strategies and actions on the ground are delivering evaluated forms of progress or otherwise, where sustainability, innovation, governance and other policy priorities are concerned.

Apart from the influence of the supporting funding instruments on local activities,

however, other reasons underpinning the prioritisation of particular goals are also possible. For instance, specific objectives in LDSs can be a result of local power relations between stakeholders engaged in their identification and creation. Many studies indicate that the interests of local public authorities are particularly strong (Esparcia et al. 2015: 42), with authorities tending to focus on activities visible to voters – especially public infrastructure (Biczkowski et al. 2020: 239; Opria et al., 2021: 11). Local farmers, fishermen and entrepreneurs often have less power in rural LAGs, however, it is also the case that the economic sector is significant in many Fisheries LAGs (Furmankiewicz et al., 2021a; 2025).

The capabilities of certain types of stakeholders to use financial resources may also be significantly influential, considering the numerous administrative, bureaucratic and financial requirements and resources needed to draw down funding (Zajda et al., 2017; Cárdenas Alonso & Masot, 2020). Even for actors in the economic sector in Poland, it was often difficult and time-consuming for them to prepare project applications that complied with bureaucratic requirements, with the result that the funds planned for them in LDSs were not always fully utilised. Such funds were typically transferred to implement municipal infrastructure development projects in the ‘rural renewal and development’ budget line, because the public sector (local self-government) had a high capacity and resources to draw down these funds (Furmankiewicz, 2018; Biczkowski, 2020). Similarly, in Bulgaria, local needs specified in the priorities and action plans of LAGs were also not always met, for instance, the development of new products and technologies (Doitchinova et al., 2019).

Some goals in LDSs may be shaped by the views of the most influential people involved in creating the strategy (Kirylik-Dryjska & Wawrzynowicz, 2024). However, local practices that are not necessarily fully economically ‘rational’ but nonetheless may be important to local people, for instance farmers’ attachment to traditional production activities (Průša et al., 2022), may simply not ‘fit’ with

extra-local development strategies. Our analysis found, however, that the majority of Polish LAGs, with the exception of U-LAGs, identified the development of tourism as particularly important, which is reflected in the strategies of LAGs EU-wide (Tirado-Ballesteros & Hernández Hernández, 2018). However, the focus on tourism has been contested at regional level (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004; Futymski, 2007) and has been found to be driven by the orientation of the EU programmes that fund LAGs rather than local priorities (Macken-Walsh, 2009). While multifunctionality must be supported in rural areas, it is difficult to conclude that all LAGs in Europe are likely to become popular tourist ‘hotspots’. Also, the experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic show that resilience requires rural areas to develop rather wide-ranging multifunctionality, that incorporates, for instance, a certain share of conventional small-scale food production at the local level (as an alternative to specialisation and long food supply chains).

Our research also revealed that discretion was used at national and regional authority levels in relation to the alignment of financing instruments with local development. Two regional authorities permitted the establishment of multi-fund LAGs with access to ERDF and ESF funds, and only one allowed the establishment of U-LAGs—these were individual political decisions. These funds did not require the establishment of LAGs, it was discretionary. A reluctance on the part of public authorities to support multi-fund LAGs was observed. In line with Niskanen’s theory of public choice (Niskanen, 1994), it is possible that authorities opted to control the available resources rather than delegate power to LAGs. The establishment of U-LAGs was not common elsewhere in the EU – U-LAGs were established in few countries, most commonly financed by the ESF (Servillo & De Bruijn, 2018). The use of several funds is an additional complication, as each has a separate budget line, different goals and different funding rules, creating additional tasks for regional administrations. This may underpin the unwillingness of regional authorities

to enable multi-fund LAGs. In the evaluation of CLLD in Poland, it was found that some representatives of regional authorities believed that the administrative duties for supporting LAGs were disproportionate to the measurable benefits (Krzyżanowska-Orlik et al., 2024).

While our considerations do not explain all the complexities and inter-dependencies of how and why LAGs function, our findings illuminate the complexity of the system within which the concept of neo-endogenous development realistically operates. Our study has limitations, some of which could be addressed through future research. For example, the heterogeneity of the numbers of the LAG types analysed (i.e. 7 U-LAGs versus 281 R-LAGs) was inescapable in Poland, where only two regions of 16 supported the creation of U-LAGs using the ESF and the ERDF. This problem could be reduced by conducting an international survey, where results would need to be orientated to the different objectives of national programmes across member states.

Another limitation relates to content analysis, where the main disadvantage identified in the literature is the possible influence of researchers' views on the interpretation of the texts, a process that is considered as a constructivist 'intervention into reality' (Průša et al., 2022: 5). However, when interpretation is led by a conceptual framework (as was the case in this research), the potential for researcher subjectivity is limited to what is typical in most qualitative research approaches (Neuendorf, 2002; Babbie, 2011). Furthermore, content analysis of strategic documents does not allow for an assessment of whose objectives were taken into account to a greater extent in the LDS and which stakeholders had a greater influence on their formulation.

Conclusions

LAGs aim to support local development objectives and actions that integrate economic, social and public sector objectives, which must be jointly pursued through LDSs (Esparcia et al., 2015; Konečný et al., 2020).

Understanding how development objectives are initially formulated in LDSs is a first step in how they can be achieved, and this requires an analysis of the array of EU and national programmes at various territorial levels (EU authorities, national governments and regional government authorities) and how they intersect; and how their objectives shape the parameters of what can be formulated at the local level in LDSs. As the range of types of LAGs extends beyond rural and agricultural interests to fisheries and urban areas as well as innovation challenges more generally (Macken-Walsh, 2016), we find that the explanatory power of the neo-endogenous development concept is continually relevant. As the analysis in this paper shows, there are quite significant differences in the objectives of LAGs, which are tangibly aligned to the type of LAG and its funding mechanism/s. Urban LAGs focus exclusively on social inclusion, because only such activities are aligned with the ESF. Fisheries LAGs, financed exclusively by EMFF funds, focus on the development of fisheries and fishing-related entrepreneurship, while paying significant attention to environmental protection – again aligned to the priorities of the EMFF. Rural LAGs have a wide scope of objectives which strongly emphasise the development of public infrastructure, which is financed by EAFRD. The widest scope of activities and the greatest features of 'integrated development' are fostered by multi-fund RF-LAGs, because access to several funds with different priorities allows this wide scope.

In these differences we see no evidence that there is a propensity towards uniformity in how LAGs identify objectives for their LDSs, but rather an agility in how they respond to both local needs and the parameters imposed by the objectives of their funding sponsors. The impact of supporting programmes is evident and shows that the LAG's activities are not fully bottom-up, but partly reflect top-down goals imposed from above. This reflects the philosophy of neo-endogenous development: local communities are free to choose their goals and activities, but receive special

support only for those activities that are in line with supra-local strategies (European, regional, regional etc.). This is to counter 'disintegrated development' but may limit local innovation (Neumeier, 2017).

There is an ever greater need to explore intersections and influences between top-down and bottom-up relationships, principles and goals of action. Non-hierarchical, often complex, connections are often explained using the concept of multi-level network governance (Thuesen & Nielsen, 2014; Tirado-Ballesteros & Hernández Hernández, 2018; Salmi et al., 2022). However, it remains crucial to pay dedicated attention to the needs and goals of actors at the local level and how these needs and goals manage to find identity, legitimacy and expression through the structured 'rules of the game' (of EU programme parameters). This ultimately predicates the outcomes of policies that are defined by the aim of supporting local initiatives. This study, therefore, has shown that certain local development objectives and activities have greater or lesser chances of being represented in LDSs and therefore ongoing monitoring of the alignment of local strategies with extra-local policies is a vital part of the picture of how rural futures are actively being charted by policy mechanisms.

The typology of Polish LAGs and the analysis of their LDSs presented in this paper cannot be argued to reveal findings that are exactly representative of LAGs across the EU as a whole (Lysek & Šaradín, 2018), but it is likely, and research has already shown, that similar trends have been longitudinally evident. Member states have a certain degree of freedom in adjusting the core objectives of policies that support LAGs in their national policies. The creation of an up-to-date pan-European typology of how EU development objectives are represented in national-level policies and LDSs at local levels would be highly valuable but would require cross-border research and the collection of harmonised data from member states, which is not a simple task (Moseley, 2003; Servillo & De Bruijn, 2018; Cejudo & Navarro, 2020). Such

an exercise might also fail to capture the differences that are most valuable for informing future policy.

An interesting question for further research would be to explore in greater depth using a range of case-studies the intersections between local and supra-local development objectives, using a qualitative research approach with people involved in the creation and implementation of LAG LDSs. Are supra-local goals important when it comes to the selection and implementation of projects at the local level, or were they only artificially included in the project documents to make it easier to obtain funding? A dissonance between the pursuit of EU objectives and local objectives on the ground is visible in other studies, especially in the field of environmental issues, including those related to the energy transition (Furmankiewicz et al., 2020). Similarly, it would be valuable to analyse the complementarity of various forms of participatory resource management models that exist in non-rural sectors, often operating simultaneously in LAG areas (e.g. projects operating alongside U-LAGs, participatory civic initiatives). It would be interesting to explore the extent to which these similarly principled efforts are synergistic, or whether they result in 'disintegrated development' stemming from multiple uncoordinated programmes (Shucksmith, 2010; Zajda et al., 2017).

Overall, insights provided by this research could help formulate the principles of EU-level programmes to support local activities in such a way that would be more conducive to the achievement of EU policy goals regarding sustainability and resilience, while also meeting local needs (Prager et al., 2015). An example of a practical intervention that could be recommended from this study is to 'detach' one, even limited, strand of LAG funded activities from the constraints of a specific funding instrument, providing them with a general budget to support 'wild card' local projects, or to dedicate a portion of LDSs' funding to supporting projects that do not fall under any objective of the sponsoring funding mechanism. These projects could provide a valuable

public policy experiment, which could possibly reveal a range of grassroots challenges and opportunities, and inspirational, potentially highly innovative ways to respond to them.

Editors' note:

Unless otherwise stated, the sources of tables and figures are the authors', on the basis of their own research.

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