

Iryna Kostetska
National University of Ostroh Academy

Bogusława Baran-Zgłobicka
Maria Curie-Skłodowska University

Strengthening the Development Potential of Rural Areas through Territorial Partnerships in Poland and Ukraine

Abstract

Rural areas face serious challenges due to low socio-economic potential. Improving living conditions requires targeted actions. This study compares rural areas in Ukraine and Poland, examining their characteristics, changes in living standards, and whether Poland's transformation can serve as a model for Ukraine. The research poses several key questions: What are the features of rural areas in Poland and Ukraine?

A key focus is on territorial partnerships—Local Action Groups (LAGs)—and their role in rural development. The analysis is based on statistical data, scientific literature, and strategic documents. It explores rural areas' status, key issues, and development trends. Factors such as administrative reforms and decentralization are assessed, alongside demographic challenges and employment levels in both countries.

Poland's experience highlights extensive infrastructure investments, including sewage and gas networks, road improvements, and better access to social services. Territorial partnerships contribute significantly to local development. In Ukraine, reforms at the local governance level aim to strengthen rural communities. However, war has severely damaged villages and infrastructure in the east and stalled transformation efforts elsewhere.

Despite these challenges, Ukraine's rural areas have the potential for growth by leveraging decentralization and community-driven initiatives, following Poland's example where possible.

Keywords: rural area, territorial partnership, living conditions, local development, Poland, Ukraine

JEL: O 18, O 20, O 21, Q 56, R 12, R 58

Problem background

Rural areas play a crucial role in every country, serving as a key element of economic development. At the same time, they possess significant social, cultural, and natural potential. However, for many years, they have faced serious challenges resulting from negative socio-economic changes. Improving this situation requires actions aimed at enhancing the quality of life in local communities (Chmielewska, Zegar, 2018; Stanny et al., 2023). From the point of view of improving the economic situation of rural areas, multi-directional measures should be taken to improve this situation.

Parysek (2001) defines territorial (local) development as 'a complex of qualitative transformations concerning a given area, relating to the standard of living of the population and the operating conditions of economic entities'. At the same time, he emphasises that local development:

- is characterised by the local scale of socio-economic activity;
- concerns the local environment in which the community lives;
- is carried out from the point of view of the needs of local communities;
- is based on local development resources;
- is implemented with the participation of local communities and local government structures, as well as other organisations and institutions.

M. Ziolkowski (2005) defines local and regional development as 'a multifaceted and complex process of positive changes leading to an improvement in the quality of the environment for residents and an increase in the competitiveness of a given local government unit'. In the ecological sphere, development should take into account the protection of natural resources and values and the reduction of anthropogenic pressure, including the prevention of environmental pollution. The effect of development is the creation of new values and utility values, favourable conditions for the functioning of the economy, and the preservation of spatial order and natural balance (Markowski 2008). It should be remembered that the local development of a territorial unit also depends on external conditions. The basic factors of development should be considered to be: the needs of local communities, natural resources and assets, labour resources, infrastructure investment, existing economic potential, local and external markets, financial capital, the level of science, technology and culture, modern production technologies, location and location advantages, international relations and bilateral cooperation (Parysek 2001).

This research focuses on understanding Poland's experience to develop proposals for Ukraine as it progresses toward European integration and the post-war reconstruction of its rural areas.

In the European Union, associations and networks of non-governmental organizations dedicated to rural development are widespread (Lengerer et al., 2023; Ray, 2000). Poland also serves as a good example in this field (Musiał-Małago, M., Marcisz, J., 2019). The study aims to assess the functioning of territorial partnerships—Local Action Groups (LAGs)—and the projects implemented within them, which facilitate multifunctional rural development.

Analysing the development strategies of territorial units on the part of Poland and Ukraine at the local level, it was noted that little attention was paid to environmental policy objectives. Some strategies do not have such objectives at all, despite being basic documents on the development of territorial units (WIATRAK 2011). However, in the LAG Strategy two strategic objectives are directed at this topic. This shows the importance and effectiveness of the LAG in promoting and implementing environmental policy in the municipalities. At the same time, they show great involvement in planning activities related to the development of agri-tourism, rural tourism and tourism infrastructure. Studies show the importance of LAGs as stimulators of rural development (KOŁODZIEJCZAK 2011; PAWŁOWSKA et al. 2014; HADYŃSKI & BORUCKA 2015; ZAJDA et al. 2016), and their strategies can be the basis for the development of future supra-local development strategies (KOLIŃSKI & KOŁODZIEJCZAK 2021). In LAG strategies, projects related to environmental protection and sustainable use of natural resources have a significant share (FURMANKIEWICZ & JANC 2011, PAWŁOWSKA et al. 2014, CZAPIEWSKA 2012; GUZAL-DEC 2014, PAŁKA 2014, MUSIAŁ-MALAGO' & MARCISZ 2019). In contrast, the results of the analysis do not indicate consistency in environmental programming in Poland. At the same time, there are no direct formal and task-based links with strategic planning (BARAN-ZGŁOBICKA 2017). Thus, work should be done to strengthen the place of environmental activities in strategic planning. In Ukraine, environmental programming itself is in its infancy.

Ukraine has a similar system of strategic planning and development programming after decentralisation (KOSTETSKA 2021). In contrast, the very goals of rural development, set at the beginning of decentralisation and entrenched in current legislation, have not been achieved (DAVYDENKO et al. 2022). Although Polish practices in combining development planning and environmental management are not fully satisfactory, their analysis provides an opportunity to highlight the advantages and disadvantages of this system and to present a new framework.

Local authorities are exploring new approaches to development, with a strong emphasis on multifunctionality. For this study, the neighboring Polish and Ukrainian regions of Lublin and Lviv were chosen due to their similar environmental conditions and shared cultural heritage. The Polish border regions have the potential to serve as an important model for Ukrainian border regions as they strive for integration into the European Union.

This paper provides an overview of development processes along with in-depth case studies to establish a basis for assessing the sustainable functioning of rural municipalities and territorial partnerships. The study examined supra-local strategic documents on rural development in Polish and Ukrainian municipalities. Their socio-economic situation was analyzed, and the objectives and activities proposed in their programs and local development strategies were identified. Based on the research findings, a proposal was formulated for implementing systemic solutions in the development of strategic plans, ensuring that local strategies become essential tools for promoting sustainable development.

Looking at the reforms undertaken in Ukraine before the outbreak of war, existing research highlights the significance of this topic and the need for further analysis, as confirmed by numerous scientific publications. Ukraine's acquisition of EU candidate status on June 23, 2022, has intensified challenges related to aligning its current policies with EU standards. Ukraine's integration into the global economic landscape requires learning from countries that have already undergone agricultural sector reforms.

Poland's experience is particularly relevant and useful for Ukraine. The concept of territorial partnerships is relatively new in Ukraine, and the Polish example is only beginning to be explored in academic literature. Korinets (2023) emphasized the importance and benefits of local partnerships. Therefore, Poland's experience in improving environmental policies should be analyzed in the context of territorial partnerships for Ukraine.

Research questions

Rural areas play an important role in the functioning of the economies of Ukraine and Poland. The novelty of the approach lies in the examination of development strategies for rural areas in Poland and Ukraine in the context of the involvement of Local Action Groups (LAGs) in rural development programming to change development priorities. Considering the social and economic problems and the intensive preparation of revitalization plans for Ukraine after the war, studies of this kind are much needed.

The main objective of the research is to compare the specific functioning of rural areas in Ukraine and Poland. The specific objective includes assessing the functioning of territorial partnerships—Local Action Groups—and the projects implemented within them, which enable the multifunctional development of rural areas (particularly in the context of improving living conditions).

The aim of the study is to evaluate environmental policies and strategic programs, define their spatial dimension, and identify the factors determining the choice of development directions. The main research question is: How can sustainable rural development in post-war Ukraine be accelerated using Polish experience?

The study poses specific research questions concerning: the characteristics of rural areas in Poland and Ukraine; changes in the standard of living that have occurred in rural areas in both countries; and the extent to which Poland's rural transformation process can serve as an example for Ukraine. Additionally, it examines whether Local Action Groups influence the improvement of multifunctional (social, economic, and environmental) rural development.

The following research hypothesis was adopted: The experience of local government units and examples of LAG development strategies should serve as a valuable tool for adapting Polish experience in the development of rural areas in Ukraine, particularly in the context of improving living conditions.

Data and methods

The research sample was selected on the basis of a query of legal acts, strategic documents and materials available on the official websites of individual territorial units. The subject of detailed research was the documents of selected communes in Lubelskie Voivodeship in Poland and gromads in Lviv Oblast in Ukraine. The work included a review of problematic literature and legal acts, a critical analysis of available development strategies and environmental protection programmes from different levels of territorial division of both countries. A comparative analysis of the strategic planning and environmental programming system in the two countries was carried out. Objectives for environmental protection in the documents were collated. Characteristics include the presentation of case studies on the experiences of local government units and LAGs. The collected data, e.g. from statistics and sectoral reports, strategic documents, from data of local government offices and support institutions, were subjected to statistical analysis. Using the abstract-logical method, the concept of a modified strategic planning system, villages and recommendations were formulated.

A comparative analysis of the strategic planning in the two countries was carried out. Objectives for environmental protection in the documents were collated. Characteristics include the presentation of case studies on the experiences of local government units and LAGs. The collected data, e.g. from statistics and sectoral reports, strategic documents, from data of local government offices and support institutions, were subjected to statistical analysis. Using the abstract-logical method, the concept of a modified strategic planning system, villages and recommendations were formulated.

Results

In Ukraine, rural areas are traditionally associated with agribusiness, while in Poland they are currently characterized by a range of integrated processes and diverse functions that influence their development. Both countries have discrepancies in defining rural areas. The agricultural sector faces problems with ambigu-

ous consequences for both agricultural development and the standard of living of rural populations. There is a lack of comprehensive financial support from the government for residents and services in the social sector. Disproportion in the employment structure in rural areas, the continuous decline of this structure, excessive physical labor in private farms, degradation of human capital, low development of rural social infrastructure, and the imperfect structure of rural production sectors negatively affect the quality of life in rural areas. The specificity of natural potential and agricultural production issues can be traced through examples from the Lubusz Voivodeship and Lviv Oblast. Given global trends in the decline of the agricultural sector's importance, there is no longer any doubt that the concept of rural area development is much broader than the concept of agricultural sector development. The issue of shaping socio-economic conditions for rural development is becoming particularly important, as it requires not only enhanced organizational efforts from the state and regions to ensure the quality of life for rural communities but also significant financial resources. In both countries, rural areas facing economic problems must intensify efforts toward multifunctional development.

Based on a comparative analysis, the following conclusions were formulated:

- The territorial division in Ukraine and Poland is very different, although after the completion of the administrative-territorial reform, it will be similar.
- The urban population in Ukraine is significantly larger than the rural population, which in 2022 accounted for only 30% of the total population. A similar situation occurred in Poland, where the rural population accounted for 39.8%.
- In both countries, the standard of living in rural areas is significantly lower than in cities (e.g., in terms of access to technical infrastructure and the level of housing equipment, as shown in Table 3).

Table 3 Furnishings of residential premises depending on the type of surface in Poland and Ukraine

Ukraine								
Years	2020		2021		2022		Dynamics of changes 2020-2022	
Area	Urban	rural	urban	Rural	urban	rural	urban	rural
Water supply	95,6	64,9	95,6	66,1	96,8	67,8	1,2	2,9
Sewage	95,3	64,2	95,2	65,3	96,6	67,0	1,3	2,8
Heating	93,9	61,9	92,3	60,3	94,7	61,5	0,8	-0,4
Gas supply	88,1	64,6	88,6	62,2	87,2	64,1	-0,9	-0,5
Hot water	64,4	27,9	63,4	27,9	66,9	30,6	2,5	2,7

Poland								
Area	Urban	rural	urban	Rural	urban	rural	urban	rural
Water supply	99,1	92,5	99,1	92,5	99,1	92,6	-	WEEREV 01/15 2025
Toilet	97,4	87,0	97,4	87,1	97,5	87,2	0,1	0,2
Bathroom	95,7	83,5	96,7	83,7	95,7	83,8	-	0,3
Gas from the	72,3	26,0	72,8	27,0	73,0	28,1	0,7	2,1

Source: own elaboration based on State Statistics Service of Ukraine, 2023 and BDL GUS, 2023

A possible starting point for the development of rural areas in Ukraine should be the development of standards and classification levels for villages, along with the creation of financial regulations in accordance with them. Importantly, drawing on the theoretical and empirical experiences of EU countries, particularly the export practices from former Eastern Bloc countries, would bring Ukraine's national rural development policy closer to European norms and requirements, aligning with the strategic goal of Ukraine's economic policy.

For the Polish part of the study, municipalities affiliated with the Local Action Group 'Owocowy szlak' (Fruit Trail) were selected. Generally, these are rural territorial units typical of the Lublin Province. Only Józefów nad Wisłą, Poniatowa and Opole Lubelskie are urban-rural municipalities (Table).

Table. Selected data and indicators for the analysed municipalities of the LAG 'Owocowy Szlak' (Fruit Trail).

	Chodel	Józefów nad Wisłą	Karczmiska	Łaziska	Opole Lubelskie	Poniatowa	Wilków
Area [km2]	108	142	95	109	194	85	78
Number of localities	26	37	22	25	47	18	26
Ludność [person]	6252	5974	5233	4499	16058	12967	4095
Population [person/km2]	58	42	55	41	83	153	53
Birth rate	-34	-54	-45	-36	-104	-71	-28
Total migration balance [person]	-17	-11	-30	-14	-61	-91	-8
Non-working age population per 100 persons of working age [person]	66,5	74,6	71,0	72,7	71,0	81,0	70,0
Average farm size* [ha]	6,7	7,41	5,75	5,79	5,62	6,63	5,74
Forms of nature conservation** [%]	30,2	56,3	40,4	63,6	40,6	13,5	63,2
Population using the water supply network [%]	87,8	87,0	78,0	99,2	92,5	88,8	98,9
Population connected to the sewerage system [%]	18,0	11,1	25,0	0,0	42,3	66,8	0,1
Population connected to the gas network [%]	38,4	23,8	57,4	0,6	54,0	90,0	0,3
Total municipal revenue per capita [zł]	8078,73	6898,20	8174,68	6166,12	6774,50	7187,15	8705,83

Total expenditure of municipal budgets per capita [zł]	7354,73	7094,46	8973,45	6498,17	6940,65	7171,29	8891,23
Own revenue in total municipal revenue [%]	23,6	20,8	20,8	28,3	33,1	35,4	20,3
Capital expenditure in the municipal budget [%]	19,9	21,0	33,5	24,0	13,7	25,6	34,8
Municipal budget expenditure on municipal services and environmental protection [%]	8,8	8,2	4,2	6,0	8,2	4,6	6,8
National economy entities in the REGON register per 10,000 people of working age	1470,0	1265,7	1212,0	1224,6	1725,9	1697,1	1328,4
Flats completed per 10,000 inhabitants	32,0	28,4	22,7	13,2	36,0	14,6	
Share of registered unemployed persons in the working-age population [%]	5,4	6,4	6,1	4,7	5,9	6,9	4,7
Tourist accommodation facilities	0	2	4	0	2	4	0
Cycle paths [km]	1,8	0	0	0,6	10,1	4,7	0

Source: own study based on the Local Data Bank of the Central Statistical Office (GUS) 2024; *data from the 2020 General Agricultural Census

The budgets of the analysed municipalities vary. Own revenues are usually at the level of 20-30% (table). Investment expenditures, which are important from the point of view of the development of the municipality and the quality of life of its residents, reach similar values. In the years 2020-2024 (table), municipal budget revenues are generally increasing, while expenditures are more varied, which is directly related to investment activities. Part of these expenditures are for municipal services and environmental protection, which are largely financed and co-financed by EU funds.

Table. Selected elements of the budget municipalities of the LAG 'Owocowy Szlak' (Fruit Trail)

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Chodel					
Total revenue	37 612 218,65	42 364 877,50	47 001 727,64	48 276 181,41	50 524 376,40
Own revenue	9 329 951,89	7 311 750,76	12 559 297,22	10 592 113,83	11 900 497,63
Total expenditure	34 006 776,08	42 204 667,94	43 393 459,82	56 127 679,06	45 996 507,97
Capital expenditure	4 072 620,49	10 980 836,01	7 009 876,80	23 002 227,69	9 137 494,23
Municipal services and environmental protection expenditure	3 687 624,24	7 329 446,49	3 626 501,10	12 380 210,50	4 036 086,33

STRENGTHENING THE DEVELOPMENT POTENTIAL OF RURAL AREAS

Funds for financing and co-financing EU programmes and projects	1 828 209,73	2 967 239,45	3 068 072,80	5 100 028,39	4 875 165,58
EU funds for financing and co-financing EU programmes and projects	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00
Józefów nad Wisłą					
Total revenue	31 706 506,01	38 973 291,97	40 982 349,04	33 085 999,24	41 334 024,93
Own revenue	6 177 117,24	7 461 281,89	9 817 768,78	7 437 064,74	8 609 929,73
Total expenditure	34 679 012,23	33 970 047,57	38 452 522,16	34 214 660,72	42 510 004,24
Capital expenditure	6 716 809,41	5 356 338,56	5 025 955,21	5 839 626,20	8 945 085,05
Municipal services and environmental protection expenditure	7 806 660,97	4 353 789,30	1 647 791,78	4 056 834,25	3 462 001,45
Funds for financing and co-financing EU programmes and projects	660 658,23	2 082 537,39	2 589 101,92	2 079 845,64	322 150,41
EU funds for financing and co-financing EU programmes and projects	20 323,39	56 285,41	211 011,29	173 478,66	64 001,55
Karczmiska					
Total revenue	27 636 962,70	30 341 354,30	38 458 705,05	28 660 685,31	43 162 287,82
Own revenue	7 926 797,49	6 857 547,39	11 095 667,76	8 809 618,37	8 960 699,83
Total expenditure	25 219 625,32	30 269 251,84	36 764 026,43	35 592 209,51	47 379 790,02
Capital expenditure	2 057 241,49	5 099 065,06	4 452 490,98	7 883 227,52	15 879 834,43
Municipal services and environmental protection expenditure	1 270 472,33	5 059 872,96	1 357 940,20	1 705 244,68	1 984 204,72
Funds for financing and co-financing EU programmes and projects	788 140,54	1 506,24	2 671 009,88	75 526,17	1 922 334,48
EU funds for financing and co-financing EU programmes and projects	162 945,66	1 506,24	28 635,37	75 526,17	26 428,08
Łaziska					
Total revenue	24 099 558,67	25 791 936,23	31 165 646,55	24 968 030,06	27 944 873,14
Own revenue	6 009 697,68	5 639 479,59	9 061 402,35	7 462 521,17	7 896 460,84
Total expenditure	22 872 576,48	21 556 485,50	29 292 258,71	24 175 438,98	29 449 720,09
Capital expenditure	3 471 588,50	1 446 175,45	5 457 886,99	4 688 142,04	7 058 277,62
Municipal services and environmental protection expenditure	1 063 649,41	1 169 289,18	1 232 119,09	1 432 951,49	1 761 593,45
Funds for financing and co-financing EU programmes and projects	2 048 080,87	136 217,00	223 251,60	0,00	340 646,49

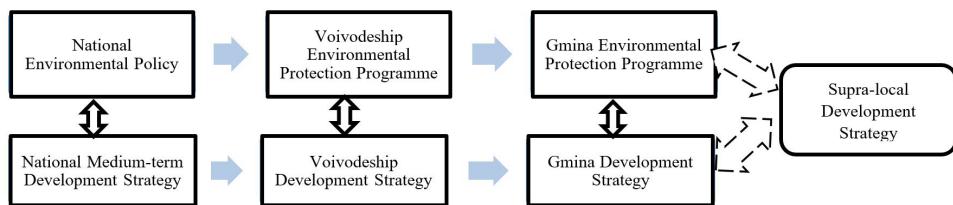
EU funds for financing and co-financing EU programmes and projects	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00
Opole Lubelskie					
Total revenue	105 313 591,26	101 448 920,29	98 279 616,87	96 769 813,38	109 015 182,60
Own revenue	37 757 132,48	29 628 720,79	30 377 214,96	29 710 415,72	36 039 707,70
Total expenditure	103 508 820,29	102 231 845,59	105 147 045,51	98 163 108,10	111 688 992,10
Capital expenditure	27 145 395,30	21 899 802,07	13 058 739,86	17 773 285,71	13 377 628,13
Municipal services and environmental protection expenditure	6 928 661,76	4 920 683,14	4 303 576,42	5 513 007,80	4 916 417,37
Funds for financing and co-financing EU programmes and projects	10 620 134,71	5 232 935,14	4 040 284,30	559 985,67	554 727,53
EU funds for financing and co-financing EU programmes and projects	38 907,72	0,00	27 576,51	254 048,33	9 859,70
Poniatowa					
Total revenue	72 834 461,69	74 307 786,16	74 042 378,75	78 673 882,57	93 706 048,44
Own revenue	28 185 810,29	24 409 520,79	30 317 545,32	30 353 806,68	33 135 652,61
Total expenditure	68 785 296,75	79 061 009,00	82 735 580,22	88 753 777,55	93 499 319,75
Capital expenditure	9 749 597,55	17 704 681,64	18 319 281,89	26 250 844,33	23 896 566,48
Municipal services and environmental protection expenditure	6 412 643,84	13 671 340,53	5 404 697,21	5 020 614,56	4 443 954,18
Funds for financing and co-financing EU programmes and projects	4 711 189,46	6 596 851,67	2 449 877,47	394 854,97	901 776,27
EU funds for financing and co-financing EU programmes and projects	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00
Wilków					
Total revenue	26 333 452,94	27 461 673,35	31 089 473,58	23 148 844,86	36 120 499,22
Own revenue	6 913 361,57	5 439 872,19	8 851 229,26	6 270 363,31	7 323 186,23
Total expenditure	26 344 730,57	23 096 944,76	30 720 319,74	22 081 840,66	36 889 713,92
Capital expenditure	6 543 748,07	1 907 416,21	6 293 076,88	1 043 028,64	12 828 830,46
Municipal services and environmental protection expenditure	1 082 853,85	875 557,08	3 537 069,54	1 063 110,18	2 523 575,79
Funds for financing and co-financing EU programmes and projects	2 405 343,90	799 169,30	2 132 457,06	607 941,98	219 169,30

EU funds for financing and co-financing EU programmes and projects	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00
--	------	------	------	------	------

Source: own study based on the Local Data Bank of the Central Statistical Office (GUS)

As research has shown, the creation of effective territorial partnerships is an institutionally effective tool, as it allows for the comprehensive use of all available resources and their rational utilization. The establishment of Local Action Groups (LAGs) integrates production, infrastructure, and other components of the rural development process in rural areas, while minimizing risk and enhancing the investment attractiveness and competitiveness of participants. LAGs implement projects that improve living conditions. These include investments related to the protection of the natural environment, increasing the accessibility of public spaces, and stimulating local community economic activity. Various types of training are conducted to improve professional skills and competencies of the residents. Projects are also implemented to raise awareness about local natural and cultural heritage, as well as to preserve traditions and customs (Fig.1).

Fig. 1. Proposed planning system in Poland using LAGs as an additional instrument.



Source: Kostetska I., Baran-Złobicka B. (2024)

The development of rural areas will contribute to increasing the competitiveness of the country and region and may become one of the key features of a modern, innovative rural development model. This is demonstrated by the successful experiences of European countries, particularly Poland, where creating conditions for shaping a competitive economy is based on developing and implementing cluster models. Analysis of foreign experiences reveals that the creation of LAGs and their successful activities are considered a key factor in the structural restructuring of rural development, aimed at enhancing the competitiveness of territorial units, regions, industries, and the national economy, as well as promoting sustainable and effective rural development. Local Action Groups serve as a valuable source of information for Ukraine, showing the effectiveness of an integrated approach to rural development. Successful examples of implementing the LEADER model in EU countries, particularly in Poland, can be adapted to Ukrainian conditions, taking

into account the similarities in challenges and opportunities. The creation of LAGs contributes to the activation of communities, securing funding, developing infrastructure, and strengthening cooperation between sectors. In this way, adapting foreign practices can become a driving force for the sustainable development of rural communities in Ukraine, ensuring the growth of their economic, social, and environmental potential.

The proposed recommendations for the establishment of a LAG in the three surveyed clusters in Ukraine aim to introduce sustainable development in rural areas, promote the activation of the entrepreneurial potential of the cluster's residents, create jobs, increase own income to the budget and preserve the local culture and way of life.

Within the framework of this scientific study, we conduct an independent evaluation of the implementation of the development strategies of the Local Action Group (LAG) "*Fruit Trail*" in Opole County, Lublin Voivodeship, which is not regulated by Polish legislation. To ensure scientific novelty, we propose an original methodology for conducting the evaluation, taking into account the limitations and challenges encountered. The analysis is based on the first four previously mentioned points (main objective, social capital, entrepreneurship development, and the building of local cultural heritage potential). It is expected that our assessment will also provide an answer to the last point concerning the adequate use of development potential. With regard to the penultimate point concerning the system of indicators, it should be noted that most Polish (as well as Ukrainian) communes or associations specify certain indicators in their strategies that may serve to assess the implementation of their strategic objectives. However, the problem lies in the fact that they usually do not define concrete numerical targets, which complicates the evaluation process, since a mere increase in the value of an indicator does not necessarily imply a sufficient level of development or achievement of the intended goal. For this reason, the proposed methodology involves comparing the selected indicators with the average voivodeship level (per capita), as well as evaluating the dynamics of the alignment of particular indicators of the "*Fruit Trail*" LAG strategy implementation with this level (or even its surpassing). Furthermore, many of the indicators specified in the strategies are either unavailable or not collected, not only by state statistical authorities but often also by local communes or associations themselves. Therefore, in conducting our assessment, we rely exclusively on the data available in the Local Data Bank of the Central Statistical Office of the Republic of Poland at the level of individual communes.

To evaluate the activities of the Polish commune association LAG "*Fruit Trail*", we first analyzed the objectives of two strategies (the initial and the current one) developed after its establishment. The first strategy for the years 2009–2015 [6] outlined two general objectives:

Diversification of economic activity within the LAG “*Fruit Trail*” territory and improvement of agricultural functioning;

Preservation of cultural heritage and activation of local residents.

The current strategy for the years 2016–2022 defines four general objectives:

A competitive and innovative space for fisheries and aquaculture;

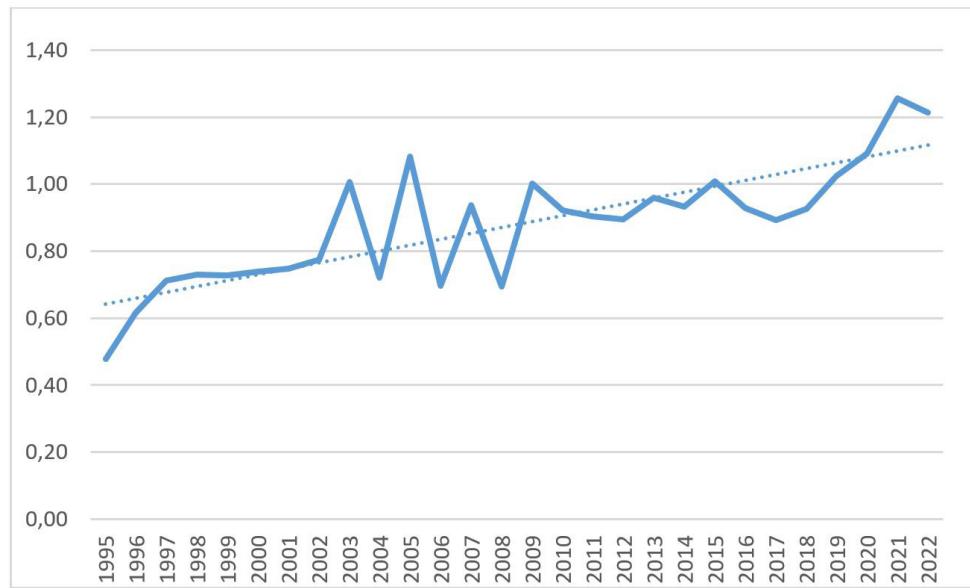
A tourist-attractive area with developed specialized and innovative services making use of heritage, local resources, the environment, and social capital;

An economically competitive area with entrepreneurial residents who are aware of the advantages of their environment;

Active and conscious residents who care for the culture, heritage, and environment of their community.

For the evaluation of the implementation of the 2009–2015 LAG “*Fruit Trail*” local strategy, average values of each index were also calculated for the period 1995–2008 and compared with the average values for the period 2009–2015. This made it possible to determine the indicators in which the LAG achieved progress relative to the regional average level, and those in which it did not. By computing the averages of the mean index values for these two periods, we were able to assess the overall progress in the strategy’s implementation by the association.

Fig. 2. Dynamics of average annual indices comparing the indicators of the "Fruit Trail" LAG strategy implementation with the voivodeship average level (per capita)



Source: Author's own elaboration

According to the analysis of Figure 2, prior to the unification of seven communes into the "Fruit Trail" LAG, the dynamics of their indicators (indices comparing them with the regional average level) were highly volatile. This was partly due to the fact that some indicators, up until 2011, were calculated only every two years. Nevertheless, in 2008 the value of the average annual comparison index with the voivodeship average level did not exceed 70%. By 2015, the final year of the previous "Fruit Trail" LAG strategy, the average annual index had already reached 101%, meaning that the per capita indicators of strategy implementation within the association exceeded the voivodeship average by 1%. By 2022, the LAG even managed to surpass the regional per capita average by 21%, which demonstrates the effective implementation of the new strategy.

In general, we decided to evaluate the communes of Lublin Voivodeship that are part of the "Fruit Trail" LAG. The research was not based on the indicators used by the association itself for internal monitoring of strategy implementation. Instead, we selected indicators available from open sources that could in one way or another reflect the degree of achievement of particular strategic objectives set by the association.

The use of per capita indicators neutralizes the differences between more and less densely populated localities, while the use of comparison indices with the Lublin Voivodeship average enables us to verify that increases or decreases in indica-

tors are not merely the result of evolutionary or regional trends. Rather, this approach allows for an objective evaluation of the progress made by the communes belonging to the "Fruit Trail" LAG in comparison with neighboring communes of Lublin Voivodeship.

Overall, the proposed methodology for assessing the association of Polish communes makes it possible to evaluate the benefits for individual communes arising from their membership in a Local Action Group. Therefore, the experience of the Lublin Voivodeship communes—located in Poland's border region with Ukraine—may be of particular relevance for Ukrainian territorial communities. These communities may also form territorial partnerships in order to achieve progress in implementing common objectives, while at the same time retaining the autonomy that was the primary rationale for the reform of local self-government in Ukraine.

References

Chmielewska, B., & Zegar, J.S. (2018). Podstawowe determinanty jakości życia mieszkańców wsi i miast po akcesji Polski do Unii Europejskiej. **Studia Obszarów Wiejskich**, 52, 23-38.

Korinets, R. (2023). **Rural development. A guide for specialists in agrarian and rural development of territorial communities**. Kyiv.

Kostetska, I., & Baran-Zgłobicka, B. (2024). Environmental policy in rural development management involving territorial partnerships. **Acta Scientiarum Polonorum Administratio Locorum**, 23(2), 227–241.

Lengerer, F., Haartsen, T., & Steinführer, A. (2023). Exploring Justice in the Process of Redesigning Local Development Strategies for LEADER: Representation, Distribution, and Recognition. **World**, 4, 56–79. <https://doi.org/10.3390/world4010005>

Musiał-Malago', M., & Marcisz, J. (2019). Lokalne grupy działania i ich działalność na obszarach wiejskich na przykładzie województwa małopolskiego. **Studia Ekonomiczne**, 1(3), 158–171.

Ray, C. (2000). The EU LEADER programme: Rural development laboratory. **Sociologia Ruralis**, 40(2), 163–171. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9523.00138>

Stanny, M., Rosner, A., & Komorowski, Ł. (2023). Monitoring rozwoju obszarów wiejskich. Etap IV. Dekada przemian społeczno-gospodarczych. Fundacja Europejski Fundusz Rozwoju Wsi Polskiej, Instytut Rozwoju Wsi i Rolnictwa PAN, Warszawa.

Synowiec, A. (2018). Perspektywy i zagrożenia dla zrównoważonego rozwoju obszarów wiejskich na Ukrainie w świetle badań terenowych w obwodzie chmielnickim. **Scientific Papers of the Silesian University of Technology Organisation and Management**, 129, 581.

Yermakov, O., & Kostetska, I. (2022). Kierunki rozwoju obszarów wiejskich w Ukrainie i w Polsce. **Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Sklodowska, sectio B Geographia, Geologia, Mineralogia et Petrographia**, 77, 91–110.

Zolotnytska, Y., & Kowalczyk, S. (2024). Zrównoważony rozwój rolnictwa i obszarów wiejskich (na przykładzie Polski i Ukrainy). *Studia I Prace Kolegium Zarządzania I Finansów*, (196), 123–135. <https://doi.org/10.33119/SIP.2024.196.9>

Baran-Zgłobicka, B. (2017). *Środowisko przyrodnicze w zarządzaniu przestrzenią i rozwojem lokalnym na obszarach wiejskich*, Lublin, Wydawnictwo UMCS.

Czapiewska, G. (2012). Lokalne Grupy Działania a kreowanie rozwoju regionalnego w województwach pomorskim i zachodniopomorskim, *Nierówności społeczne a wzrost gospodarczy* 29: 401–413.

Davydenko, N., Wasilewska N., Boiko S., Wasilewski M. (2022). Development of Rural Areas in Ukraine in the Context of Decentralization: An Empirical Study. *Sustainability* 14, 6730. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14116730>

Furmankiewicz, M., Janc, K. (2011). Partnerstwa terytorialne jako nowy model zarządzania rozwojem lokalnym – różnice regionalne i wpływ na aktywność mieszkańców, *Studia KPZK PAN* 140: 231-245.

Guzał-Dec, D. (2014). Partnerstwa międzysektorowe jako instrument wykorzystania zasobów lokalnych w procesie zrównoważonego rozwoju obszarów przyrodniczo cennych województwa lubelskiego, *Roczniki Naukowe SERiA* 16(4): 109-114.

Hadyński, J., Borucka K. (2015). Aktywizacja obszarów wiejskich Unii Europejskiej w kontekście programu LEADER w Wielkopolsce, *Journal of Agribusiness and Rural Development* 1(35): 49-56. DOI: 10.17306/JARD.2015.5.

Koliński, K., Kołodziejczak, A. (2021). Strategie lokalnych grup działania jako podstawa tworzenia przyszłych strategii rozwoju ponadlokalnego gmin, *Rozwój Regionalny i Polityka Regionalna* 55: 91-110. <https://doi.org/10.14746/rrpr.2021.55.07>

Kołodziejczak, A. (2011). Lokalne Grupy Działania jako czynnik rozwoju wiejskich obszarów peryferyjnych w województwach lubelskim i podlaskim, *Studia Obszarów Wiejskich* 28: 127–139.

Kostetska, I. (2021). Perspektywy decentralizacji na Ukrainie: doświadczenia Polski, *WSCHÓD EUROPY* 7, 1: 47-61. DOI:10.17951/we.2021.7.1.47-61

Markowski T., 2008, Teoretyczne podstawy rozwoju lokalnego i regionalnego. [w:] Strzelecki Z. (red.), Gospodarka regionalna i lokalna. Wyd. Nauk. PWN, Warszawa: 13-28. Markowski T., 2008, Teoretyczne podstawy rozwoju lokalnego i regionalnego. [w:] Strzelecki Z. (red.), Gospodarka regionalna i lokalna. Wyd. Nauk. PWN, Warszawa: 13-28.

Pałka, E. (2014). Wpływ środków unijnych na pobudzenie inicjatyw społeczności wiejskich obszarów opóźnionych w rozwoju: przykład województwa świętokrzyskiego, *Infrastruktura i Ekologia Terenów Wiejskich* II/1, 355-367. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14597/infraeco.2014.2.1.026>

Pawłowska A., Gąsior-Niemiec A., Kołomycew A. (2014). Partnerstwa międzysektorowe na obszarach wiejskich. Studium przypadku lokalnych grup działania w województwie podkarpackim, Warszawa, Wyd. Nauk. Scholar.

Parysek J. J., 2001, Podstawy gospodarki lokalnej. Wyd. Nauk. UAM, Poznań.

Wiatrak, A. (2011). Strategie rozwoju gmin wiejskich, Warszawa, IRWiR PAN.

Zajda, K., Sykała Ł., Janas K., Dej, M. (2016). Metody i instrumenty rozwoju lokalnego LEADER, RLKS innowacje społeczne. Łódź, Wydawnictwo UŁ.

Ziółkowski M., 2005, Zarządzanie strategiczne w polskim samorządzie terytorialnym. [w:] A. Zalewski (red.), Nowe zarządzanie publiczne w polskim samorządzie terytorialnym. Oficyna Wyd. SGH, Warszawa: 75-134