Non-governmental organizations (NGO) in Poland started growing dynamically after 1989, though some of them existed much earlier (such as the Polish Red Cross). NGOs reflect the existence of civil society and people’s belief in their ability to co-create social reality. The NGO category (referred to as creators of the so-called ‘3rd sector’ of economy) usually includes associations and foundations, but it may also encompass a variety of relations or e.g., social cooperatives. The activities of Polish NGOs are regulated by a few legal acts, mainly 1) The Association Act, which states that an association is voluntary, autonomous and lasting organization operating on a non-profit basis whose activities mostly include civil, non-profit work of their members; 2) The Foundation Act, which regulates the establishment and operations of foundations; they may be founded by either a natural or a legal person; 3) The common Good and Voluntary Work Act, which states that an NGO cannot be an enterprise operating in a public finance domain for profit.

When listing the basic characteristics of NGOs, it must be remembered that:

1. It cannot be founded by a governmental entity (it can be established by a natural person or market entities).
2. It focuses on non-profit goals (although it may run business activity).
3. It is, as a rule, financed from non-public funds.

Polish NGOs usually focus their activities on sport and recreation (38 %), education and up-bringing (12.8 %), culture and art (12.7 %) and social help and care (11.2 %); generally speaking, they operate in the services sphere. Vast majority of organizations face a few problems: lack of funds to support their activity (the average budget of an NGO is approx. 4 861 € (20 000 PLN; 1 PLN = 0.243 €) and 11 – 12 % of NGOs operate without any resources); insufficient activity of their members or shortage of volunteers; and excessive bureaucracy. Nonetheless – as already stated – the number of NGOs is growing each year. Their professionalism increases as well, which is visible in the cooperation between them and local authorities: in 2003, 68 % of communes co-financed NGOs; in 2009 – it came up to 86 %.

Key words: activity barriers, associations, bureaucracy, European funds, Leader Plus, local action group
The number of NGOs registered in the last 20 years has been increasing. It is estimated that at the end of 2010 there were approx. 98000 NGOs in Poland (incl. 71000 associations, 15000 voluntary fire brigade units and 12000 foundations (Figure 1).

![Graph showing the number of NGOs in Poland from 2004 to 2010.](image)

**Figure 1** Number of NGOs in Poland in 2004 – 2010
Source: author’s own study, based on [http://civicipedia.ngo.pl/x/32/345](http://civicipedia.ngo.pl/x/32/345) (2012-02-10)

**Obrázek 1** Počet mimovládních organizací v období 2004 – 2010

(1) počet organizací

General perception of NGOs’ activity in Poland is positive. Gradually, Poles tend to believe that together (e.g. as an association) they can solve problems of small communities; few people, however, actively participate in such operations. E.g. in 2002, 11.1% of adult Poles did voluntary work; in 2006 – 23%, but in 2010 – 20%.

There are 56800 rural communities in Poland and approx. 38% of the society lives in the countryside. As much as 19% of all NGOs have their offices in rural areas. Their activities mostly focus on helping local communities and stimulating them into action. To do this, they revive local tourism, promote sport or organize leisure time for senior citizens. Some of the NGOs focus on protection of local cultural heritage, ecology and animals; others organize help for disadvantaged families and provide support and equal opportunities for gifted youth.

The aim of this article is to present operations of one particular organization which operates in a rural area. Local Action Group WIR operates successfully for the benefit of the local community, actively supports local business operations, and protects the environment and cultural heritage.

The thesis proposed in this article states that the success of a rural NGO is conditioned by members’ commitment, participation of the whole rural community, as well as by local authorities’ ability to manage the support programs.

The figures presented in this article come from WIR Association’s reports, interviews with its leaders, Klion/Jawor Association’s reports (an association that monitors the development of the 3rd sector in Poland) as well as statistical data by GUS (The Polish Central Statistical Office).

**Wir association – its beginning and outline of its activity**

Rural Development Initiative (WIR) Association – Local Action Group was established in March 2006 on the initiative of NGOs, farmers, entrepreneurs and representatives of a few communes. It is a non-profit, voluntary, autonomous association of natural and legal persons (including local authorities and businesses). The main goals for establishing the NGO were:

1. Designing and implementing a Development Plan for the following communes: Stargard Szczeciński, Chociwel, Marianowo, Suchań, Stara Dąbrówka and Kobylnka (Figure 2).
2. Promoting rural areas.
3. Stimulating rural communities to participate in the development process of rural areas they inhabit.
4. Promoting information about initiatives connected with people’s activity in rural areas.

![Map showing the territorial scope of WIR Associations operation.](image)

**Figure 2** Territorial scope of WIR Associations operation on the map of Poland

**Obrázek 2** Territorialna pôsobnosť operácií WIR asociácie zobrazená na mapu Polska

The Association is led by a 7-person board (2 people from public administration sector, 5 entrepreneurs and NGO representatives). Other bodies within the Association are: a 3-person Revision Committee and a 13-person Council (5 members from the public sector, 4 from the business sector and 4 from the social sector). Board members live in the area included in the Development Plan and are knowledgeable about the development of rural areas.

At present, the Association has 97 members: 63 natural persons (mostly farmers) and 34 legal persons (6 communes, 20 NGOs, 6 entrepreneurs and 2 public libraries). As communes constitute Association members, WIR’s reach is very precise and covers an area of 649 km² (it encompasses 206 settlements inhabited by 32 500 residents). The unemployment rate in the region reaches 20%. These 6 communes are agriculture-oriented, as farmland constitutes 63.2% of their area (woods – 23%, water – 4.6%, wasteland and roads – 9.1%). The communes feature a varied landscape (postglacial with lots of lakes) and resources such as: geothermal springs, clay, peat and gravel deposits extracted on a business scale. However, the tourism infrastructure is underdeveloped: there are only 5 hotels and B&Bs, 3 campsites, 1 resort and 8 agritourism farms.
Local development plan for 2009 – 2015 – objectives and results

The governmental Agency for Restructuring and Modernization of Agriculture is responsible for implementation of agricultural and rural programs. It prepares support plans funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development 2007 – 2013. One of such programs is Leader Plus; voivodeship authorities are responsible for its implementation.

In order to participate in the Leader Program, a Local Action Group must be established. WIR Association is an example of such a group. In 2008 WIR put forward a proposal for 2009 – 2015 that included a Local Development Plan. Project, which requested 1 169 308 €, was submitted to the Marshal’s Office in Szczecin, to Rural Area Development Equalization Department (RADED). The application included 7 main objectives:

1. Creating brands for regional products.
2. Development of lake-centered tourism.
3. Improving technical condition of monuments and manor parks.
4. Promoting and displaying natural and cultural highlights of the region.
5. Building and modernizing sports facilities.
6. Creating a range of leisure activities for residents and tourists.
7. Integrating local community and improving communication.

In their application, the Association indicated that there were informal craft and handicraft groups, therefore there was potential for new local brands. However, in order to promote them, a certification process and display options would be needed (such as a local product gallery). The application also highlighted the fact that though there are 25 lakes and ponds in the area, there was an insufficient tourist base and leisure options, therefore it was advisable to create new agrotourism farms and cycling routes between lakes. There was a number of historical buildings in need of renovation. These included e.g. old monastery compounds, industrial facilities (e.g. distillery) and 18th and 19th-century palaces with parks and cemeteries. All in all, the register listed 48 sacred buildings, 16 palaces and manors, 16 manor parks and 11 other items. If renovated and utilized to play a social and cultural role, they would undoubtedly increase the regions attractiveness. Despite the tourist potential of the region (e.g. well-know kayaking trail on the Ina river), the aforementioned communes had not opened a single Tourist Information Office. The application provided for creating a place to prepare and provide information for tourists, locals and potential investors. Lastly, the application listed renovating, erecting or equipping 12 sports facilities, such as gyms, sports fields or day-care rooms.

When WIR Association received the European funds, it became a grant-giver, as 78 % of their subsidy (which amounted to 280 443 €) was intended for redistribution to local institutions and organizations which would submit applications for specified objectives. As much as 22 % of the sum was allotted to covering Association’s office overheads (the office handled application submission and evaluation process). Applicants needed to prove that they have 50 – 70 % of their own contribution (which was later on changed to the disadvantage of the applicants); therefore the sum of implemented projects could have reached even 2 307 230 €. In 2009 the Association’s office received 11 applications for local strategic activities and 6 of them resulted in signing agreements for a total of 43 642 €. The Association has also spent 16 388 € on their overheads, which totals 60 030 €. In 2010 as many as

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Objectives set out in the Local Development Plan and their implementation – as of 31 Dec 2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Objective (1)</td>
<td>Planned until 2015 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Creating local branded products (3)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Creating a gallery to promote local artists (4)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Organizing trainings in production and marketing (5)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. New agrotourism farms (6)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Creating new cycling route (7)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Generating new workplaces in the tourist services sector (8)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Creating Tourism Information Offices (9)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Renovating historical buildings (10)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Organizing events to promote monuments (11)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Publishing promotional materials (12)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Designing local souvenirs (13)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Association’s participation in promotional events (14)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Erecting, modernizing or equipping sports and culture facilities (15)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Organizing sports, culture and education events (16)</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Opening an Internet cafe (17)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Organizing courses, trainings and study visits (18)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s own processing, based on WIR Association’s data.
41 applications were submitted (they totaled 184,602 €). None of the agreements were signed, therefore applicant received no funding. Out of 32,123 € for Association’s operations, only 9,120 € was transferred (there was over 23,900 € missing). Table 1 presents the project objectives from a quantitative perspective, as well as their implementation at the halfway point of the program, and the mechanism of transferring funds is displayed in Figure 3.

**Figure 3** The mechanism of transferring funds in the Leader program

**Obrázok 3** Mechanizmus transferu peňažných prostriedkov v programe Leader

As presented in Figure 3, WIR Association—upon signing an agreement with RADED for Leader program participation—receives subsidy tranches (1); then it opens a contest for potential beneficiaries (B1, B2 etc.) who can put forward projects in accordance with the Local Development Plan. Obviously, if a group of activists want to receive the funds for their idea, they must formally set up an association or other legal entity, and then submit their project. If it receives a positive opinion, WIR Association transfers the funds for its realization. Later on, all funds must be accounted for (3). Subsequently, all relevant information and reports are submitted to RADED, which assesses and accounts for all the expenses; then RADED transfers the last subsidy tranches.

As planned, in 2011 four contests were held, which resulted in 16 submissions. The agreements, however, were not signed, because RADED was behind on payments not only for 2011, but also for 2010. Therefore WIR Association could not fully implement its Local Development Plan, as the institution that authorized the implementation of projects and transferred the funds worked inefficiently.

**Discussion**

The presented case study of an organization which combines the public, private, and non-governmental sectors is a living proof that inhabitants of rural areas are inventive, want to act and develop. They, however, tend to make their future plans conditional on public funding, which (1) contradicts the notion of non-governmental activity (separated from the government); (2) limits organizations’ creativity in raising funds to just one source of subsidies. The WIR Association’s operations show that such dependency can lead to difficulties. To prevent it, organizations should depend not only on the European Union or governmental programs, but also intensify fund-raising activity and enlist business partners who might be interested in participating in their projects, even if rural areas do not abound with such socially-aware entrepreneurs, who might support beneficial initiatives. As a result, organizations are practically forced to depend on the EU and governmental programs despite the fact that dilatory officials may — as already mentioned — hinder realization of the agreed actions. It may be illustrated by the presented Local Development Plan supervised by RADED (Marshál’s Office in Szczecin). Paradoxically, RADED boasts that in 2011, as many as 183 agreements for rural project were signed in West-Pomeranian voivodeship; on average, it gives 3.5 agreements per an employee (in February 2012 RADED employed 52 persons). It seems justified to ask why — in spite of such numerous staff — RADED has a 1.5-year delay in project accounting and transferring current funds in accordance with agreements. Large delays in payments mean that organizations such as WIR Association must apply for bank loans in order to implement projects they signed for. Uncertainty connected with the funds transfer makes potential applicants (usually NGOs) withdraw their submissions because they need to wait for signing the agreement too long, and then must wait again for re-imbursement of their expenses. It also discourages other potential applicants, which is best reflected by the number of applications submitted to a contest organized by WIR Association (Figure 4).

**Figure 4** Number of submitted applications and signed agreements in 2009–2011

Source: author’s own processing, based on WIR Association’s data.

Problems with the institutions responsible for implementation are not the only challenge; organizations must also face complicated and changeable regulations. As already mentioned, in the middle of the Leader Program, The Ministry of Agriculture decided to change the method of refunding the costs: project executors had to spend the whole sum on their activities, and only then (following a positive assessment of clerks) the funds were reimbursed. There was no chance, then, for a partial co-funding while the project was in progress. The Ministry forgot that rural NGOs had very limited budgets and could not implement even simple and relatively cheap projects on their own. By making that decision, the Ministry forced many organizations to abandon their attempts.

Despite all the difficulties, WIR Association gradually achieves the planned objectives, mostly thanks to preferential bank loans. From the mathematical viewpoint, out of 92 planned actions, 47 (a half) has been implemented. That should be viewed as a huge success. Partially it is also a success of the Leader Program, which stimulated people to
come up with projects, increased their knowledge about NGOs and Local Action Groups, and proved that development opportunities are within their reach. It must be added, however, that all credit for the current implementation level of the program goes to Association leaders, who battle lack of funds and inactivity of rural communities.

Engaging rural inhabitants, who still know little about NGOs and do not want to participate in their activities, is an extremely challenging task. It means that the future of organizations lies in the hands of their leaders and depends on their perseverance and willingness to do something for the common good; and that requires their free time, competences and funds. It seems that accomplishing goals of a non-commercial organization that operates in rural areas is much more difficult than completing objectives of a business entity, mostly due to a dynamic and complex environment, dependency on administrative procedures and officials’ decisions, aversion to bureaucracy, as well as no sense of social responsibility in people.

Each organization that comes into existence and starts operating is noteworthy. Rural NGOs are especially desired as they provide development opportunities that their local communities who – contrary to city-dwellers – would otherwise be deprived of (Sztandar-Sztanderska, 2009). Programs like The European Agricultural Fund or Leader program were created with that exact goal in mind. Associations such as Local Action Groups serve the same purpose. Regrettfully, there are many barriers that separate these two spheres. When the Leader Program was being implemented, it was emphasized that entities such as Local Action Groups cannot lose sight of their goals, i.e. stimulating the internal growth potential of a given area (Halasiewicz, 2008). The inner potential of rural areas does exist; what seem to be lacking, though, are friendly and efficient implementation institutions to help with the programs. The abovementioned digressions can be summarized as follows: the European Union programs in recent years have focused on two directions- spreading democracy within societies and building prosperity (Ramos and Delgado, 2009). It seems that most often these are only empty declarations because offices that handle funds and implement programs are ineffective or at least not as effective as they should be.

Conclusion

WIR Association has designed a Local Development Plan for its communes and received funds from Leader Plus Program. The Association’s activities have focused on exploiting the potential of human, natural and cultural resources. The main beneficiaries are going to be local communities because it is their ideas that are being implemented. It turns out that a well-written action plan and good organization are not sufficient to act effectively. Activists’ enthusiasm falters in the face of tardy bureaucracy in institutions that implement programs. In case of the Leader Plus Program, the delays reached 1.5 years, which discouraged potential applicants. If rural communities are to develop, there must occur an increase in professionalism and responsibility of the aforementioned institutions, as well as further attempts to engage members of local communities.

Mimovládné organizácie obývajú mesta. Táto tendencia vyplýva zo skutočnosti, že čím väčšia je populácia, tým ľahšie je pre organizácie získat členov. Taktiež je táto skutočnosť ovplyvnená akumuláciou sociálnych problémov v mestských oblastiach, na ktorých rešení sa môžu podieľať práve tieto organizácie. To však neznamená, že videlecké oblasti nemajú obyvateľov, ktorí sa usilujú o verejné dobro. Tento článok popisuje polské mimoměstské organizácie a prezentuje jedno z iniciatív s názvom WIR Association – WIR asociácia (wr = whirl), ktorá spoluz dieli mestnu správu, mimovládné organizácie a podnikateľov.

Klúčové slová: bariéry aktivity, asociácie, byrokracia, európske fondy, Leader Plus, miestna akčná skupina

References


PRZEWLOCKA, J., 2010, Polscie Organizacje Pozarządowe [onli-

RAMOS, E. – del MAR DELGADO, M. 2009. European Rural Deve-


Sztandar-Sztanderska, K., 2009, Activation of the unemplo-
yed in Poland: from policy design to policy implementation. In: International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy, vol. 29, 2009, no. 11/12, p. 624 – 636. ISSN 0144-333X.

