



European Rural Parliament 2015

National report from Poland

prepared by
Polish Rural Forum

Introduction

The Polish Rural Forum is the national platform of cooperation of rural NGOs. It was established in 2002, first as an informal network, and later registered as a legal entity in 2005. It has the legal form of a “union of associations”, whose members are organizations dealing with rural development.

Membership. The Forum has more than 80 members, including nearly all the national-level organizations involved with rural development (such as e.g. the Rural Development Foundation, Foundation for the Development of Polish Agriculture and the Institute for Sustainable Development), “umbrella” organizations (e.g. the National Union of Village Leaders which represents over 40 000 of village leaders, or Forum for Educational Initiatives representing several hundreds of small community schools) as well as many local and regional NGOs and over 30 Local Action Groups implementing the Leader programme. The Forum’s charter ensures that small local organizations are not dominated by the big national-level players.

Activities. The activities of the Polish Rural Forum (PRF) include :

- participating in policy dialogue and strengthening the voice of rural actors, for instance through PRF’s representatives in the Monitoring Committee of the Rural Development Programme, organising policy debates and providing information to rural communities about the current challenges related to rural policy at national and EU level;
- facilitating exchange between rural actors in Poland and **rural NGOs in other countries** through participation in transnational projects and activities, in particular within the framework of PREPARE Partnership for Rural Europe;
- education and training for local communities and rural NGOs, for instance through the organisation of seminars and conferences, publications, as well as the creation and management of centres that provide support and advice to rural NGOs;
- stimulating cooperation between various actors, e.g. working towards improved cooperation between NGOs and public administration, promoting local multi-sector partnerships of the Leader type, as well as support to the creation of regional and national networks of Leader LAGs.

Approach to the European Rural Parliament campaign

In view of the range of activities described above, the Polish Rural Forum considers it an important priority to pause, every once in a while, and reflect on horizontal matters asking broad far-reaching questions. As a federation of rural NGOs, we consider it to be our duty to provoke systemic and strategic discussions that aim to facilitate a sort of *self-awareness*.

Therefore, in preparations to the European Rural Parliament 2015, we decided to use the outputs from our earlier reflections. We revisited :

- “Questions about the future of rural Poland” – a series of regional discussion panels, expert meetings and one national conference that were held in the years 2008 to 2010 and resulted in

the publication of a book containing six identified key questions seminal to further rural development, an elaboration of these questions and descriptions of a number of good practices showing examples of tackling these questions;

- PRF's contribution to the rural side of "A strategy for Poland's third sector" from 2014. This project was a rare example of a sector-wide campaign of activity aiming to bring all representatives of the civil society to contemplate about common long-term goals. PRF based its work on a then recent very thorough own sociological study of rural NGOs.

Directly for the sake of the European Rural Parliament, in PRF organized :

- In January 2015, an Internet discussion through e-mail among its members,
- in May 2015, a national real-life meeting with representatives of the rural civil society in Maróz in though which we received contribution from over 100 people,
- a number of local discussions that took place in the aftermath of the Maróz meeting.
- on 17-18 June, a discussion panel in Wdzydze Kiszewskie with a number of LAG representatives

In the January Internet questionnaire, we asked participants to identify the most important aspects of rural development from their point of view.

In the May meeting in Maróz, we asked three questions:

- 1. What are your hopes and fears when you think of your local community?
- 2. What are you proud of when you think of your local community?
- 3. What are the demands you would like to share in the name of your community with local, regional, national and European decision-makers?



Participants answering the questionnaire in Maróz

In the subsequent local meetings, we asked local communities to loosely reflect on the findings that were hitherto made, give us their feedback and some local examples.

LAG representatives in Wdzydze Kiszewskie were asked how they see Poland's Rural Development Program in comparison to the rest of Europe, what they can show to other countries, and where they would like to learn about from other countries.

Below are the findings of all these discussions categorized thematically.

Economy

Agriculture. Agriculture remains a predominant element of the overall rural economy. Agricultural land takes 30% of the country's overall surface, the combined agriculture and food sector employs 3 million people, consists of over 10% of the GDP and over 12% of Polish export (*Data from Polska Wieś - Raport o stanie wsi FDPA; 2014*). Partly thanks to the accession to EU, this sector is undergoing a gradual modernization.

Diversification of rural incomes. Albeit gradually the importance of agriculture itself lessens. In this context the diversification of rural income sources remains unchangeably a priority. Historically Polish countryside after the second world war typically was characterized by mainly small farms due to the small scale of communist collectivization. Work in agriculture doesn't allow to sustain large amounts of people, the rising aspect of value addition in the production process is insufficient to support the entirety of rural economy. In all discussions infallibly the creation of new work places not directly connected with agriculture was mentioned as an important issue.

Local food products. In this aspect it seems imperative to create effective and cohesive legal framework for the production, selling and promotion of local food products. This is of course linked with agriculture but relies less on land and capital ownership. Production of local and traditional foods have many advantages which are widely recognized also among our discussion participants, but will not be discussed here in more detail. Equally important is the shortening of food supply chains.

Legal framework. At the moment Polish legislation requires food producers to abide by many inconsistent regulations that make many restrictions and unnecessarily complicate the process. The Law recognizes three types of very similar activity that may roughly translate to direct sale; direct delivery and marginal local limited food production and require producers to report to different institutions. The need for a single all encompassing law that is not very restrictive and allows for the creation of food cooperatives, simplified reporting and short food supply chains was widely expressed in the process of our upward cascade of ideas. Thanks to these discussions, a coalition of NGOs advocating very specific legal solutions gained in popularity and so will now hopefully work more effectively.

Tourism. Another economy branch that highly depends on local resources is Tourism. In this aspect, it was interesting to notice a recognition of the value of the natural environment (see below). In some inspiring cases the creation of a single well prepared tourism product allowed for a very intensive social and economic activation of local communities. Thematic villages have evidently become a success story in Poland. They still gain in popularity and in some cases have shown remarkable potential for social inclusion, creating jobs, making financial profit and creating a sense of community.

Young entrepreneurs. Rural entrepreneurship is still marginal in rural Poland. Our participants of the upward cascade associated new businesses with young people. They consensually identified high social insurances costs (which is the most notable labor cost in Poland) and taxes as a hindering force. Despite there being many programmes for innovative young businesspeople, few of these instruments are destined for rural areas. Our discussion participants expressed a need for long tax-vacations for young entrepreneurs in rural areas to make entrepreneurship more attractive. Especially that people employed in agriculture benefit from very low social insurance payments, which creates a phenomenon of fictional employment in farming.

LEADER. The LEADER programme in its many forms, which has equally economic impact as it has social, has a history of ten years in Poland. Despite its numerous imperfections, LEADER is generally speaking a very successful experiment for Polish rural areas, up to the point where some urban centres now try to adopt the LEADER philosophy. Our Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development has actively from the beginning participated and invited the civil society sector to learn

the LEADER approach. Many important aspects have been more or less consulted with LAG and NGO representatives. But obviously there remains much to be done.

In our discussions and beyond them, we have often encountered three demands related to LEADER - prefinancing for Local Development Strategies, simplification of reporting (of beneficiaries to LAGs and of LAGs to managing authorities), and generally more trust.

Social issues

Special needs. As in many countries, emigration of young people to urban centres is identified as an important problem. As a consequence, the mean age of people in rural areas is rising. This creates further challenges. Elderly people are not the only members of rural communities to have special needs. Poverty is unfortunately still widespread. Alcoholics, people with disabilities, children – all require special attention to satisfy their needs. Ethnic and cultural diversity is not very common, but wherever it does exist, it too should be protected.

Farms offering social care. A very interesting example taken from Netherlands to satisfy the needs of some of these groups are farms destined for care (*gospodarstwo opiekuńcze*) of elderly, disabled



and/or children. These are very good alternatives to for instance retirement homes that allow their customers (or residents) to actively participate in the life and work of the farm, giving them a sense of purpose and a group of colleagues to form meaningful relationships. This is a type of activity that Polish representatives can teach a little but will also gladly learn more about.

The character of villages. Many of our participants expressed pride of their villages, but also a fear that they might lose their rural character because of urban sprawl. They do not want their villages to become suburbs, be divided by a highway or otherwise permanently changed to the worse by unimaginative modernization.

At the same time, modernization itself is very desired. Paved roads, better public transportation, or better access to social infrastructure and services are all very important aspects of development without which our participants feel it is difficult to progress. There is the extremely important issue of “being careful what one wishes for”. Local communities must take part in making decisions about space management.

Participation. Luckily there is a growing need for participation in decision-making and policy building and some particular examples of issues have surfaced during our discussions (for instance water management and obligatory development strategies for counties (*powiat*)). The ability of local leaders but also regular citizens in rural areas to take responsibility and see themselves as important actors of creating public policies is strengthening. One of many successful instruments employed in Poland that served this purpose are village funds (*fundusz sołecki*) – a type of very limited (around €1,000 to €5,000 per year) local participatory budget which in many cases serves as an opportunity to create interest and activate local inhabitants.

Natural environment

The natural environment appeared in discussion mainly when there were NGOs interested directly in ecology. Otherwise the environment was sometimes recognized as an important source of pride and wellbeing for inhabitants and as a crucial resource for tourism, but not necessarily as a precious

and sensitive resource that should be taken care of. There was little connection made with infrastructural modernization that was discussed in depth.

Energy. Many participants saw the need for new energy solutions – although mainly for economic and self sustainability purposes. Polish electricity and heat is mainly produced in large coal-fired plants and is then transported by old and decaying infrastructure with extreme energy loss on the way. Almost any change in this situation could prove very helpful for the environment.

There have been some attempts by the government to make legal possibilities for local energy production from renewable energies, however there seems to be little effort to disseminate these solutions because despite widespread needs and hopes not many people practically participate as prosumers (producer-consumers) in the energy mix.

Civil society challenges

In 2013 PRF along with academics of the Mikołaj Kopernik University of Toruń conducted a deep sociological study of rural associations and foundations. It was based on quantitative research of 375 NGOs and study groups of 30 representatives of rural civil society.

Cooperation among NGOs. A very important finding was made in terms of trust and cooperation. Although there is a general lack of satisfaction from contacting the public sector, cooperation with them was better assessed than cooperation with other NGOs. Competition for grants has made cooperation very difficult within the sector. Nevertheless there is a growing number of cooperation platforms for NGOs. Some integrate territorially, others thematically. An important role is played by Local Action Groups that in their own way are such platforms, but also often ally into larger structures.

Urban-rural relationships. It is also important to be open for urban-rural relationships. Firstly the competition for funding is smaller in these cases, secondly urban and rural NGOs have surprisingly much to learn from each other and can benefit vastly from joining forces in common causes. Such an example can be made from PRF's participation in a group called the 12 Demands Group that was made in the preparation of all regulations for the new EU funds programming period and has survived as a general pan-sectoral consultancy group.

Education

In previous years, rural education has been identified as a very urgent problem. In 1999 a reform of the education system drastically changed the financing system forcing many schools in small towns and villages to close. This sparked a feverish movement in many of these locations where communities did not agree to send their children to other, distant towns.

One successful solution was to form associations for the purpose of running schools. These involved not only children, parents and teachers, but also other members of the community. As anything that is done collectively and in a bottom-up manner, these schools often served as catalysts for community-building. Many of these schools today serve not only as educational institutions. In the absence of other recreation facilities, or sometimes in spite of them, they serve as the main location to hold local events after school activities and parties not only for students but also for other inhabitants of the town.

Public schools in turn require a change in their system of financing. At the moment the amount of money is very strongly linked with the number of students. This leads to paradoxes where many students do not participate in classes, but teachers and headmasters refuse to change the situation in fear of losing financing. Perhaps it is only a question of finding an appropriate algorithm to calculate a balanced budget that is linked but not entirely dependent on the number of students. This is a possible area for exchange of experience with other countries.

Response to the national ERP campaign

Our participants definitely exhibited eagerness in the process. Especially effective direct meetings were so successful partly because they had a feeling that their work is necessary and will be further used. There are many conferences in which important questions are asked but very often there is a sense of doubt in their usefulness. When we told these people that their words will be carried further out in Europe, they really had a sense of purpose.

Also it is useful to keep in mind effects of previous similar discussions. It gives a sense of continuity when we can reach into an older publication and quote, sometimes the same experts, showing how some things have changed while others remained the same.

We had some trouble raising a large enough interest in the Internet discussion. Again direct personal meetings proved most effective. Emailing was useful only if we targeted a specific organisation and asked them individually to participate in this important task often backing this up with a telephone call.

Further plans

The work is not yet finished. Further Preparations for ERP will be made because we sense that the topics have not yet run out. People's energy was awoken, an important introduction was made in these months that paved the way for a wider discussion. We will now draw on the findings of these discussions and refine our questions, propositions and good examples in order to make our participation in ERP strategically important.

In the course of these preparations it became evident that Poland is gradually becoming ready for our own Rural Parliament. These discussions became a very useful opportunity to contemplate how we would like to engage all rural development actors and what kind of event it would have to be. Gathering experiences and advice will definitely be an important priority for the Polish delegation in the second European Rural Parliament.

July 10th 2015