

THE PROSPECTS AND WAYS OF SUPPORTING THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF LOCAL RURAL COMMUNITIES IN POLAND

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of the idea of sustainable development in national dimensions entails the need to take appropriate actions on a macroregional and specific local community scale. The development of territorial self-governments in Poland has in recent years increased the role of local communities in solving many socioeconomic problems, including problems which impact the quality of life of the inhabitants. The particular dynamics of the actions taken can be observed with the accession of Poland to the European Union.

Key words: ecological awareness, sustainable awareness, local community, proecological actions

Introduction

The economic and social development of the majority of the world's countries has so far been based primarily on non-renewable sources of energy and excessive use of the resources at hand. Such a development strategy usually leads to upsetting the balance between man and the natural environment, which, in turn, endangers the health and life of present and future generations. An alternative to such a strategy, based exclusively on economic aspects of development, is the idea of sustainable development, which takes into account production and economic benefits as well as, above all, social and environmental benefits.

However, the idea of sustainable development, as presented in official documents and in scientific publications, encounters barriers and limitations, primarily of a bureaucratic nature. The level of awareness of the society and the will to accept such directions of development of one's environment, which additionally take into account proecological aspects, are also of importance.

Among the many initiatives and actions taken on an international and regional scale, the initiatives taken within the European Union have paramount importance in promoting the idea of sustainable development. This is particularly well seen in the agricultural sector, which, in the opinion of experts, is by and large responsible for the degradation of the natural environment. The common agricultural policy, which has been implemented for a number of years and which prefers an intensive, industrial model of agriculture, led to a considerable reduction of diversity of fauna and flora, degradation of the quality of ground water, pollution of soil and loss of biodiversity [Piskorz 2006].

The increasingly evident negative consequences of intensive agricultural development became an important reason for reforms, which have for a dozen

or so years been implemented as part of CAP. The subsequent reforms constitute an attempt to shift the support from agricultural production to actions aimed at promoting rural areas and preserving the natural environment. Various initiatives taken as part of the so-called 2nd pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy serve to fulfil this objective. One of such the initiatives is the LEADER pilot program, which can provide support for "actions aimed at raising environmental awareness and investments related to preserving and enhancing the environmental and cultural heritage, including the development of areas of high environmental value" [Kamiccki 2006].

The pilot LEADER + program, also introduced in Poland, contributed to the establishment of more than 170 so-called Local Action Groups in various regions of Poland. The emerging organisations, in most cases established in the form of associations, actively join the development of local strategies of sustainable development of their own environments.

The aim of the study, sources of materials and methodology

The aim of the study is to present the essence of sustainable development in relation to the specific local community, and determining the most advantageous ways for it to be supported by local self-governments and the inhabitants of the commune. For the specific case study, the Siennica Ryńska commune was selected, located in the eastern part of Poland, formally part of the Lubelskie Voivodeship. This commune is well-known for numerous proecological initiatives and actions for the benefit of environmental protection.

Particular attention was paid to actions which are aimed at influencing proecological behaviour among the young and adult inhabitants of the commune. This behaviour translates into, among other things, promotion of a healthy lifestyle, respect for the cultural heritage of past generations, and caring

for the local natural environment.

The primary sources of materials used in the study are documents of the Commune Council and other institutions from the commune of Siennica Ryżana. The commune's official website is an important source of information, which presents the investments already taken and planned as well as other actions serving the idea of sustainable development of the local territory. The data collected was analysed using available scientific literature and other papers in the field of the subject matter.

General characteristics of the commune of Siennica Różana

The commune of Siennica Różana, which is subject of our interest, is situated in the southeastern part of Lubelska Upland, in the River Siennica valley. It is situated 19 km from the town of Cheim and 11 km from the powiat town of Krasnystaw. In terms of administrative division, the commune is part of the powiat of Krasnystaw, which is part of the Lubelskie Voivodeship.

The total area of the commune is 98 km²; it is inhabited by more than 4.5 thousand people. The population density is low – 47 persons per km². There are 14 localities with solectwo status established in the commune. Each solectwo has its representative (soltys), a Solectwo Board and Revision Committee. They act on the basis of statutes approved by the Commune Board.

The commune is situated in the eastern part of Poland, where disadvantageous demographic phenomena have been occurring for several years. As a result of the migration to central and western regions of Poland and abroad, increasing year by year, the population is decreasing and its age structure is worsening. This outflow per annum is almost 1% and includes primarily men. Despite these disadvantageous trends, this commune, when we compare it to other communes, has a relatively good proportion of people at working age to remaining inhabitants. The predominating group (55% of all the inhabitants) are economically active. The percentage of people at post-working age is at the level of 20%, whilst children and youth constitute 25% of all the inhabitants.

The commune of Siennica Różana is typically agricultural. More than 90% of the land is soils of 3rd and 4th valuation class, which in conditions of high culture are good both for traditional crops and specialised production (sugar beet, rapeseed, etc.). Agricultural production is run by 1200 family farms with an average surface area not exceeding 6 hectares. 166 entities perform economic activity in the commune, primarily companies owned by a single

person and companies which employ up to 3 persons. Most entrepreneurs provide trade services in the form of convenience stores and shops with chemical and industrial goods, with plant protection chemicals, fertilisers and building materials. Other entrepreneurs carry out service activity in the field of "agricultural production machinery services", carry out services related to general construction, as well as roofing, hydraulic, carpentry or installation work. Ten entrepreneurs provide transportation services, two of which provide passenger transport. Other entrepreneurs provide music and insurance services. A few entrepreneurs provide services in the field of agricultural consultancy, veterinary, tailoring or nursing care.

As in most rural communes, the commune of Siennica Ryżana has to struggle with the problem of unemployment. The registered unemployment rate exceeds 15%, and this does not include the hidden unemployment, which is a problem of farmer families. As in other communes in the eastern parts of Poland, the largest group of the unemployed are young people aged 18-34. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that year by year there is an increase in the group of young people, usually better educated, who migrate in search of jobs in other regions of Poland. The total employment rate in the commune is close to 44%, whilst the economic activity rate is 51.7% [Rocznik Statystyczny 2003].

The authorities of the commune actively support actions promoting education of the youth and children. A well-equipped Public Lower Secondary School and three primary schools function within the commune. Pupils benefit from free transport and school clubs. Thanks to the efforts of the self-government and funds obtained from the World Bank, the school youth can follow their interests and advance their skills, with the use of educational and didactic aids in the school club. Children from poor families or families at risk of social pathologies use the help of the commune's Social Welfare Centre. In addition, each year, the "Help children survive the winter" event is organised. The event is organised for the benefit of the poorest families with many children, and includes primarily food aid.

The Commune's Culture Centre conducts activity in the commune, aimed at children, talented youth and folk artists and poets. There is also a folk music band at the centre, a children's folk dance group, a ballroom dance group, and many musical groups [www.Siennica.pl].

The commune's activity related to improving the condition of the natural environment and ecological methods of agricultural production

Actions for the protection of the natural environ-

ment and sustainable development in the commune studied have been taken since the beginning of the 1990s. As early as in 1990, the commune began implementing a program for the extension of proecological investments. This resulted, first of all, in an extension of the water supply network, today used by 95% of the inhabitants. A major breakthrough in the actions aimed at protecting the natural environment in the commune of Siennica Ryńska was the development of "The Ecological Structure Development Study in the commune of Siennica Ryńska" in 1994 and its passing for realisation by the Commune Board. The results of the study carried out were and still are helpful in the fulfilment of fundamental ecological objectives, such as, for example:

- reasonable management of all the environmental resources in the commune
- maintaining the most valuable environmental qualities in a state as close to natural as possible
- adding new values to the natural environment
- Eliminating or reducing the negative impact of existing ecological threats and barriers [www.Siennica.pl].

The practical implementation of sustainable development in a particular local community should include comprehensive activities covering, among other things, the protection of soil, water and air. The program for improving the sanitary conditions, currently implemented in the commune, is consistently implemented in all the above-mentioned segments.

In recent years, due to the advancing process of extensification of agricultural production, there are no major threats resulting from the use of mineral fertilisers and plant protection agents in the commune. However, continually developing road transport could be a source of slight soil pollution. Nevertheless, the impact of this factor applies only to narrow strips of land directly adjacent to major communication routes. No plants which are likely to accumulate harmful substances, in particular heavy metals, should be grown in such areas.

Soil protection is closely related to the problem of collecting and utilising liquid and solid municipal waste. Recycling of municipal waste from the entire commune takes place at the waste landfill, commissioned in 1996. The commune's landfill was built in compliance with all the basic requirements of environmental protection legislation. The landfill is isolated from the substrate, fenced, and has a proper access road as well as a sanitary protection zone.

The commune of Siennica Ryńska is one of the few communes in this part of Poland with an implemented and effective system for the collection

of waste from individual households and property estates. A few years ago, distribution of 1.5 m³ truck containers to individual localities at the cost of the commune was started. Larger containers were placed near education establishments and near work establishments. In 1997, the authorities of the commune started an action to liquidate illegal waste dumps in forests and wayside trenches. This action considerably improved the aesthetics of many localities and points of interest in the commune. Moreover, in order to involve the village inhabitants in solving the problems of environmental protection and maintaining the aesthetics of farms, villages and towns, the commune, in cooperation with the Voivodeship Agricultural Consultancy Centre, has organised the "My aesthetic and safe farm" yearly competition. Prizes for the participants are funded by the commune's self-government [www.sien-nica...].

With the extension of the water supply network, which causes a considerable increase in the water consumption in households, the problem of collection and recycling of liquid waste is aggravated. Constructing the sewage network and the effective waste water treatment system is an expensive process; however, it is essential for improving the condition of the natural environment and raising the quality of life of inhabitants and, potentially, tourists. The problem of waste water recycling in the commune is being gradually solved, with the use of diversified actions. A large mechanical-biological waste water treatment plant has been in operation for several years now, with a throughput of 200 and 100 m³ per 24 hours. The insufficient sewerage system is being currently extended, with the considerable participation of the EU funds. At the same time, the idea of household waste water treatment plants is being implemented, in particular in places in which for the time being there is no possibility to build a collective sewerage system.

In the second half of the 1990s, a comprehensive air protection plan was prepared. As a result of the consistent implementation of that plan, as early as in the year 1999, a gas supply system for the entire commune was completed. Almost 60 km of gas supply network and the required connections to housing buildings, municipal building objects and work establishments were completed. Currently, 80% of households use natural gas. In order to improve the quality of air in the commune and in order to reduce the emission of pollutants, coal-fuelled boiler-rooms were modernised and changed into gas-fuelled ones. In the first place, the modernisation was performed in larger boiler-rooms in education establishments, office and municipal buildings and in

the housing building owned by the Commune Office.

Wide-ranging efforts of self-government authorities of the commune in the scope of improvement of natural environment and aesthetics of the surroundings were noticed long ago. This was reflected by the financial prizes and honorary diplomas awarded to the commune in numerous environmental and ecological competitions. The commune gained great popularity after winning 2nd prize in a Poland-wide competition organised in 1995 under the patronage of the president of the Republic of Poland, for the most ecological commune in Poland. Obtaining such a prestigious distinction, supported with a financial reward, enabled the commune authorities and inhabitants to seek additional funds and take new proecological initiatives.

Further distinctions and significant financial funds were obtained by the commune in competitions organized by the National Fund for Environmental Protection and Water Management: in 1996 and 2001 for the best realisation of tasks submitted in subsequent editions of the competition "for waste management in rural areas" and in 2001, the prize in the competition "low retention in rural areas."

Among many other diplomas and distinctions, one should mention the prestigious title of "environmentally friendly commune" under the honorary patronage of the president of the Republic of Poland and the Minister of Environment, granted to the commune of Siennica Ryżana in 2003. This title, accompanied by a certificate, is a sign of the recognition of the efforts taken by the commune authorities and inhabitants for the benefit of sustainable development of the local community.

The successes achieved by the commune in relation to the protection of the natural environment are to a considerable extent the effect of wide-ranging educational work conducted for many years among children, youth and adult inhabitants of the commune. Its aim is to increase sensitivity to the problem of the aesthetic value of one's own farmyard and entire localities, as well as the impact of environmental pollution on inhabitants' health and quality of life.

Proecological behaviour of the youngest generation is shaped thanks to the implementation of ecological education school programs, but also through organisation of competitions, happenings, and art and photography exhibitions. The effect of these actions is a growing care for an unpolluted environment, the ability to live a healthy lifestyle and to behave properly in protected areas. Youths participating in this type of program learn about how to prevent degradation of the natural environment and the possibilities of restoring it.

Thanks to the cooperation between the commune and the Voivodeship Environment Protection and Water Management Fund in Lublin, ecological campaigns are carried out under the slogan "Protection of the natural environment in the commune of Siennica Ryżana." The ecological effect of this type of action is making children and youth sensitive to the beauty of homeland nature, developing local patriotism expressed in care for one's own environment and showing the dependence of human mental health on the condition of the environment [Lasota 2004]. As part of this campaign, numerous events and competitions promoting environmental knowledge and a proecological lifestyle are organised.

In the 2002/2003 school year, a particularly extensive program of ecological events in the commune was implemented. The celebration of a "day with ecology" and an ecological march across the commune were important points summarising the whole campaign. Apart from children and youth, also participating in the march were representatives of self-government authorities, parents and other inhabitants of the commune. Members of an ecological interest group drew up petitions related to the protection of the environment and nature of the commune and hand-delivered them to the self-government authorities. The day with ecology was also a good opportunity to present ecological issues in the form of theatrical performances, mini-cabarets and "healthy food" eating. For the representatives of the Department of Environment Protection of the Voivodeship Office and the powiat Sanitary and Epidemiological Station, this was the appropriate time for a lecture on the condition of waters in the vicinity and the principles of healthy nutrition [Lasota 2004].

A noteworthy action for the benefit of developing the ecological awareness of young inhabitants of the commune was establishing a special sports and ecology class in the local lower-secondary school. The main aim of this initiative is to promote among pupils a healthy lifestyle and the realization of standards of ecological actions during the three-year course. Moreover, the students of this class are the coordinators of the annual "Clean up the World" campaign and initiators of the separation of waste and collection of aluminium cans. The funds obtained from the sale of recyclable waste will be used to equip school labs and workshops and to purchase sports equipment.

Following the initiative of teachers, school youth also take actions related to environmental conservation in the area and monitor natural environment in the close vicinity. They also care for monuments of nature and valuable species in the commune, and search for new, interesting natural spots, where there

are interesting flora and fauna species. Pupils make information boards and place them where uncontrolled burns of grassland and moorlands is prohibited, with a clarification of the harmfulness of such actions. They also participate in forest planting actions and nourishment of forest nurseries. Thanks to the cooperation with Forest Division in Krasnystaw, the youth participate in "green" lessons, learning about forest life, its pests and other dangers [Lasota 2004].

Ecology issues are also propagated among adult inhabitants of the commune. Annual meetings, organized in all localities, are an opportunity for taking such actions. During these meetings, lectures and discussions related to the protection of the natural environment and healthy lifestyle are held. Moreover, ecological education includes the organisation of competitions that promote the aesthetics of individual farmyards and whole villages as well as tidying up the whole commune. These actions broaden the ecological knowledge of the inhabitants and raise their sensitivity to the natural environment and the need to protect it.

Summary

Building an ecologically aware society requires transparency of actions, clear and commonly accepted initiatives, and more than anything the ability to engage as much of the local society as possible in the efforts. The authorities of the commune studied fully understand this need; thus, they strive for the efficient and quick flow of information, including organisation of rural gatherings, meetings and feasts, as well as publication of brochures,

leaflets and press releases in the local press. All these actions contribute to the integration of the local community in joint actions and enhance the sense of responsibility for the present and future condition of the natural environment.

One can say that Siennica Ryńska is one of the few communes in which sustainable development based on respect for nature is already under way. This is done for the good of the local community and the tourists who visit these areas. In this respect, this commune may serve as an example for other communes in Poland and for many local communities in the European Union.

Literature

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