

Evolution of the European Union's policy for development of rural communities in the context of the European Green Deal strategy implementation

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Abstract

This article refers to development support instruments for rural communities in the European Union (EU). The author presents the systemic and strategic determinants of creation and delivery of the EU rural community policy, as well as the origins and evolution of the Union policy in the above-mentioned scope. The analysis is focused on the specific institutional and financial solutions which promote sustainable development of rural communities. The article demonstrates that multi-level and multi-agent nature of the development management system in the EU affects the implementation of a neo-endogenous policy towards rural communities in the EU. The text also presents developments in the implementation of EU policy for rural communities after 2021 in the context of the implementation of the European Green Deal (EGD) strategy.

Keywords: rural communities, endogenous potential, rural policy, European Union (EU), European Green Deal.

Ewolucja polityki Unii Europejskiej na rzecz rozwoju społeczności wiejskich w kontekście realizacji strategii Europejskiego Zielonego Ładu

Streszczenie

Tematyka tekstu odnosi się do instrumentów wsparcia rozwoju społeczności wiejskich w Unii Europejskiej. W artykule przedstawiono systemowe i strategiczne uwarunkowania tworzenia i realizacji unijnej polityki wobec społeczności wiejskich, a także genezę i ewolucję polityki unijnej w powyższym zakresie. Analiza koncentruje się na konkretnych rozwiązaniach instytucjonalnych

i finansowych, które promują zrównoważony rozwój społeczności wiejskich. W artykule wykazano, że wielopoziomowy i wielopodmiotowy charakter systemu zarządzania rozwojem w UE wpływa na realizację neo-endogenicznej polityki wobec społeczności wiejskich w UE. W tekście przedstawiono również zmiany w realizacji polityki UE wobec społeczności wiejskich po 2021 r. w kontekście wdrażania strategii Europejskiego Zielonego Ładu.

Słowa kluczowe: społeczności wiejskie, potencjał endogeniczny, polityka wiejska, Unia Europejska (UE), Europejski Zielony Ład.

The aim of this article is to diagnose the direction of evolution of instruments for supporting the development of rural communities in EU policy, in the context of implementing the objectives of the European Green Deal (EGD strategy). The author discusses the origins, functioning and changes of specific institutional and financial solutions, which were adopted at the EU level and which purpose was to contribute to the development of rural communities in the financial perspective 2021–2027. The rationale behind the topic is that the implementation of the strategic priorities of the EGD brings both opportunities and challenges for rural communities. Taking into account the fact that the level of social, economic and territorial cohesion between cities and rural areas continues to be a development challenge for the EU, and that rural communities face a range of challenges like depopulation, ageing, limited access to high quality jobs or social or digital services (see: European Commission 2021: p. 5–7; Esteban-Navarro et al. 2020), it is worth answering the question of how the EU intends to reduce their scale and improve the development opportunities and quality of life of rural inhabitants through public intervention.

The first part of this article presents the methodological assumptions for the analysis, which were applied to the objective and subjective scope of the article. In order to determine the scope, it is essential to define the major analytical categories used in the article: rural communities and their sustainable development, as well as the neo-endogenous model in rural development governance. Furthermore, the first part of the article indicates the conceptual sources for explaining the process of creating and implementing a rural community development policy at the EU level.

The subsequent part of the article describes the system for managing the EU rural community development policy, illustrates its multi-level and multi-actor nature, and includes a summary of the profile of the interest groups which represent rural communities in the management process.

The next part of the article describes the primary instruments for rural community development, which include institutions, as well as financial measures. This part of the article is also focused on the instruments' origins and evolution in historical and teleological context. The article ends with conclusions concerning the support of rural communities in the EU policy 2021–2027, determined by the EGD's priorities implementation.

The article is based on such source materials as EU legal acts and documents, as well as academic literature on the relevant concepts, academic definitions, EU policy and development of rural communities.

Methodological basis of the analysis

In light of the numerous ways of defining *rural communities* found in source literature, the author uses in this article a definition, according to which the subject of study are local rural communities which are construed as having shared goals, preferences, interests and affairs that relate to the public sphere in a given area. The source of social bonds in rural communities is the voluntary, intentional and active civic engagement, which allows to form a local community. Researchers refer to this kind of rural community as the new local community, which is established through civic participation and cooperation for the community's development (Gorlach et al. 2013; p. 103–104). As will be discussed later in this article, this definition corresponds to the EU policy for development of rural regions and their residents, which offers support instruments to rural communities that have the knowledge, skills and motivation to be engaged in rural development.

Notwithstanding the diverse social and professional structure of residents of European rural areas, the article presents rural communities as uniform analytical category; as such, neither individual social and professional groups, nor diverse local relations are isolated (Halamska 2013; p. 133). Moreover, the analysis laid out in the article does not separately discuss support instruments available to farmers, who are an important, albeit not the only group which makes up rural communities in the EU. Hence, the place of the financial and structural instruments applicable to the agriculture sector in the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) — which are discussed in detail in numerous academic analyses (e.g. Van Herck et al. 2013; Sadłowski et al. 2021) — are beyond the scope of this article.

With regard to development instruments for rural communities, the article is focused on institutional and financial instruments, which programmatically, as part of the adopted policy of the EU, are directly dedicated to rural communities. This approach is chosen because rural communities are able to derive specific development benefits from each public policy implemented at the EU level.

Another analytical category used in this article is the *development of rural communities*, which is understood in accordance with the sustainable development model promoted in the EU policy. Sustainable development in relation to rural communities means an increase of the quality of life of rural residents thanks to dynamic economic growth, creation of new quality jobs, education, healthcare, social and territorial cohesion, as well as care for the good quality of the natural environment (Council of the European Union 2006). Therefore, the author analyses in this article the instruments used by the EU, which are dedicated to accomplishing the formulated development objective. Instruments of a policy oriented towards the development of rural communities are territorial in nature. They offer support to rural communities, which are also the subject of the policy's intervention, with consideration of their specific needs and development challenges.

In terms of the analysis of system conditions of implementing the EU policy for the development of rural communities, the concept of the *multi-level governance* (MGL) is applicable. Its fundamental theoretical assumptions were formulated by Gary Marks, who studies the structural funds reform carried out by the European Economic Com-

munity (EEC) in the late 1980s, which changed the relations of power between the Member States, transnational institutions and regional authorities in the EEC. In result of the reform, states have lost their dominant position in the development management process to other entities representing transnational and regional levels of the political structure of authority (Hooghe, Marks 2001: p. 4–5). In consequence, the level at which decisions are made, as well as the manner, in which actions and relations between actors participating in the management processes have undergone change. Taking actions and cooperating directly, i.e. without national-level involvement in decision making, has been made possible. An illustration of how MLG works is the interregional cooperation in the EU which takes place outside of governmental decision-making structures. MLG is characterised by relations of power both in the sense of a hierarchical order and networks, whereby subjects of management processes are not only public actors, but also social organisations, interest groups, trade unions and actors who wish to realise their goals and pursue their interests in a political and social system (Bache, Flinders 2001: p. 15–27).

System conditions of the rural community development policy in the EU

The process of creating and implementing the EU's policy may be considered complex due to the characteristics of the Union's public management system. As a result of deepening of European integration processes and creating the institutional order which encompasses international and transnational solutions and procedures, a multi-level system for making and implementing public decisions has been developed. The system does not have a distinct and dominant centre of accumulated power (Ruszkowski 2007: p. 211). The Union's public policies programming and implementing system has a multi-level character, which may be accounted to the EU being a subsidiary community. The organisation intervenes in areas, which are not its sole competence, only when states prove to be incapable of achieving their objectives or when the EU's involvement guarantees better results. Multi-level governance has been developed thanks to two parallel processes, i.e. centralisation and decentralisation of authority. By transferring their competence in the scope of economic and social management, EU Member States have allowed Union's authorities to create a transnational development policy. Democratisation of the management system and dispersion of resources necessary for successful implementation of territorially-oriented development policies have led to distribution of decision-making and executive powers across different levels and resulted in a departure from a hierarchical order in the decision-making process (Commission of the European Communities 2001: p. 11).

At the transnational level, the key role in the rural development policy delivery and implementation belongs to the European Commission (EC), which is responsible for preparation of legislative proposals, programming process, development of administrative procedures, allocation of funds and recommendations regarding development management standards. On the basis of partnership agreements concluded with the

EC, as well as with the assistance of national administration systems, the Member States implement financial and institutional solutions, which were developed at a transnational level, into national development management policies. Depending on the territorial structure and administrative culture of a given Member State, these processes may also involve regional and local actors (Michalewska-Pawlak 2015: p. 83–86).

Therefore, the multi-level and multi-actor development governance system of the EU creates formal conditions for actors, who represent territorial communities, to participate in decision-making processes concerning delivery of the development policy. Rural communities are an interest group, which is able to affect the decision-making process and shape of the policy at the transnational level through existing channels of articulation. Since territorial stakeholders have diverse interests, motivated by local developmental circumstances typical of a given area, they assume different forms of organisation, which are best suited to represent their interests, for example: foundations, policy networks, and groups of experts. Activity of entities, which represent rural communities before the EU, generates a number of benefits connected with informing rural communities about the possibility of pursuing their interest in the EU, providing industry information essential to policy making to EU institutions and bodies, articulating demands and expectations of rural areas at a transnational level, adopting common positions, and coordinating activities of rural areas (Kurczewska 2011: p. 106–107).

Bodies, who represent rural communities, are linked in European networks and regional organisations. The ability of these actors to influence and represent is diverse. The EC is aware of this fact (Tatham 2008) and actively supports the creation of such bodies through legislative and financial solutions. Furthermore, the polycentric mechanism for managing the EU's policy simultaneously generates bases for dialogue, cooperation and competition. It is also possible for a divergence of interests between individual institutions, which represent interests of individual rural communities. Nonetheless, it is difficult to estimate the number of agents who represent rural communities in the EU at a transnational level, because many actors, officially registered as interest groups, at the same time are lobbying in other thematic areas of EU policies. Some of these actors are worth mentioning here.

The European Rural Community Alliance, which has operated since 2004, but was formally registered as late as 2009, is a lobbying organisation which represents interest of rural communities before the EU (see: European Rural Community Alliance WWW). This organisation closely cooperates with *PREPARE – Partnership for Rural Europe*, a network established in 1999 with the aim to support civil society and intranational cooperation for rural areas within the EU. The network strives to strengthen cooperation at all management levels and include rural communities in management processes. This organisation affects the policy for rural communities by participating in meetings of the European Commission's Rural Advisory Committee (see: PREPARE WWW). Together with the European LEADER Association for Rural Development¹, created in 1999 by national

¹ See more on the website <http://elard.eu>

LEADER networks, these organisations established the European Rural Parliament (ERP) – the initiative, which consists in organising biennale meetings of organisations, networks and groups, which represent European rural communities, including from states outside of the EU (European Rural Parliament 2015).

The last general meeting of the ERP was held in Kielce in 2022, where participants formulated specific recommendations for the effective rural development policy in EU. They refer to the inclusion of rural communities and local leaders in decision-making processes, the consideration of pluralism of opinions and rural interests, real institutional cooperation at European, national and regional levels of rural governance. Moreover, ERP members expressed specific demands for funding for the development of rural communities from EU structural and investment funds. They noted: "The EU-framework for the 2028–2034 period should include a truly holistic approach and direct programs for rural development also as part of Cohesion Policy" (European Rural Parliament 2022: art. 5).

Rural communities play significant role in rural development governance processes, not only at supranational level, but above all at local one. Within the framework of EU systemic solutions, a bottom-up approach is promoted, which implies the direct involvement of rural communities and the local resources they possess in development processes. The territorial approach, which takes into account the diverse social and economic potential of rural areas, gives rural communities and their stakeholders the opportunity to create their own unique, specific and locally adapted innovative management solutions to solve existing problems and reduce marginalisation processes.

EU policy instruments for support of rural community development

The traditional paradigm for development of rural community, which was adopted by the European Economic Community (EEC) at the moment of its creation, had a sectoral nature and centred on the increase of agricultural production through ensuring an adequate level of income to people working in the agriculture sector. This viewpoint was justifiable in the 1950s, because there was a deficit of basic agricultural products in economies of European states and a high rate of rural residents employed in the agriculture sector, which in certain states reached 60% of all people employed in rural areas (Harvey 2015: p. 6–9).

A steady departure from the sectoral approach to rural development begun in the late 1980s, together with social, economic and environmental changes taking place in European rural areas. In retrospect, it can be said that the origins of the EU's rural communities development policy date back to the late 1980s, when the regional policy of the EEC Community was shaped, which aim was to support the development of regions facing structural challenges. In the Single European Act, among others, rural areas were considered as areas lagging behind. Therefore, the regional policy at that time included an objective, which concerned the development of overpopulated and peripheral rural

areas with low-income population, relatively low GDP per capita, degraded natural environment and high vulnerability to reforms of the CAP (Pietrzyk 2000: p. 98).

Significant changes in support instruments for rural communities were introduced by *Agenda 2000* and the two-pillar *Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)*. In addition to market and price interventions dedicated to the agriculture sector, between 2000 and 2006, the Guidance Section of the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund, as part of the rural pillar of the CAP, financed basic services for the rural economy and population, renewal and development of rural areas and preservation of rural heritage, as well as support of tourism and craft (Rowiński 2008: p. 19–20).

The key moment in terms of creating rural community development policy instruments was the start of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), which since 2007 has financed the second pillar of the CAP of the EU. Funds were paid out within an architecture of rural areas' development programmes at national or regional levels, within whose framework the Member States chose actions from 26 available support measures. However, only two measures directly applied to the support of rural community development as a whole: (1) basic services and village renewal in rural areas, and (2) LEADER. The remaining 24 actions were oriented towards restructuring and modernisation of holdings, environment protection and combating climate change (Regulation 1305/2013).

Therefore, economic and environmental priorities of the EU prevail over social aspects of rural areas' development. The total EAFRD's budget for 2014–2020 was over 150 bn euros; around 43 bn euros were allocated for projects concerning increase of competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises in rural areas, over 16 bn euros – for social inclusion expenses, around 3,5 bn euros for research and development, over 3 bn euros – for creation of sustainable and quality employment, just under 2 bn euros – for new ICT-technologies expenses, and over 1,5 bn euros – for education and vocational trainings (European Commission 2023). A detailed analysis of funds from the Rural Areas Development Programme reveals that beneficiaries of financial measures provided for by the EAFRD were primarily stakeholders associated with the agriculture and forestry sector, i.e. individual farmers and institutions in the agriculture sector.

Since 1991, LEADER has been the major instrument of the EU policy for local communities. In subsequent financial perspectives, it has been defined as a community initiative, a programme, a measure, a priority axis, and in 2014–2020 financial perspective – as one of the available methods for implementation of the rural development programme (Michalewska-Pawlak 2015: p. 161–163). Regardless of its place in the structure of the specific Union's policy, the principle purpose of this instrument and the manner of its implementation has not changed. LEADER is the only tool of the Union's policy for rural areas, which allows for complete decision-making and executive empowerment of rural communities in the local development management process insofar as rural communities – within local action groups which include public, social and private partners – create bottom-up, multi-sector partnerships oriented towards the development of the endogenous potential of a specific location (Dax et al. 2016). The LEADER measure is

based on the assumption that rural community is aware about the issues pertinent to a given area, and thanks to cooperation, involvement, ingenuity and social activity, that community is able to create innovative solutions driving social and economic change in rural areas, as well as solving or minimising problems which cannot be resolved by traditional public policy instruments (Bosworth et al. 2016; Chevalier, Vollet 2019). The quality and efficiency of pro-development actions undertaken by rural communities is diverse and determined by several variables, including local institutional systems, the quality of social capital or the condition of the civil society. Notwithstanding, LEADER is a solution which enables rural communities to obtain funds for bottom-up development strategies. Therefore, LEADER is a unique instrument in the EU territorial development policy: this measure allows rural communities for bottom-up creation of development processes, where bottom-up social engagement is a precondition for the use of this instrument.

When in 2010 the development strategy *Europe 2020* was adopted by the EU, three pillars of economic, social and environmental growth were established. These principles are also applicable to rural communities, where quality of life is affected by the realisation of the above-mentioned objectives. The basis for smart growth is knowledge and innovations based on new technologies, which significance little by little becomes included in the rural community development policy. However, this happens relatively late, considering that the smart approach to regional economic specialisations has been implemented in the EU development policy since 2014 (Michalewska-Pawlak 2021: p. 30, 33). The debate on the creation of the initiative *Smart Villages* has begun in the EU in 2017 and has included both a presentation of good practices in the scope of implementing innovative solutions concerning satisfying needs and supplying services to rural communities, with their active involvement, and a reflection on the package of measures in the scope of territorial development policy, which could encourage rural communities to create, implement and spread these practices (Panciszko 2021: p. 43–44). Therefore, *Smart Villages* are another bottom-up idea on how to create conditions for growth of individual communities, which takes into consideration their territorial specificities, knowledge, new technologies and cooperation. However, presently, there has been an ongoing debate regarding the form of EU support, in the immediate future, for such initiatives undertaken by rural communities.

The European Green Deal and the implementation of development policy for rural communities in the EU 2021–2027

The current EU social, economic and environmental development strategy EGD, proposed by the EC in 2019, should be considered as the main determinant of policies supporting the development of rural communities between 2021 and 2027. The adoption of the EGD strategy means the entry into a new phase of economic development in the EU, which implies the alignment of economic and social objectives with ecological and climate protection. Achieving the objectives formulated in the EGD relating to the development of Europe as a continent to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 requires changes in a number of sectoral and territorial policies and actions (European Commission 2019).

The EGD strategy implementation presents both specific opportunities and challenges for all EU regions, including rural areas. These relate to the effects of profound structural changes in the economy, the labour market or consumption patterns and levels. Although the main axis of the changes proposed by the EGD is focused on reforms of the agricultural sector to reduce its carbon intensity, decarbonisation, production of healthy and safe food, shortening of the supply chain and protection of biodiversity (Prandecki et al. 2021), the social dimension of its implementation cannot be overlooked. Failure to take into account the social determinants and costs of the introduced economic and environmental changes may contribute to the deepening of social and territorial inequalities, a sense of social exclusion and social injustice, and consequently the growth of Euroscepticism and populist sentiments (Kruszyński 2022: p. 34–36).

In the case of the policy to support the development of rural communities in the current multi-annual financial perspective, it is oriented to supporting the transformation of the rural economy towards a more sustainable one. On 30 June 2021, the EC published the communication: *A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas – Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040*, in which challenges and the priorities in the rural areas development were defined. In accordance to green transition established by the EGD strategy, the role of innovation, cooperation, exchange and sharing knowledge was stressed. In the above-mentioned document, the European Commission emphasised that the economic development of rural communities should have been interconnected with bioeconomy which contains „agriculture, forestry, fisheries, aquaculture, and the production of food, feed, bio-energy and bio-based products” (European Commission 2021: p. 7).

The EC referred to local communities and showed their role in the governance of rural development, by participation in the decision-making processes and creation of place-based policies and investments. As crucial determinants of vibrant rural communities existence the transport connections and digital transition were recognised (European Commission 2021: p. 10–11).

The main financial instrument of rural communities support still remains the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). In comparison to the previous EU financial perspective 2014–2020, from 2021 to 2027 the total allocation for the EAFRD has been reduced by 19% (European Parliament 2022). The LEADER programme has been sustained and the EU Member States have an obligation to spend at least 5% of the EAFRD's budget for bottom-up developmental strategies managed by local stakeholders (Regulation EU 2021/2115: art. 92).

For the preparation and implementation of smart villages strategies and other forms of cooperation aimed at rural development funding has been maintained. Rural communities, through the use of smart villages strategies, can deal with local challenges defined by the EGD strategy as key, relating to biodiversity, renewable energy, water management or sustainable mobility (Annex 2021).

The LEADER provides opportunities for various bottom-up initiatives by rural residents and various social and professional groups. What can be perceived as unfavourable change from

the perspective of the needs of local communities, is the reduction of the maximum level of funding for local community projects to 80% of eligible costs, which in the previous financial perspective was 85% (Regulation EU 2021/2115). In practice, this means that beneficiaries will be forced to seek additional funds to finance 20%, which may be a challenge for local communities in backward regions affected by development constraints.

New solution in the current financial perspective is the option of engaging the EAFRD for transnational learning mobility of rural communities. This offer is mainly aimed at young farmers and women, the groups perceived as key for rural development (Regulation EU 2021/2115). This solution integrates rural policy instruments into the programme *Erasmus+* and means not only better coordination of support measures, but also investment in knowledge and the quality of human capital.

The detailed analysis of the instrumentarium of support for rural communities in the period 2021–2027 demonstrates that the existing institutional and financial arrangements are focused mainly on environmental and climate priorities. No less than 40% of the EAFRD is dedicated to the measures, which refer to environmental protection and climate changes (Regulation EU 2021/2115). Climate neutrality, biodiversity protection or healthy and affordable food are the benefits to be enjoyed by all EU residents as a result of the EGD strategy implementation. The agricultural sector and farmers, as the professional group with public support and responsibility for achieving the "green" and climate objectives of the EGD, have been playing a central role in these transformations.

Between 2023 and 2027, as part of improved managerial and financial flexibility, the Member States have had the possibility of shifting the EAFRD and amounts allocated to direct payments in the range of 25% to 30% of the funds allocation between the two pillars of the common agricultural policy. On the one hand, this rule offers the possibility of transferring increased funds to rural communities, but at the same time there is no guarantee that, due to the needs of the agricultural sector and food security, this process will be reversed, and the EAFRD will be transferred to agricultural development at the expense of projects dedicated to rural communities.

The EC provides for financial transfers under the Structural Funds and other horizontal programmes, which will ultimately reach rural areas. A special role in promoting the use of knowledge, innovation and cross-sectoral cooperation is to be played by the programme *Horizon Europe*, bringing together rural beneficiaries and the world of science to develop smart solutions to serve rural communities (Annex 2021: p. 1). The emphasis on knowledge and innovation has never been as prominent in EU activities to date. Indeed, these two factors are seen as the remedy to part of the development challenges of the European countryside.

Conclusions

The analysis of the EU policy for rural communities development demonstrates that its objectives and instruments of implementation are the result of the impact of various conditions, both of a social nature, relating to the characteristics of rural communities

and of systemic character, in terms of the adopted model of development management in the EU, and of a strategic one, relating to development objectives defined at the level of the entire integration grouping.

The genesis of the rural community development policy is related to the changes taking place in rural areas, and its instrumentation results from the adopted development model based on balancing economic, social and environmental elements and taking care of the quality of life in rural areas. The policy is implemented by means of a range of financial instruments, in the form of the funds, with particular reference to the EAFRD, and institutional solutions that allow the territorial diversity of rural communities in the EU to be taken into account. The adopted instruments are part of the neo-endogenous approach to rural development, based on the assumption of using local, specific and unique development resources, existing local social and economic relations and the opportunities provided by the EU institutional and financial system in this regard. Owing to the assumed neo-endogenous nature of development processes, existing instruments for supporting the development of rural communities in the EU have a flexible character and can be implemented by communities at different levels of development and with different interests and challenges.

The implementation of the objectives of the EGD strategy has significantly influenced the process of supporting the development of rural communities. The level of funding for community projects has been reduced in favour of supporting environmental and climate initiatives and sustainable agriculture, while recognising the subjective role of local communities and knowledge and innovation for bottom-up rural development.

The ultimate influence on the level of support for rural populations comes from the decisions of the Member States, which, in a multi-level system of rural development governance, play a key role in the territorial distribution of financial resources.

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